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Maternal Performance Feminist Relations

Lena Šimić · Emily Underwood-Lee

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Lena Šimić · Emily Underwood-Lee

Maternal Performance

Feminist Relations

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Since 2015 we have done a number of interviews with artists working around maternal themes, presented our work at numerous conferences including: ‘Motherhood and Creative Practice: Maternal Structures in Creative Work’ at South Bank University in London, ‘Theorizing Motherhood in Academia’ at Museum of Motherhood, Manhattan College, New York, ‘Mothernists II: Who Cares for the 21st Century?’ at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art and Astrid Noacks Atelier in Copenhagen and Maternal Attitude at the University of South Wales and MADE Gallery in Cardiff. We have also edited ‘On the Maternal’ for *Performance*

Research journal and curated *Live Art and Motherhood: A Study Room Guide on Live Art and the Maternal*, as part of the Live Art Development Agency collection. By naming these events and publications, we would like to extend our deepest thank you to all the organizers, artists, scholars, and contributors; without you, your ideas and our mutual exchanges, this book would not have been possible. You have inspired us and helped us grow in our thinking and scholarship.

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PRAISE FOR MATERNAL PERFORMANCE

“Motherhood is lived in the moment and in all of time” state Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee in their dazzling book on maternal performance that defies categorisation. Putting into conversation the complex histories of feminist theorising about motherhood, and an array of contemporary maternal performance, this extraordinary work is inventive, personal, strident, scholarly, political and profound in equal measure, and quietly moving in unexpected ways.

Through an engagement with maternal loss, grief, embodiment, birth, maintenance and care, as they are performed, and perform us, Šimić and Underwood-Lee weave a deep maternal relational sensibility between theory and practice, and between one another, in a way that is truly generous and generative of new ways of thinking about maternal futures.”

—Lisa Baraitser, *Professor of Psychosocial Theory, Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, UK*

“What a joy to read a text that so fully embodies the idea of maternal performance, not only through extensive scholarly inquiry but also through conversational, relational, and epistolary engagement between the authors. Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee offer an important model of feminist maternal scholarship alongside nuanced understandings of what maternal performance can entail.

I found the format incredibly engaging, as the authors moved between scholarly voices and subjective maternal voices and even into epistolary

exchange in the penultimate chapter. The shifts in voice helped me further engage in the performance works discussed. And I so appreciated the sudden shift to pandemic lockdown contexts in the maintenance chapter. A real maternal performance in action!”

—Rachel Epp Buller, *Associate Professor in Visual Arts and Design,*
Bethel College, US

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Beginnings (1 Month)

MATERNAL CONNECTIONS

A beginning is never really possible. We are confined by our history, our bodies, our socialization, and the choices we have made. This awareness of our contexts feels especially important to us when working within the field of the maternal. We come from mothers and produce mothers; the maternal is cyclical and interconnected.

Motherhood is lived in the moment and in all of time, connecting us and expanding us beyond ourselves. Motherhood is also only definable in relation to our other (be that other a child, our own mothers, our chosen family, our communities, or the more-than-human world that cares for us and for whom we may or may not care). The maternal precludes us from ever starting anew as if we were free subjects, and yet it is precisely in the idea of natality that we can seek our freedom as capacity to begin anew, as political theorist Hannah Arendt asserts: ‘Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men [*sic*] take initiative, are prompted into action’ (1958, p. 177). While Arendt asserts that it is the capacity for beginning of the individual that is the primary condition of being human, it is mothers who are placed in a position to hold the space of those new beginnings, to initiate new beginners, while holding onto themselves too, in between the past, in terms of connectedness to the historic and the family lineage, and the new lives ahead. The maternal

paradoxically engages us in between the idea of freedom, as capacity to begin anew, and interconnectedness and responsibility to the wider world, which we foreground in this opening. In *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018) Jacqueline Rose writes: ‘You are born into the slipstream of your mother’s unconscious – as a therapist once said to me’ (pp. 109–110). We are interconnected through our mothers, and our mothers’ mothers, and all the mothers that came before. Yet, as mothers, we bring forth new human beings, and marvel at their capacity for new beginnings, their own freedom. The mother figure brings together, in one moment and one body, all the new beginnings that preceded her and all those beginnings that will follow, collapsing time and relations together.

