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Negotiating the Maternal: Motherhood, Feminism, and Art

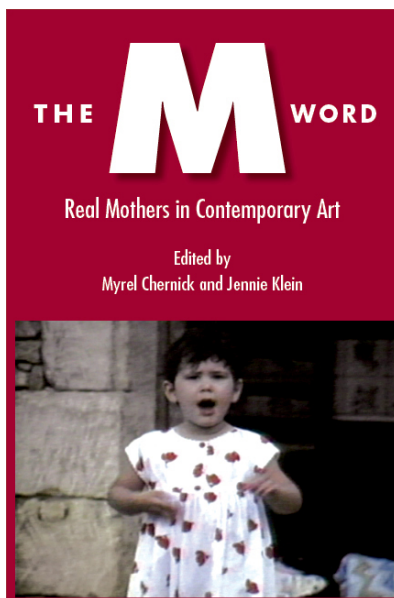
Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, eds.
The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2011. 444 pp., \$49.95, paper

Rachel Epp Buller, ed. *Reconciling Art and Mothering.* Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 332 pp., 23 color ill., 63 b/w. \$119.95

Over the course of the past twenty years, the representation and theorization of the maternal has emerged as a particularly rich area of interdisciplinary feminist inquiry. Two recent books—*The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, edited by Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, and *Reconciling Art and Mothering*, edited by Rachel Epp Buller—contribute to this field of debate by examining a range of historical and contemporary artistic explorations of motherhood and mothering. While images of maternal chastity and devotion pervade the history of Western art, in the idealized form of the Virgin Mary, the two anthologies collectively showcase the work of an international roster of artists who explore what Adrienne Rich first theorized as the disjuncture between motherhood as patriarchal institution and motherhood as complexly and variously lived experience.¹ Countering the dominant cultural construction of a maternal ideal that is primarily white, middle-class, young, and heterosexual, these titles bring together contributors from countries including Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, in order to address how factors such as age, class, ethnicity, race, and sexual preference may intersect to generate an experience of motherhood that is specific to each subject.

The M Word sets out “to both revive . . . initial debates around motherhood, subjectivity, and maternal desire and to look back at those debates from the vantage point of twenty years’ work on maternity and maternal subjectivity” (8). In accordance with this double project, the first section, “Conversations and Questions,” reprints and revisits key critical texts on the maternal in art by Mary Kelly, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and

Andrea Liss. In her multipart installation *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79) Kelly juxtaposed personal reflections on her experience of raising a child from early infancy to the point at which he was able to write his own name; found objects originating from her son, including stained nappy liners, baby



vests, and scribbled drawings; and a psychoanalytical account of the formation of sexed and speaking subjectivity. The work has subsequently been ascribed a central place in the ongoing attempt to determine the history of feminism’s impact on art over the past forty years. Though *The M Word* may at first glance appear to participate in this work of retrospective canon formation by reprinting extracts from the “Experimentum Mentis” sections of the *Document*, a conversation between Kelly and fellow practitioner Margaret Morgan establishes the maternal as a central and recurring concern across four decades of Kelly’s project-based work.

In that interview, Kelly responds to a suggestion by Morgan that *Post-Partum Document* be considered “the most intensely, and intimately, inward-looking” of her projects by referring back to the specific complex of interlinked aesthetic, political, and personal concerns that had impact on the *Document* at its moment of making in London in the early 1970s (21).² Kelly emphasizes the *Document* as a “commitment to a conceptualist notion of interrogation, but one informed by feminism” (29). While studying at Saint Martin’s School of Art, Kelly had come to feel that the

