

# gender<ed> thoughts

New Perspectives in  
Gender Research

Working Paper Series  
2026, Volume 1

Magdalena Kallenberger

**MATERNAL FANTASIES.**  
The Collective Body as an  
Artistic Strategy of In\_Visibility.

With a Commentary by Elke Krasny



GÖTTINGER CENTRUM FÜR  
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## MATERNAL FANTASIES

### The Collective Body as an Artistic Strategy of In\_Visibility

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#### Abstract

This article looks critically at the value and desirability of ‘visibility’ in relation to art which revolves around motherhood and ‘artist mothers’ by focusing on the Berlin-based collective *MATERNAL FANTASIES*. I will not only situate *MATERNAL FANTASIES*’ collective art production as a *posteriori* critical-activist exercise in the context of artistic research, but I will also outline its self-reflexive, aesthetic, practice-based, and improvisatory methods for making meaning and recording knowledge. Specifically, I will look closely at two artworks by the collective to point out how their *collective body* becomes a method and a tool to make polyvocal, collective, lived experiences of motherhood visible at the expense of the individual body. In addition, I will use my entangled position as researcher and active member of *MATERNAL FANTASIES* to investigate maternal in\_visibilities and care work through collective art production *together with* its members. In doing so, I identify the concept of ‘autotheory’ as a central part of the collective’s artistic practice.

#### Keywords

motherhood(s), in\_visibilities, feminist practices, collective art production, artistic research

#### Introduction

In most capitalist societies, care work such as social services, cleaning, cooking, elderly care, and child-rearing are still mostly unpaid or low-paid tasks, mainly carried out by women in private households and thus invisible. A similar situation can be observed in the arts and cultural industry when it comes to the subject of motherhood. In this article, I will lay out a trajectory of ‘maternal art’ exhibitions to show how this topic has shifted in the last twenty years (since 2000) from the margins towards the center. I will critically discuss remain the art world has focused on a specific type of ‘mater-

nal art’, particularly the isolated, biological ‘mother with child’ constellation, drawing on the Christian ‘Virgin Mary with Child’ of the Western art history canon. Of course, over the past decades, there have been attempts to offer alternative visions and voices,<sup>1</sup> but they rem tied

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<sup>1</sup> Other voices I am thinking of include (but are not limited to) Bracha Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006), Andrea Liss’ monograph *Feminist Art and The Maternal* (2009), Myrell Chernick and Jenni Klein’s *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (2011), Rachel Powers’ *The Divided Heart: Art and Motherhood* (2012), Rachel Epp Buller’s *Reconciling Art and Motherhood* (2012), and Rachel Epp Buller and Charles Reeve’s *Inappropriate Bodies, Art, Design, and Maternity* (2019). All of them are situated in the Anglo-

to the mother/child dyad because our dominant model of motherhood in the arts is an individualistic one, as I will point out in this article.

Questions around multifaceted and ambiguous experiences of motherhood became the starting point for my research and the foundation for the artists group *MATERNAL FANTASIES*.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I will trace the history of feminist (mother) art collectives and (critically) situate *MATERNAL FANTASIES* within their tradition. I use *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as a case study to analyze how to curate – in the double sense as both an artistic practice and a practice of *curare* = caring – a collective process which can give rise to new infrastructures, tools, and methods for intergenerational, collective art which considers care work and affective labor part of the production process. *MATERNAL FANTASIES* can thus be seen as part of the wider notion of the “organisational turn” (Holm / Beyes 2021: 1).