As artists and scholars, we have further lineage too—we are also a part of the larger body of work and context in relation to maternal performances and studies. We are therefore indebted to both our mothers as well as our feminist and maternal performance foremothers. The Performance and the Maternal research project,¹ from which this book emerges, has grown from our mutual desire to map and theorize multifaceted maternal performances, to pay tribute to the work of various performance practitioners who have tackled the subject, and to pay deep attention to their working methodologies and performance aesthetics. These include (in the order of discussion in the book): Helena Walsh, Emily Steel, Amanda Coogan, Fern Smith and Patrick Fitzgerald, Elina Brotherus, Hannah Ballou, Aleksandra Nikolajev-Jones, Quarantine, Marni Kotak, Third Angel, Tracy Breathnach-Evans, Lenka Clayton, Lizzie Philps, Grace Surman, Megan Wynne, Liz Clarke, Jessica Olah, Hannah Buckley, Courtney Kessel, Peggy Shaw, Nanna Lysholt Hansen, Lynn Lu, Paula Varjack, Catriona James, Maddy Costa, Luca Rutherford, and Bryony Kimmings. While discussing, theorizing, and analysing the working processes and performances of the aforementioned artists we reflexively engage with our own lived experience of mothering, performance making, and writing. We started this research project and our collective thinking on the maternal in 2015, but have had our own paths in maternal studies and feminist performance for over two decades.

OUR SUBJECTIVE MATERNAL MAPS

Lena: Since my involvement in maternal studies and my work as an artist around maternal themes, from 2004 onwards, I have been struck by how often the main reference points for scholars working around art and the

maternal are Mary Kelly and Bobby Baker, and in particular two works: Kelly's Post-Partum Document (1973–1979), a six-year exploration of the mother/child dyad, and Drawing on a Mother's Experience (1988), which was, in Baker's words, created 'in order to make sense of the first eight years of motherhood, before moving on' (Baker and Barrett 2007, p. 47). I am indebted to Post-Partum Document, which has inspired my arts practice during maternity leaves, and Drawing on a Mother's Experience, to which I have returned again and again, almost compulsively, in my pedagogical work with students, asking them to acknowledge and consider not themselves, but their mothers.

Beyond Kelly and Baker, I want to return to the moment when I first saw M.O.M. Marks of Motherlands (2007) by Helena Walsh at the 'Intimacy Across Digital and Visceral Performance' conference at Goldsmiths University, London. This was one of those moments when I was truly unsettled by the experience of viewing performance art, in this case by its maternal theme and its brutality on the body: the performer enacting brutality on her own maternal body. I was eager for this performance; I was at the time working on my own artwork Contemplation Time (2007–2008), which was about processing my maternity leave with my son Sid. I was delighted that there was a piece about motherhood at this conference, and moreover that it was tackling issues of national identity, the question of the 'motherland'. I have also always had quite a problematic relationship to my own homeland, the newly created country of Croatia, something I have explored in my video artworks, and which ended up being a part of Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić, a live art event in Carlisle in 2008. I didn't know Helena Walsh but as I was waiting to enter the George Wood Theatre where the piece was to be performed, I chatted away to my then partner saying how I would love to interview Walsh, and talk to her after the performance.