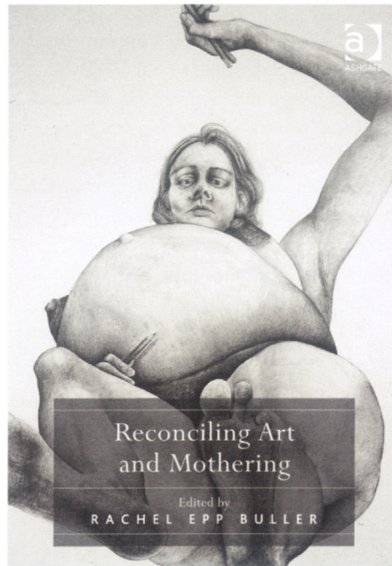
systematic approach to art favored by artists including Joseph Kosuth and the Art and Language group was limited by their reluctance to interrogate the concept of subjectivity. The engagement with psychoanalytic theory, in particular the writings of Jacques Lacan, that so differentiated *Post-Partum Document* at its moment of making thus emerged in part from Kelly’s dialogue with conceptualism, but was given further “political urgency” as a result of her involvement with the burgeoning women’s movement (22). While that movement had initially offered a sociologically oriented critique of the sexual division of labor within the domestic sphere, psychoanalysis introduced into that debate a consideration of the issue of desire and hence of the psychic construction of femininity: “The esoteric reworkings or revisions of the Lacanian diagrams represent a moment when we were trying to describe what was being experienced here, in that symbiotic relationship with the child, and how the trauma of separation, once it was mapped onto the traditional schema of the subject unfolding in the field of the other—identification, castration, and so on—would reveal something unique about the way in which maternal femininity is formed” (22). While part of the significance of *Post-Partum Document* undoubtedly lies in its positing of the day-to-day physical and emotional work of mothering as a topic worthy of sustained and serious artistic investigation, the conversation between Kelly and Morgan reveals how, in the *Document*, the maternal also serves as a site from which to interrogate both the psychic structures of subjectivity and sexual difference, and their imbrication with theories of representation.

It is this idea of the interrogative and generative potentiality of the maternal that is taken up by *The M Word*. While Chernick and Klein acknowledge Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* as a “crucial precedent” for the contemporary work presented in their anthology, they do not set out to provide either a chronological history of the maternal in art informed by feminism, or a definitive survey of Kelly’s influence on those artists who have subsequently grappled with issues of maternity in their work (4). The third section of the volume, “Contemporary Art and the Maternal: Articulating the Maternal Metaphor in Feminist Art,” highlights a number of artistic interventions that, in ways very different than *Post-Partum Document*, took the maternal as a

central site of both artistic and political interrogation, but that have been overlooked or marginalized by established accounts of feminism's impact on art during the 1970s. Michelle Moravec documents the activities of Mother Art, a feminist performance group that met in the early 1970s at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. Mother Art's first project was literally to make room at the Woman's Building for women with children, many of whom recalled being made to feel unwelcome by the teachers in the Feminist Studio Workshop, in the form of the *Rainbow Playground* (1974). Between 1974 and 1985, the group organized a diverse range of activities, from exhibitions and workshops aimed at gaining greater visibility for mothers who were artists, to increasingly politicized performance pieces addressing issues such as wasteful government spending (*Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, 1978) and abortion (*Freedom of Choice*, 1982). An essay by Maria Assumpta Bassas Vila examines a series of works produced by the Catalan conceptualist artists Fina Miralles and Eugènia Balcells during the 1970s, reading the critical interrogation of family relationships in works including Miralles's *Matances* (1976–77) and Balcells's *Album* (1976–77) as an attempt to recover what Bassas Vila refers to as a “maternal symbolic order” (183) erased by the repressive gender ideologies promoted by the Franco dictatorship. Mónica Mayer recounts how the idea of “transmaternity,” which she defines at that which happens “when motherhood takes us from the domestic realm to the political arena,” became central to the work of Polvo de Gallina Negra, the feminist art group that she founded with Maris Bustamante in Mexico in the 1980s (167). Their most ambitious project, *¡Madres!* of 1987, began with Mayer and Bustamante's pregnancies, and consisted of a series of mail-art pieces and performances. In drawing attention to a range of other work on the maternal made at around the same time as *Post-Partum Document*, but in different geographical locations and in distinct cultural and political contexts, *The M Word* thus implicitly contributes to the work of challenging teleological accounts of origin and influence, and of imagining alternative cartographies of art informed by feminism.³