I identify the concept of autotheory as a central part of the artistic practice of *MATERNAL FANTASIES*. First coined by Stacey Young to counter discourse that homogenizes “women” (Young 1997: 61), Lauren Fournier applied the term on contemporary works of literature, art, and art-writing. These works integrate autobiography and other explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory in ways that transgress genre conventions and disciplinary boundaries (Fournier 2021). By implementing autotheory as a method in artistic research and by “facilitating quick movement back and forth between different modalities of thinking and examining the world” (Zwartjes 2019: 3), I foreground the value of situatedness, of doing research *inside-in* (Hannula / Suoranta / Vadén 2014: xii): “It creates a sense of parallel, rather than of hierarchy, between different ways of knowing, thinking and analysing” (Zwartjes 2019: 3) while artistic

research emphasizes reflexive, aesthetic, practice-based, and improvisatory methods for making meaning and recording knowledge (Leavy 2020; Rolling Haywood, Jr. 2013). As an artistic researcher, I do not study something, but rather study *with* something (Hannula / Suoranta / Vadén 2014: 50). In my case, I investigate *maternal in visibilities* and care work through collective art production together *with* the members of *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as an *a posteriori* critical-activist exercise. In this sense, I apply autotheory as a method in artistic research to explore and test theory through investigations of maternal, lived-body experiences and collective art production. I consider visibility and invisibility “two mutually entangled and interdependent concepts” following the proposal of the *Cfp: Renegotiating Minoritarian In\_Visibilities*. As suggested by the editor, I am using an underscore in the orthography to highlight the “conceptual gap between visibility and invisibility as a discursive space for the negotiation of ambiguity, vagueness and indeterminacy.”<sup>3</sup>

I will argue that the individual is rendered invisible within the collective body. To demonstrate this in detail, I will turn to the method of ‘collective automatic writing’ in the first part of this text. The work “Like so Many” (2018) by *MATERNAL FANTASIES* used automatic writing, historically associated with the surrealist movement, as a tool to unearth individual, lived experiences. I will illustrate how individual lived experiences can be transformed into polyvocal collective art in which the *collective body* is a fluid, osmotic structure oscillating between internal and external processes and interconnections instead of a fixed, stable entity. As I will show, “Like so Many” serves as a best practice example in the context of artistic research on how to generate new knowledge. It further exemplifies how artistic research constitutes a collection of acts that are not a progress, but a process: a

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American discourse around the maternal which is far estranged from the German discourse.

<sup>2</sup> *MATERNAL FANTASIES* is a Berlin-based feminist art collective, founded in 2018. It counts as its members Lena Chen, Mikala Hyldig Dal, Maicyra Leão, Hanne Klaas, Isabell Spengler, Aino El Solh, and myself, Magdalena Kallenberger.

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver Klaassen / Jana Tiborra / Katharina Wolf / Cathérine Ludwig-Ockenfels: CALL FOR PAPERS. Renegotiating Minoritarian In\_Visibilities. Interdisciplinary Conference, November 12-14, 2019. [https://www.uni-giessen.de/en/faculties/gkgcsc/events/conferences-symposia-summer-schools/conference-sites/In\\_Visibilities](https://www.uni-giessen.de/en/faculties/gkgcsc/events/conferences-symposia-summer-schools/conference-sites/In_Visibilities).

never-ending, self-critical, and self-reflective creative process (Hannula / Suoranta / Vadén 2014: 27).

After showing how the individual is rendered invisible through the process of collective writing, I will turn to another example of in\_visibility in the context of maternal art. In the photograph “Tell Me How to Disappear” (2019), the *collective body* becomes a skin that makes the collective visible as a single artistic entity. I describe how this aesthetic, collective skin becomes a method and a tool to make polyvocal, collective, lived experiences visible at the expense of the individual body. For a mother artist, the notions of visibility and invisibility, individuality and collectivity are complex. In the conclusion, I will present an outlook on my analysis in terms of the power dynamics in the art canon.