We entered the darkness of the studio and we sat on the floor, I seem to remember. Walsh was stark naked as she entered the stage, which was full of plastic baby bottles and brittle brushes placed in an orderly manner. A video projection came on in the background, images of milking cows, of rural Ireland. I can't seem to remember if there were any images of the Troubles, but it was clear that this was a piece about war, devastation, failures of the body, of the motherland. Walsh was marching around the stage as a soldier, later on bandaging her breasts, filling her mouth with some gauze, sucking her fingers in the process of doing it, gagging even. At one point she placed one of the baby bottles next to her sex, inviting it to act as a dildo, an inadequate phallus. In the final act of the piece, she

started cleaning herself with a brittle brush, pushing it into her vagina. She squatted on the floor, her legs wide open, and stuck the brush into herself, penetrating herself, cleaning herself. The brush was pulled out stained with blood. All throughout the piece I was unnerved. The final action unsettled me further. What is this? Motherhood? How can it be this bad, this violent? Is this what motherhood produces? Is this what this artist feels about becoming a mother? There were references in the piece about mastitis and her failure to breastfeed, interspersed with images of milking cows. All was so raw, so mechanical and brutal. Following the piece I could hardly speak. I quickly told my partner we better go, I wasn't going to speak to this artist, this was one of the most devastating and shocking pieces I had ever seen.

It was much later on that I was more able to process the performance, try to understand why such violence was necessary upon the body by the artist herself, in public moreover. After all, it is only in public where artwork has a capacity to become a part of discourse, of knowledge, of exposure of maternal realities and brutalities. Eventually, I became friends with Walsh and we have collaborated on a number of projects, supporting each other's work. M.O.M. Marks of Motherlands toured to Art Workshop Lazareti in Dubrovnik, my hometown. This was an artistic exchange that I helped organize and for which I am glad. Unfortunately, I did not see the piece in my hometown on tour, but in some ways I have contributed to spreading a particular version of real maternal experience into the public sphere, exposing the ideal myth of motherhood internationally too.

The shock of the maternal is such that the new mother is catapulted into the land of overwhelming love, pleasure and pain, jouissance, ambivalence, depression. M.O.M. Marks of Motherlands did something to me, viscerally, through my body. It was a kind of shock, a break, an interruption which needed to happen in order for me to process the performance, and eventually decide to research its field in depth. The first task was to map a number of maternal performances which were lived maternal experiences made public. For that shock I am deeply grateful to Helena Walsh, her courage as well as the brutality of her maternal aesthetics. It was through the analysis of Walsh's work, my own Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić (2008) created during my maternity leave, and through Jess Dobkin's The Lactation Station (2006), which looked at the topic of breastfeeding in a much more humorous and communal manner, that I started formulating some thoughts around labour and violence in maternal performance works. I was seeking my own understanding and insertion into a maternal performance context.

*Emily: I threw myself into maternal performance making as an instinctive response to having my first child in 2008. At that time, I found inspiration not within a maternal tradition but more in a feminist tradition of making autobiographical performance, and yet I could not see my new maternal self reflected within that tradition. To me, it seemed that the maternal and feminism were often at odds. The domestic seemed tame and unimportant; I felt that my desire to carry, birth, and raise a child was an obstacle to my professional and political actualization. All the performances I had thought about, watched, and admired were about the 'big' issues (for example Annie Sprinkle's engagement with sex positivism or Eddie Ladd's examination of gender). And then, shortly after the birth of my first daughter, Lena sent me a copy of Phyllis Chesler's *With Child* (1998) and my parameters immediately shifted. I was pleased to read a representation of maternal experience with which I could identify, different in the specifics of time, place, and culture, yet something that resonated with me and allowed me to negotiate my maternal identity in relation to another's opening up of the domestic space into the public realm. Andrea Liss' *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2009) further introduced me to the work of many mother/artists and encouraged me to begin to examine how the world could be viewed through the lens of the maternal, to think and act 'm/otherwise'. Here I could find strength in my maternal subjectivity and 'unleash the maternal taboo' (Liss 2009, p. xvi), not as a means of promoting maternal experience as more profound, more feminine, or more feminist, but instead as a subjectivity that is important and worthy of consideration.*

