

Maternal Journal Introduction (2018) - from The Artist Mother Studio (AMS) zine, *Maternal Journal*, compiled and edited by Amy Hughes Braden and Raina Martens, with an introduction by China Martens.

Who is s/he/they?ⁱ Mother Artist: work is easy, motherhood more difficult.ⁱⁱ Is motherhood the last taboo?ⁱⁱⁱ For a serious artist to admit, contain, show their (maternal) body?

Is inequality out of the home better than inequality in the home?^{iv} Do many see what goes on there? Where is the power, surprise of creation—in roots, soil or fruit?

I've been poring over artist biographies every night, googling and googling through twisted umbilical tubes and tunnels of knowledge, preparing to write this introduction. I'm inspired by movements of disruption like Mother Art Collective, who staged "Rainbow Playground" (1974) outside of the Woman's Building artist studios, where dogs were permitted but no children; Woman Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, who made space for black mothers; and Hackney Flashers, agitprop in London.^v I'm reading about Betye Saar, a 92-year-old living artist who sparked the Black women's movement^{vi} and has a retrospective in New York this November. In her time schools were segregated and she could not go to school for art.^{vii} I'm thinking about politicized art and political action, the unidentified California girl who had her quinceañera outside of the detention center where her dad is being held and the indigenous, immigrant, enslaved, incarcerated, as well as other (young, nonconforming, queer, disabled, poor, and working class) parents and children who are separated from each other, who are denied even this basic right, historically and increasingly in this country. I am trying to place this zine on motherhood by artists who are mothers in context.

I made my first zine—*The Future Generation*—in 1990 *because* I was a mother. I needed to network with others, to create what I couldn't find. It made people laugh to hear I was a mother and a punk, a mother and a zinester. . . how could this be? How hard it was to gather those old issues (like looking at one's old diaries) into a book in 2007. And again to push for a second edition to come out ten years later: to advocate for myself: for *her*. The young me who wrote instead of washing the dishes, or anything else, when she had the chance: when she had babysitting. She had sacrificed too much in order to not stand up for her, now, as the older future me. The me with my daughter grown, long past the empty nest stage, a few years into menopause, but still new to myself: still learning: still struggling to create. As a writer I will always be, fighting for something yet undone.

But now in Fall I treasure the sunlight that I once fled; I taste a different time. I have time: yet time's not enough; and time's still running out too. Nights come faster.

My first book came out when I was 40 and my daughter 18; and the next two in that same decade. As a low-income single mother, I was a continually practicing writer. While I didn't have the discipline before motherhood (at age 21) I didn't have the time after. When my daughter became an older teen, my hands became more "free" and my activist goals found fertile partnerships with younger radicals. Victoria Law and I collaborated on a project that later became *Don't Leave Your Friends Behind* an anthology of stories on supporting families in social justice movements and communities. Harriet Moon, Sine Hwang Jensen, and I started Kidz City, a radical childcare collective in Baltimore that was very much an experiment. When asked what radical childcare was (at the workshops I gave on community support geared towards non-parents) I defined it as:

1. Childcare at radical events;
 2. Organized in collective non-hierarchical inclusive ways;
 3. Including programming for children in the spirit of the larger event.
- Supporting parents and children, especially mothers and marginalized mothers but other caregivers as well, was the best way I saw to work towards putting one's ideals into practice and building a better world.

When it all comes down to it, however, we must define exactly what we are talking about. Not all mothers, like not all women, have the same struggles. After Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012, I felt the most important topic one could work on was to focus against racism and white supremacy. I devoted myself to working on *Revolutionary Mothering: Love On The Front Lines*—an anthology of stories that center mothers of color and other marginalized mothers, with google docs and emails and any way I could after I was asked by Mai'a Williams, along with Alexis Pauline Gumbs, to join the project as a third co-editor. *Revolutionary Mothering* is in the spirit of *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Queer Black Feminism of the 70s and 80s*. Whiteness, I continually see, takes over and must be pushed back against by decentering its oblivious (to itself) narration. Reproductive Justice, a concept, movement, as well as phrase coined by Loretta Ross, like intersectionality, is a way to begin to center black women's intellectual labor and lived experience. Black female leadership is key to everyone's liberation. I felt it was important to give my time to *Revolutionary Mothering* before I could yet take time, in good consciousness, for myself. Now in my early fifties I seek self-actualization, exploration in this special time where I have yet a parent or grandchild who needs my caregiving, and novel writing/creative self-expression is my goal. I also seek a better understanding, healing, of what hurts in me, that I feel was sometimes deflected by activism. It feels radical, and difficult, to care for myself. I am also tired and scared of this world currently, as well as joy seeking, for having reasons to live are no small thing.