### ***Feminist Maternal Art at the Margins of In\_Visibility: From Mother/Child to the Collective***

In January 2019, the German art and cultural magazine *Monopol* titled “Kind und Kunst – Das letzte Tabu” (Child and Art –The Last Taboo) (Buhr 2019) and asserted that art considers itself as avant-garde in many social issues, except when it comes to the subject of parenthood. Children are rarely the subject of art and, for mothers, they are considered the killer of an artist’s career. This assumed role of the mother artist has been questioned from the margins and pushed onto the public stage from time to time, usually in self-organized, ambitious, small-scale, insufficiently funded group shows, such as “doublebind. art children career” (2003) curated by (mother) artist and curator Signe Theil at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin and “Maternal Metaphors I” (2004) and “Maternal Metaphors II” (2006) curated by artist Myrel Chernick at Rochester Contemporary Art Center, New York.<sup>4</sup> “New Maternalisms” (2012), a show cu-

rated by art historian Natalie S. Loveless traveled to Santiago de Chile, where it expanded through a collaboration with the Chilean curator Soledad Novoa to include Chilean artists in “New Maternalisms” (2014). The last chapter of this series was again shown back in Canada as “New Maternalism Redux” (2016).

All these exhibitions were self-organized by ambitious individuals who were also mothers. Signe Theil told me in a 2018 conversation how important it was for her personally to become active and to raise visibility for this marginalized topic. Another, equally important, aspect was to build and grow a network between mother artists themselves and towards an outside audience, using public visibility as a tool of self-empowerment. However, all these group exhibitions have featured works of individual mother artists questioning the representation of motherhood(s). Most of these counter-images can still be traced back to the isolated, biological mother. They mostly portray one mother with one child, not more or many children. Usually, the child is pictured in the infant-toddler stage, as this is the most transformative period for the newborn mother artist. Anthropologists have coined the term “matrescence” to describe this developmental identity transition (Raphael 2011: 65-72), which implies ‘giving birth’ to both a child and a new identity for oneself. For those mothers who continued working as artists, this identity transition has often led to a radicalization of their art practice. This can be observed in the works of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mary Kelly, and Susan Hiller from the 1970s, to Renée Cox and Gail S. Rebhan in the 1990s, to contemporary works by artists like Birgit Dunkel, Katharina Bosse, Judith Samen, Elinor Carucci, Catherine Opie, and Hannah Cook.

This trajectory delineates a history of struggles of visual artists fighting, on the one hand, the norm of who is perceived as mother (Renee Cox’ series *Yo Mama* (1992-1996) and Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004)) or challenging the representation of motherhood through an iconization of a secular motherhood based in everyday moments (Birgit Dunkel’s *Madonnas* 2001, Katharina Bosse’s *A Portrait of the Artist as*

<sup>4</sup> “Maternal Metaphors II” expanded into the publication “The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art” (2011) by Myrel Chernick and Jenni Klein.

a *Young Mother* 2011, and Judith Samen's *a.T. (Brotschneiden)* 1997). On the other hand, artists like Elinor Carucci or Rineke Dijkstra depict intimate but ambivalent moments in the mother-child relation such as bodily exhaustion after childbirth (Rineke Dijkstra's series *New Mothers* (1994)) or as sensual dramas of intimacy (Carucci's *Mother* (2013)). Hannah Cook's work, which was recently awarded the prestigious art prize by Museum Ostwall in 2022, confronts head-on the most prominent voices critical of mother artists. In *Ada vs. Abramović* (2018) and *Ada vs. Emin* (2018), Cook stages herself nursing her baby while sitting on Emin's bed or by facing Abramović in her performance work "The Artist Is Present" (2010).

Gradually in the past years, the topic has evolved from small-scale project spaces and galleries towards larger institutions. The Photographers' Gallery and The Foundling Museum in London presented "Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood" (2013/14) curated by Susan Bright, while the Palazzo Reale in Milan showed "The Great Mother" (2015) curated by Massimiliano Gioni. In the same year, "Rabenmütter / Mother of the Year"<sup>5</sup> (2015/16), curated by Stella Rollig, Sabine Fellner, and Elisabeth Nowak-Thaller, opened at Kunstmuseum Linz. These three exhibitions were accompanied by extensive, well-produced exhibition catalogues, which, in doing so, left a visible trace of the exhibited works. These exhibitions excluded artworks by (feminist) art collectives like *Mother Art*, *Desperate Artwives*, and *Polvo de Gallina Negra*. Instead, they focused solely on the individual mother-child(ren) relation. It can be argued that these exhibitions reproduce the capitalist ideology of the bourgeois nuclear family and the Christian 'single-mother-artist / Mary with a child' constellation. They continue the classic narration of the Western art canon of the

(fe)male/single artist/genius that 'gives birth' to art. Structural forms of discrimination are being kept in the private realm, motherhood remains an individual choice and responsibility. Merely by assembling these individual artist positions in the form of group exhibitions (such as "doublebind" (2003)), a multifaceted picture of motherhood(s) appears.