*Liss' deeply moving interlude in her book, during which she describes how her son 'coax[ed her] back to life' (p. 122) when she experienced breast cancer, was particularly pertinent as I was wrestling with my own breast cancer treatment at the time. The shock of motherhood and the shock of cancer coalesced and I suddenly became aware that my maternal life, my cancer, and my feminism were inextricably intertwined. With my consciousness raised (the allusion here to the consciousness raising of second wave feminism is very much deliberate) I remembered encounters I had had with the Magdalena Project's 'Mothers of Invention' (1995) years earlier and sought out reports about that event, which helped me realize I could be a feminist and speak about the maternal. I watched Jill Greenhalgh's *The Threat of Silence* (2010) and was reminded of the cyclical, ongoing nature of maternal life and experience. I devoured the script of Peggy Shaw's*

To My Chagrin (2003), *realizing I could find my own maternal identity through performance practice and academic study.*

When I was diagnosed with cancer while pregnant, I began writing immediately; these writings, which took the form of letters to my unborn child, later became the basis for a performance, Patience (2008). Jackie Stacey has written about the privilege of being an academic and being able to turn to one's own research skills in order to understand whatever crisis we might happen to be living through at that time (1997, p. 3). So too with performance, I turn to works by artists that I admire and to making my own practice in order to understand better the shock of motherhood. It is through making and thinking about artwork that I have been able to engage with that shock, this new state which overwhelms, delights, and destroys in equal measure. Now my children are older, I have moved beyond the new and yet it is still through performance that I seek to understand the maternal.

In June 2015 we found ourselves resting on the chairs in a classroom, after a series of papers at the 'Motherhood and Creative Practice: Maternal Structures in Creative Work' international conference at South Bank University, organized by Elena Marchevska and Valerie Walkerdine. It was getting towards the end of the second day, and we were tired. We started discussing the overall conference—its massiveness, its ambition, its creativity, all somehow impossible to contain. We felt slightly alone in our performance studies discipline—it seemed the work was so much further ahead in other fields. Our conversation evolved along these lines: *I'd love to know more about performance and motherhood. Could we call that 'maternal performance'? Yes, how about thinking about 'maternal performance' specifically? Let's do that, try to understand the maternal in relation to the performance artform. Okay.*

Two years later, in 2017, we published our *Manifesto for Maternal Performance (Art) 2016!*, which followed Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* and its two-part structure (Šimić and Underwood-Lee, pp. 131–139). Ukeles has, alongside Kelly, Baker, Greenhalgh, Shaw, and Chesler, been one of the major influences for our project. The lines such as 'The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?' and 'Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.)' became etched into our consciousness. We found resonance in Ukeles' proclamations:

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife.
 I am a mother. (Random order).
 I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking,
 renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also,
 (up to now separately) I 'do' Art.
 Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things,
 and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art. (Ukeles 1969)

This was daily life as art, moreover it was performance. We divided our *Manifesto for Maternal Performance (Art) 2016!* into IDEAS and MATERNAL PERFORMANCE JOURNAL. All our IDEAS emerged from the JOURNAL, the messiness of the daily. Our *Manifesto* was born out of our mothering practices and, importantly, collaboration. We were always writing in relation to one another. The process of writing and living the *Manifesto* very much related to our daily experience of mothering, which is made obvious through the JOURNAL section of the work, and our personal histories of performance making.² In the following pages of this book, we turn our eyes towards other performance makers and their maternal practices, while, in our position as scholars, attempting not to lose sight of our own methodology as mother/artists.

Contexts and Questions

But what then is 'the maternal'?

Is it a physical thing?

Is it the ability of some bodies to carry life and give birth?

Is it a concept connecting various notions to each other?

Is it a metaphor for something else?

For me the maternal includes all of these, but perhaps most of all it functions as a system of seeing, thinking, and relating to the world. A system which completely breaks away from the binaries of the feminine/masculine oppositions through the maternal body's pivotal role to natality and otherness.