--

All art needs support. All creation requires conditions conducive to creation. In between movement and culture, we make meaning. Mothers are no different. Mothers also need support. (As walls support roofs, as streets support cars, as invisible labor supports the patriarchy and exploited labor supports the

privileged—as the kitchen supports dinner, and the door supports your entrance, a ramp can support a wheelchair, flexibility can include, as rhetoric excludes, those it wishes to.) Mothers do not exist in a vacuum (or in any kind of vacuum cleaning dichotomy). Mothers and children exist in a society. While it's true there needs to be a better balance between the sexes that is not the only balance needed. Community contains all of us.

Once I dreamed of the childcare squat revolution. I saw the squats of Berlin; and of the Lower East Side in NYC in the 1980s. How do we build a better world? Childcare, child inclusiveness, and creating healthy conditions for children and their caregivers; and us all, with all of our needs (as we all do have needs, some more vulnerable than others, at least at various stages in our life, as I said earlier, just sometimes those more vulnerable show up the situation first that later will effect others less vulnerable) may be a very good way. Another way perhaps, might be following the leadership of those affected, as knowing best and containing the answers for the problems in their own lives. We should listen to marginalized mothers to turn this ship around: to invest in solutions. Likewise artists may help us dream. Mother artists, with all the intersections that affect mother artists of color and marginalized groups, as well as their labor celebrated their genius credited (The tendency these days is for white women to extract words like Intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crensha; and Reproductive Justice, coined by Loretta Ross—for themselves in acts that repeat white supremacy and colonization with a new jargon.) Accessibility. Representation. Access. Dreams. Art. Childcare! Now I think I am writing a Utopian treatise. But in fact I'm writing an introduction to a supportive structure to contain mother art. Materials we have worked together to assemble and share.

Are all women on the same side? No I don't necessarily think so. Some women with more than you will try to keep it that way. And I know, as a white woman, I am a problem, whiteness my issue to work against. But I am also a woman's woman, which to me is the strategy of the working class. This does not mean that we can't build bridges, however, when we acknowledge our differences and listen to the reality of those with less privilege. However imperfectly, we can act to make a difference, for ourselves, each other, and the world to be.

Next year is going to be the year of the mother artist. Unfortunately it will always be next year until suddenly it's last year. However artists are used to working within these conditions. We will change them. Art is life. Art births, raises, rests, and revives. The era of representation is only beginning. Mother artists are everywhere. They always have been.

- China Martens, Baltimore Maryland, Oct. 31 2018

ⁱ I am thinking of fathers who give birth and/or may also mother as well as non-binary parents who generally do not go by such a gendered term as mother. Also I am influenced by the great spider mother artist Louise Bourgeois who wrote, “we are all vulnerable in some way, and we are all male-female,” and Brazilian cartoonist Laerte, a transgender woman who stated in *Laerte-se* (Netflix, 2017) that she lets her grandchild call her grandfather as asked by her son “since he already has three grandmothers” and questions the category of men and women as perhaps more of a tendency and social construct than firm identity.

ⁱⁱ To paraphrase Yoko Ono.

ⁱⁱⁱ A question raised in *Artist and Mother* Season 9, Episode 7. This episode profiles four California artists who make motherhood a part of their art: Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Andrea Chung, Rebecca Campbell, and Tanya Aguiñiga. There's a persisting assumption in contemporary art circles that you can't be a good artist and good mother both. But these artists are working to shatter this cliché, juggling demands of career and family and finding inspiring ways to explore the maternal in their art. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/artist-and-mother>

^{iv} This question inspired by page 19, *Motherhood in the Art World*.

<http://www.claudiasandovalromero.com/text/MotherhoodintheArtWorld.pdf>

^v Again this wonderful, and international, resource: *Motherhood in the Art World*.

<http://www.claudiasandovalromero.com/text/MotherhoodintheArtWorld.pdf>

There is also a documentary that comes with it:

[https://vimeo.com/claudiasandovalromero/motherhood in the art world](https://vimeo.com/claudiasandovalromero/motherhood%20in%20the%20art%20world)

^{vi} Betye Saar: the artist who helped spark the black women's movement:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/30/betye-saar-art-exhibit-racism-new-york-historical-society?fbclid=IwAR3Eure8fw50ErrnFvXYb2se1oMD0pvWMo2tF4gWuSDESdZAhh9FsiGByjA>

^{vii} Influences: Betye Saar, by Betye Saar. <https://frieze.com/article/influences-betye-saar>

The Artist Mother Studio (AMS) Conference seeks to elevate the voices of artist mothers/caregivers and continue important conversations about communal labor and how mothers can leverage their experiences for positive societal change. The AMS Conference is a part of an artist-driven project organized by DC-based artist Amy Hughes Braden and marks the culmination of a nine week artist-in-residence for artist mothers at Washington Project for the Arts. The conference is free to attend and includes lunch and childcare (provided on a first come first serve basis).

<https://www.wpadc.org/events/ams-conference>