### **Questions of In\_Visibility as a Central Trope Organizing Western Feminist Thinking and Feminist Art Practice**

Why are questions of in\_visibility such a central organizing trope of the Western feminist thinking and feminist art practice? Questions of in\_visibility are deeply rooted in the legacy of the Enlightenment period and closely linked to the consecutive primacy of vision and the hu(man) logic of an "expansionist, colonising mind in pursuit of clarity and classification" (Parkins / Karpinski 2015: 1). Feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller calls scientific enlightenment "a drama between visibility and invisibility, light and dark, a drama in need of constant reenactment" (Keller 1986: 69-70), while Ilya Parkins and Eva C. Karpinski illustrate how "in/visibility has surfaced again and again as a shifting signifier of feminist desire for presence" (Parkins / Karpinski 2015: 3). Historically, feminists like the suffragettes have taken to the streets marching and occupying public spaces as an effective strategy of protest and resistance. This strategy of visibility is still being pursued today, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

### **Mother Art Collectives Creating Visibility in Public Space**

An example of a mother art collective which confronted straightforwardly the factual discrimination of artists is *Mother Art*. This group met through their involvement in the Woman's Building in Downtown, Los Angeles in 1974.

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<sup>5</sup> "Rabenmütter / Mother of the Year: Zwischen Kraft und Krise. Mütterbilder von 1900 bis heute / Between Empowerment and Crisis". The much-disputed term 'Rabenmütter' is culturally framed. In the German version, "Rabenmütter" is a pejorative stereotype of mothers who fail being mothers, while the English title is positively but maybe ironically connotated.

They were active during the 1970s and 1980s and tackled a vast array of social and political issues in their art. Their collective action started out of the indignation over the Woman's Building passing a rule that dogs, but not children, would be allowed into the artists' studios. As a first collective action and pointed response, *Mother Art* built a play structure for children on the outdoor premises of the Woman's Building. Andrea Liss describes how their "other installations similarly pinpointed the amazing lack of attention and respect accorded to mothers, their families, and the work they perform to maintain self and family" (Liss 2009: 2).

Around the same time, the *Hackney Flashers Collective*, active between 1974 and 1980, arose in England from a similar concern with regard to women's roles as mothers and workers. With its twenty members, the collective produced two seminal exhibitions that toured for several years. The first exhibition "Women and Work" (1975) consisted of nearly two hundred photographic prints and accompanying texts documenting the typical roles taken on by women, which were often unskilled and low-paid at that time. The photographs documented women protesting domestic violence, families campaigning for nursery provision, as well as women and siblings providing care to young children. The second exhibition, "Who's Holding the Baby?" (1978) tackled the then (as now) poorly publicly funded childcare in Britain and required the use of additional tools: illustration, collage using advertising imagery, and graphics. *Hackney Flashers'* feminist critique was intended as an agitprop (agitation propaganda) tool to be deployed in a range of settings, among them women's liberation conferences, trade union meetings, libraries, and institutions concerned with social policy. Their work positions itself between photo-journalistic and conceptual art practices while taking a strongly political, activist approach.

In the last couple of years, there seems to be a revival of feminist public activism in various forms. *Desperate Artwives*, established in 2011 by artist and mother Amy Dignam, was the self-proclaimed only platform for artist mothers (basically since *Women Art* and *Hackney Flashers*) at

that time. They performed public action by hosting a series of 'takeovers', collaborative performances staged as a collective response to specific events, sites, and current issues faced by women and mother artists. In 2018, the group took to the business district of London, positioning themselves in plain sight in front of the banks, with faces covered with bedsheets and tablecloths.<sup>6</sup> According to the group, "this action represents the still ever-present invisibility of women within the workplace, as well as the invisibility of the domestic paid and unpaid work in homes still undertaken mostly by women" (*Desperate Artwives* 2018).