(Donoghue and McCloskey 2013)

The maternal is contested both as a term and a condition, definitions and arguments abound. Previously we have stated 'For us, motherhood refers to the lived experience of mothering regardless of our route to it, whereas the maternal refers to the study of and representations of motherhood'

(Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2016, p. 3). We stand by this definition as a central tenet in our consideration of the maternal in performance. In this first chapter we bring together some of the arguments, methodologies, and practices that are brought forth by a consideration of maternal performance. We predominantly examine work by mother/artists working within the medium of performance. We also engage with the work of childfree practitioners who have addressed maternal themes or employed what we have come to name maternal methods in their work. We define maternal methods and approaches as artistic endeavours that are primarily concerned with a relation to an other and are directed towards that other with careful intent. In our *Manifesto for Maternal Performance (Art) 2016!* (Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2017b) we set out our IDEAS, or propositions. One of them reads: ‘Day 2. Maternal performance relies on the other’ (p. 131). We also state: ‘Day 27a. Maternal performance others’ (p. 132). It might be arguable that all performance is inevitably relational, but what is particular about a maternal method is that inclination towards the other. Maternal comes into being, it exists, because of its potential to be in relation. We are also keen to foreground feminist approaches and relations.

We employ the term ‘mother/artists’ to describe diverse practitioners, a phraseology employed by Eti Wade (2016), Andrea Liss (2009), and many of the artists in this book. The term has gathered strength through its usage in various exhibitions, and social media networks.³ The term ‘mother/artists’ functions as an empowerment of a statement as well as a strategic outcry, similar to the way in which Ukeles proclaimed her own position as an artist, woman, wife, mother. In many of the cases we explore, the term ‘wife’ is redundant, but woman, mother, and artist firmly stand. Moreover, it is the term ‘mother’ that we have come to interrogate, rather than the still contested term ‘woman’. In *Women in Performance: Repurposing Failure* (2020) Sarah Gorman writes about a number of women performance practitioners who, despite working with postmodern strategies in performance making, and creating work in contemporary times, occupy strategically defined subject positions and embrace identity politics (Gorman 2020, p. 4). In discussing the examples of women’s contemporary performances, Gorman follows on from the feminist tradition of Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti and their assertion of sexual difference as ontological, which then becomes a political strategy in marking one’s particular lived experience as well as activist collective endeavours (p. 11). Despite the ever-present fear of returning

women to essentialism, Gorman identifies the potential for agency that is offered by an understanding of bodily difference:

However, the artists I discuss are liberated by a departure from the pressure to ascribe to particular feminist or gender theorists and take to the stage in order to actively claim a position of agency. They can be seen to adopt an essentialist belief in ontological difference as political strategy and as a result their position is in keeping with that of Irigaray and Braidotti. The artists detail interlocking experiences of oppression, celebrate their cause and unapologetically rekindle an agenda for identity politics. (p. 11)

As part of our research for this book we interviewed a number of artists and our starting point was always to ask if they identified with the term ‘mother/artist’. This kind of question is leading, and can be seen as setting a path towards a similar kind of return to identity politics, a reaffirmation of one’s position either as an artist, as a mother, or as both. The responses are varied and revealing. Some of the artists we interviewed stated a strong affiliation with the term and self-identified as mother/artists, for example Aleksandra Nikolajev-Jones describes herself as a ‘maternal artist’ (Nikolajev-Jones with Underwood-Lee 2020), while other artists rejected the label as pigeonholing their work. Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro explained:

I ... feel that we should not tokenise the term [mother/artists] as something exclusive. Just as we are not exclusively BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of colour] artists but we choose to weave through language, queering that which identifies our current positionalities. We are moving beings, we are artists. The maternal experience is a means for me which is about empowering my existence, enhancing my spiritual practice and elastifying understandings of resistance, strength and allyship. (Anguezomo Mba Bikoro with Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2020, p. 2)

The complexity in adopting the term ‘mother/artist’ is further explored by Amanda Coogan:

It is a little tricky because there are lots of layers to identity, as well as layers to being an artist. So, certainly, inspiration for a piece has to come from what I know and where I am. I want to say, crisis, but it is actually also the crises of becoming a mother.