The M Word reflects Chernick and Klein's commitment to challenging hegemonic constructions of motherhood and to exploring “aspects of the multifaceted and divided category of maternal subjectivity” not only in

the plurality of maternal voices included in their volume, but also in the diverse range of visual and textual strategies adopted by their multiple contributors (5). It is, as its editors acknowledge, “an unconventional book” (14). Serving in part as an anthology of previously published critical writings on the



maternal in art, it also includes curatorial overviews of four recent exhibitions on art and motherhood, as well as reproducing a wide selection of the work exhibited in those shows—and these images are not merely illustrative, but rather “provide a counter-narrative to the texts included in the book—a counter-narrative that both supports and exceeds these texts” (14). Following Chernick and Klein's stated aim to “foreground the relationship among theory, practice, and imagery” (7), contributions take a wide range of forms—from theoretical and art-critical reflections on the maternal and its representation in art, to personal musings by artists on the impact that motherhood has had on both their art practices and their professional careers, to short fiction, to performance scripts and poems, to experimental text-image pieces. In asking the reader to move among and through these meditations on mothering and motherhood, visual and textual, autoethnographical and theoretical, *The M Word* also invites us to consider not only how art practice might offer a means of reconfiguring the maternal, but also how an attention to the maternal might generate new modes of understanding and enacting

the history and practice of art informed by feminism.

Reconciling Art and Motherhood is, by comparison, a more conventionally arranged volume. Like Chernick and Klein, Epp Buller sets out to challenge “a singular, patriarchal, hegemonic construction of motherhood” and “to make room for the complexities and diversities of feminist mothering experiences, from maternal ambivalence to queer

mothering to quests for self-fulfillment outside of and in addition to mothering” (5–6). *Reconciling Art and Motherhood* is divided into two sections, with contributions grouped according to “those written by artists and those by art historians” (5). The first, art-historical section, “On Representing the Maternal Body: Critical and Theoretical Reflections,” consists of nine essays that examine the treatment of motherhood in the work of historical and contemporary artists who are women. Epp Buller notes that this section opens in the early nineteenth century before “moving quickly to the present day” (6). This chronological dash ensures that three significant art-historical essays—Heather Belnap Jensen on the representation of maternity in the work of the post-revolutionary French painter Marguerite Gérard; Deborah J. Wilk on the ways in which paintings of the stock figure of the breastfeeding, immigrant mother contributed to wider debates surrounding ethnicity, class, citizenship, and eugenics in nineteenth-century America; and Paula Birnbaum on the maternal imagery produced by the Russian Jewish sculptor Chana Orloff in Paris in the interwar period—appear somewhat adrift in a volume otherwise entirely given over to contemporary art practice. In her introduction to the second section of the volume, “Contemporary Artist-Mothers: Statements and Negotiations,” Epp Buller takes up more directly the question of chronologies or genealogies of the maternal in art, defining her project in distinction to that of the Feminist Art Movement of the early 1970s. While artists such as Miriam Schapiro sought to recover and celebrate a forgotten tradition of artistic foremothers, Epp Buller emphasizes that she wishes to trace “echoes and hauntings of foremothers rather than direct lines of descent” (137). Her analysis of these “echoes and hauntings” leads her to identify three key tropes in contemporary art that engage

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with issues of motherhood and mothering: “the maternal body,” “the maternal gaze,” and “pushing maternal boundaries” (138–43).

In her assertion that “depictions of the physical changes of maternity far outnumber other references to motherhood in contemporary art,” Epp Buller implicitly places the matter of the body and its representation at the center of debates on the maternal in art (141). It is an issue that Chernick and Klein also grapple with in *The MWord*. Acknowledging “the example set by Mary Kelly,” they comment that, “In our selection of work, we have tried to avoid . . . traditionally sentimental images in favor of work that is rigorously conceptual” (*MWord*, 7). *Post-Partum Document* was and remains notable for its refusal to represent the maternal body. Kelly’s use of indexical objects, traces, diagrams, and text as a means of visualizing the intersubjective relationship between mother and child not only responds to emerging concerns in the British women’s movement around the position of the female figure within patriarchal systems of representation, but also expressly differentiates her project from the idealized images of the Madonna and child that form so significant a part of the iconography of Western art history. In considering the legacy of that key work on the maternal, Chernick and Klein appear to imply that to abandon the “rigorously conceptual” model of the *Document*—to represent the relationship between mother and child on a more direct or literal level—is to fall prey to the dangers of “sentimentality.” It is an anxiety that is repeatedly voiced by contributors to both volumes. To the Canadian artist Leslie Reid, who began to address issues of maternal ambivalence in her art only when her sons were no longer young children but moving toward adolescence, it appears that, “for artists, the representation of motherhood remains especially difficult, coloured by association with essentialism, sentiment and autobiography” (*MWord*, 327). A conversation among three artists at different stages in both life and career, Mimi Smith, Diana Quinby, and Jackie Skrzynski, emphasizes that all three strive “to avoid the pitfalls of . . . sentimentality” in their work about motherhood (*Reconciling*, 183).