Even from the very early days when you are totally shocked, when your body is all over the place, your hormones are all over the place, and you're thinking in a different way... all of these things become really important to the creation and making of a piece of work. Then there is another level, which is the professional level. I'd be a little wary of saying, 'No I can't do that exhibition because I am needed at home with my family.' My prime focus is to negotiate, from the start, in a different way. Being a mother/artist is absolutely like the bricks and mortar, the foundations of my work. (Coogan with Šimić 2017, p. 2)

Coogan here highlights the complex intertwining of biology, domestic labour, the politics and the pragmatics of showing work in the public domain, and the performance of a maternal identity, but overall she comes back to an approach that is informed by a desire to do things differently, to imagine a maternal method and inspiration that move away from the patriarchal and inform every aspect of our life and work. This approach might be viewed as a feminist relation—feminist because it rejects the patriarchal, and relational as it involves negotiating a different way of working in and with her community, which in turn will lay the path for other artists to have a more ethical, relational, feminist encounter. Coogan uses the word 'negotiation' when describing her focus, a different way of approaching her performance making. It is this maternal approach that has informed the selections we have made within this book. Furthermore, the maternal negotiating position, in both Coogan's and Anguezomo Mba Bikoro's cases in the context of their arts making practices, makes explicit a need for feminist relations, those which thrive on the sense of justice and equality as well as the recognition of our differing material conditions.

How is it that we approach the term 'mother' or 'mother/artists'? We hope to be able to work through these complex terms by addressing the doing, the making, the creating, and the active process of being a mother, or mother/artist, rather than a fixed biological position. Alison Stone usefully reinterprets Irigaray's conception of sexual difference to argue that any progressive philosophy of gender must incorporate a sexed dualism but must also recognize that all bodies are never confined to a singular identity or position. Drawing from this proposition, and addressing Judith Butler's well-known critiques of Irigaray, Stone proposes 'an ontology of bodily multiplicity' (2006, p. 87). Such an ontology would acknowledge biological experience and gendered categories of sex, while not limiting or confining those categories (p. 122).

While we cannot get away from the biological acts of pregnancy and birth, which both hold an important personal and political dimension in our understanding of identity, we want to understand mothering as an activity that is inclusive and can take up many different forms. Mothering is a site of never-ending political and personal production. While it is fluid and changing over time, generations and geographies, its discourse must be informed by situatedness in a specific time and place, since mothering is undertaken by specific bodies, marked by certain experience and contexts.

As well as an approach to doing, maternal works can be those that consider the situations around the act of carrying a child in utero, raising children, caring for our others, or being cared for. We consider works from a range of perspectives: those who identify as mothers, those who choose not to mother, those unable to mother, and those who are mothered. A useful example of the power of performance to open not just a generalized political consideration of the maternal, but also a specific and highly charged debate with direct reference to legal frameworks, can be found in *19 Weeks* by Emily Steel. *19 Weeks* (2017) is a play about the author's decision to terminate her pregnancy. The show website describes Steel's decision thus: 'In 2016, playwright Emily Steel had a termination after her baby was diagnosed with Down Syndrome' (*19 Weeks*, n.d.). *19 Weeks* was originally produced as a live performance that premiered at the Adelaide Fringe in Australia in 2017 and was subsequently produced as a radio play by BBC Wales and broadcast on Radio 4. In *19 Weeks* Steel shares a story that is hugely under-represented within the field of maternal performance. Her play invites us to have compassionate understanding for a decision that is portrayed within the play as at once difficult and easy, filled with sadness but not regret, emotional and clear-headed. Steel talks in the play of her certainty about wanting to get pregnant and then of her clarity that this particular pregnancy, with these particular test results, could not continue. Abortion is still a loaded topic and the moral and legal frameworks are constantly in debate. The year of 2017 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the UK Abortion Act 1967 and there have been frequent debates in Parliament and public since the commencement of the act in order to attempt to refine it and to open up or to limit bodily autonomy. A cursory glance at the US media will show that US abortion law was an even hotter topic under the Trump administration, with all too frequent attacks on state-funded clinics 'promoting' abortion. It is also worth noting here that abortion is still illegal in the UK

after twelve weeks and it is only ‘exceptions’ that the various legal frameworks permit, although in practice these exceptions are now applicable in almost all pregnancies within Northern Ireland, England, Wales, and Scotland up to twenty-four weeks of pregnancy. When set against this background, *19 Weeks* can be seen as a bold and important political work that enables us to reflect on the power of art and performance to make a space where we can consider some of the most complex and incendiary aspects of the maternal. *19 Weeks* humanizes abortion—it makes it not a political issue to be debated but a real-life event for one woman and her family, full of emotion and complexity. The decision to terminate a pregnancy here is difficult but necessary and we, as listeners, are asked to empathize with the central protagonist. We use ‘maternal performance’ to bring to light the stories of particular artists working through their own maternal experience. Thus, within this book we consider works that are either maternal in their approach or aesthetics, deal with maternal themes within their content, or are made by self-identified mother/artists, and many of the works we consider are maternal in all of these ways in a complex intermingling of structure, approach, identity, and themes.

We choose to use the term ‘maternal’ over ‘parental’ deliberately. There is a significant pull towards the term ‘parental’ in order to escape certain essentializing arguments that conflate mothering and the responsibility for care with women, and women with those that have the capacity to bear children; however, we believe that ‘parental’ obfuscates the significant contemporary and historic gendered labour that has been done by mothers over the centuries as well as makes invisible the birthing body of the mother. We do not believe that mothering is dependent on a capacity to birth or that all those who birth are women, and a driving force in our research for this book has been to move from this essentialized position to understanding mothering and the maternal as thought and action, rather than primarily through the lens of biology. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the majority of mothering work has been and is still done by women, as Simon Kelly and Adele Senior point out (2020, p. 3). Kelly and Senior argue for the use of ‘parental’ as a means of marking the intersection between the act of mothering, the ecological, and the shared labour within a family unit or community. They argue for a parental ethics that is in direct opposition to neo-liberal economics of labour, a position with which we have much sympathy; however, our project here is to understand the specificity of maternal performance and feminist relations. Within this complex negotiation between recognizing

the ontology of birthing and mothering bodies, including the gendered division of caring labour, and seeking to de-essentialize mothering, we use ‘maternal’ much as we use ‘feminist’—recognizing that you do not have to have a uterus to be maternal and you do not have to be a woman to be a feminist.

The crux of our project lies in ethics, in the way we relate to one another, which is imbued with feminist urges towards equality, acceptance of difference and reciprocity. It is therefore paramount that we highlight not only examples of ‘maternal performance’ but also ‘feminist relations’. Those take centre stage in the public maternal performances that we discuss in this book, as well as artistic methodologies in making work. Since maternal performance is always about relations, we seek to understand those as primarily feminist, meaning cognizant of different positions of power between us, striving to be just and equal while at the same time transparent and respectful about our differences. Hence, we highlight in our title for this book both maternal performance and the feminist relation it engenders.

The main research aim of this project is to map and theorize some of the current performance practice and studies activity around the maternal. Our choices are, of course, subjective. Our responses are also subjective. We have considered the work that we have been drawn to or that has been brought into our field of vision since 2015, through the maternal discussions that have taken place in the research for this book or that we have been made aware of because it has gained currency within conversations about feminist maternal art within the informal and formal networks of which we are members. We are not aiming for this publication to be an exhaustive catalogue of the history of maternal performance; instead, we have chosen work that engages with particularly knotty problems, intriguing conceptions, or challenges our own ideas around maternal performance. Our thinking about the maternal is in the context of a proliferation of mother/artist exhibitions, networks, and performances internationally, many of which are featured in this book, as well as our own positions as mother/artists/scholars. We recognize that our own context and background still shape the work we chose to explore here and the lens through which we view it. The artists we write about come from an international context and predominantly the territories of Northern Europe and the USA. The limits of our own geographical location and language barriers have informed our choices about the work we have engaged with. Many of the artists are migrants, which might reflect our