In an important essay on “The Body in Question: Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity, and Desire,” first published in 1994 and reprinted with a new postscript by the

author in *The MWord*, Andrea Liss acknowledges the vital role played by the *Document* in broader feminist debates on the body and its representation in Britain in the 1970s. Liss also testifies to the need to find “new ways of representing that do not continue the patriarchal scheme that divides women’s minds from our bodies and desires” (78). Although much of the work presented in these two anthologies draws on the lessons provided by the *Document*—Epp Buller’s own series *The Food Landscape* (2008), in which she documented the gradual process of weaning from the breast by producing daily prints made from the foods her daughter had eaten that day, is a case in point—other artists have, in their explorations of maternal selfhood and embodiment, appropriated those very traditions of historical representation that have been deemed so fraught. In *Self Portrait/Nursing* (2004), Catherine Opie depicts herself and her son Oliver in the traditional pose of the Madonna and child. The image simultaneously draws on and undercuts art-historical conventions in order to assert Opie’s intersecting identities as lesbian and mother: while her downward gaze conveys her tenderness toward her son, her sexuality is quite literally proclaimed across her heavily tattooed and scarred flesh. Opie’s exploration of the complexities of lesbian sexual identity and queer family life is the topic of essays by Erin Bartlett in *Reconciling*, and by Margaret Morgan in *The MWord*. In her contribution to *Reconciling*, Liss examines Renée Cox’s photographic self-representation in the *Yo Mama* series (1992–96) in relation to both mammy and child portraits from the antebellum period, and Marian iconography. Liss contends that, in opening up “the conception of black women as sexual and as mothers on their own terms,” Cox’s self-portraits not only challenge patriarchal conceptions of maternal passivity and selflessness, but also “bring into full evidence the denials slavery brought to bear on the black female body” (75 and 77). The work of Opie and Cox thus differs from that of other artists included in the two anthologies who aim at a more “realistic” or “truthful” depiction of the pregnant and birthing body (for example, the photorealist paintings of Jessica Clements). Though the range of strategies they adopt may be very different from that of Kelly in the *Post-Partum Document*, many of the contemporary artists who contribute to these two anthologies thus share Kelly’s

interest in critically interrogating existing systems of representation.

Many of these contributors address in their statements the day-to-day challenges of combining the roles of artist and mother—of “reconciling art and mothering,” as the title of Epp Buller’s volume would have it. As Liss emphasizes elsewhere, however, “It is not a matter of ‘balancing motherhood and work,’ as the media culture likes to insidiously simplify things. . . . It is the feminist mother’s admission that ambiguity is often the norm.”⁴ In bringing to critical attention a diverse body of art made over the past forty years that does not simply valorize maternal experience, but that actively embraces ambiguity, these two anthologies not only make a decisive contribution to the emerging field of maternal studies, but also bring the maternal to the surface of feminist thinking on the history and practice of art informed by feminism.

1. See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976).

2. For further discussion of how *Post-Partum Document* intervened in a series of interconnected “discursive sites” in London in the early 1970s, see Mary Kelly, “Notes on Reading the *Post-Partum Document*,” *Control Magazine* 10 (1977):10–12; rep. Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 20–25; and Juli Carson, “Re-Viewing Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*,” *Documents* 13 (Fall 1998).

3. See Marsha Meskimmon, “Chronology through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art Globally,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 322–33.

4. Andrea Liss, “Maternal Rites: Feminist Strategies,” *n.paradoxa* 14 (2004), 25, italics in orig.

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