own position (Lena is a migrant to the UK, a country she was not born into, and Emily is English-born and living in the devolved, bilingual nation of Wales). We have tried to make sure we write about artists who are living regionally as well as in capital cities. We note that the majority of artists we write about in this book are white, cis-gendered, academically and economically privileged, and do not present as disabled. We propose that an examination of the diversity of maternal performance is an area that must be given more attention in future research, something we have tentatively begun across our Performance and the Maternal project, particularly through the inclusion of more artists of colour in the curated section of our website for this research project, which includes interviews as well as documentation of workshops, fora, and online performances.

We acknowledge that there is a gap in our engagement with maternal performances made by mother/artists who belong to the global majority. In her examination of the priorities for feminist action, *feminist theory: from margin to center*, originally published in 1984, bell hooks notes that motherhood has not historically been top of the list of problems that black women have to contend with:

Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, lack of jobs, lack of skills or education, and a number of other issues would have been at the top of the list – but not motherhood. (2015, p. 133)

The reasons identified by hooks may contribute to the disproportionate whiteness of maternal art, with global majority artists engaging with more pressing concerns before having the luxury of considering their maternal relations, or, as hooks also identifies, it may be that motherhood is romanticized by white women. Hooks highlights that black thinkers and artists who are dealing with a legacy of colonial essentialism and racism reject the un-nuanced celebration of the maternal (p. 136). It is also possible that artists of colour may be making maternal performance work and we may just have failed to see it, as have so many white scholars, programmers, and others who have ignored or not paid attention to the work of artists from beyond their own sphere of reference or canon. As Robin DiAngelo has pointed out, defensiveness is often a mark of ‘white fragility’ and can be seen as being apologist for our own racism (2011, p. 57). We must therefore not attempt to defend our position but to ask ourselves how we perpetuate the whiteness of maternal art, and offer that we will

continue to try to do better. One of the crucial questions that has come up through our organization of a series of online maternal fora is yet again that of whether the maternal art context is too white. We had been aware of whiteness in maternal performance and art since working on our *Live Art and Motherhood: A Study Room Guide on Live Art and the Maternal* for the Live Art Development Agency (Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2016), and we are grateful to Jess Dobkin for frankly raising the issue once again, in her email correspondence with us in connection to us organizing an online Maternal Performance (Artist Forum) in October 2020. Furthermore, we are aware that in-depth questions ought to be asked in terms of intersectionality, some of which we have started unpacking through our forum ‘Migration and (Maternal) Citizenship’ in October 2020 (Performance and the Maternal, n.d.). While it is evident that mothers are as diverse as the human population, different kinds of questions arise around the identity of mother/artists and their representations and aesthetics: Who are they? Whose voices are privileged in the art world and the academy? What barriers exist? What structures need to be dismantled and reimagined? How are we contributing to a process of canonization and repeating a particular perspective on who mother/artists are?

The overarching research drive for this book has been to try to better understand some of the complex and diverse experiences of mothering, mothers, and the maternal that are presented to us in performance as maternal approaches and performance aesthetics. We are driven to explore such aesthetics. Following on from this research aim, a number of research questions emerged, including: What is specific about maternal performance, as opposed to other artforms? What processes, strategies, and methodologies are used by performance practitioners and mother/artists working with maternal themes? What, if any, are distinct maternal performance aesthetics? What is the history of the relationship between motherhood and feminism? How is the maternal life/art dyad informed by both performance practice and theory? How is maternal subjectivity framed in both representations of motherhood and of being mothered? What can a maternal sense of subjectivity offer in performance encounters? How are the maternal and ecology connected? What are our maternal futures? How is maternal art able to contribute to change in the material and social conditions in which women mother? We do not attempt to provide definitive answers to our questions but instead aim to open up areas for discussion and engagement. We explore how other artists and scholars