This local public action expanded into the virtual space under the hashtag *#united-despitethedistance*. In this collective virtual action, participating international artists shared online images of themselves hiding under bedsheets and tablecloths in solidarity, building a virtually visible alliance. Supporters who joined the *Desperate Artwives* takeover via social media were, among others, Martha Joy Rose of *The Museum of Motherhood*, Deirdre M. Donoghue, founder and curator of *M/Other Voices*, Suzy Spence, director and curator of the *Womenhouse Archive*, Dyana Gravina, founder and artistic director of *ProCreate Project*, and initiator and curator of the Israeli "mamactivist chapter" Shira Richter. This form of feminist activism combining public actions performed at local, urban spaces and connecting them to international public actions on virtual platforms like *Twitter*, *Tumblr* and *Instagram* shows how the struggles of motherhood regardless of national borders are a unifying momentum within an international women's movement even though or most probably because motherhood has not yet been recognized as a marginalized identity and is still confined to the private realm (Jolly 2017: 74).

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<sup>6</sup> The visuality of the images relates to the popular online collections and archives (*Pinterest*) of "Hidden Mothers", a genre of photography common in the Victorian era, in which young children were photographed with their mothers present but hidden in the photograph. It arose from the need to keep children still while the photograph was being taken due to the long exposure times of early cameras (Cheng / Barnett 2020).

But how to shift political action from the margins? The political was formerly imagined as practically synonymous with the public sphere and with conflicts between institutions or nation-states. Even though its meaning has evolved over the course of history (MacCabe / Yanacek 2018), mainstream discourse still draws on Hannah Arendt's understanding of the political as any action that is performed in public (Arendt 1963: 124). Johanna Hedva, artist and author of the "Sick Woman Theory" (2018), is very critical of this definition and the implications of what and who this definition excludes: "If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed a-political – simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street" (Hedva 2018: 2). Or, as Judith Butler puts it in her 2015 lecture *Vulnerability and Resistance*, "Arendt failed to account for who is allowed into the public space, of who's in charge of the public. Or, more specifically, who's in charge of who gets in" (Butler 2015). For mother artists, this access to non-domestic space – from art residencies to exhibition openings – is crucial. But where to leave the child(ren)? In the following section, I will show how *MATERNAL FANTASIES* has found solutions to the question of access and visibility on the organizational and aesthetic level.

### ***"Like so Many" (2018): Becoming In\_Visible Through Collective Writing***

In this section, I will highlight how the *collective body* became a tool to unearth and share our lived experiences, and, at the same time, a tool for community building through writing, reading, and listening to each other's stories, fostering intergenerational dialogue. As a starting point for our initial meetings in spring 2018, we had asked everyone to contribute one text that we would read together and discuss. Aino El Solh shared with us Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). As we were reading out loud collectively, Cixous' sentences were rolling to-

wards us like waves with their inherent reverberating repetitions: "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous 1976: 876). This text resonated deeply with all of us and pushed us to start our first collective writing session more than forty years after Cixous had first drafted her essay. Since none of us had much previous writing experience and because we wanted to bring personal and troubled experiences to the surface that we would probably not express publicly outside the safe space of our group, we decided to use automatic writing as a technique, encouraging an unconscious stream of thought and words. Automatic writing is a spiritual practice, also known as psychography, which was adapted by the Surrealist Avantgarde to create an illusory stream-of-consciousness association (Breton 1924: 298). We have used automatic writing as a method to build from single words or, later on, from word clusters a starting point for accessing fractions of our hidden memories and experiences. We decided on a restricted time frame of around 20 minutes, not too long to become overwhelmed by the task or to fall into overthinking and self-censorship. The atmosphere that built up in the room during this collective writing session was also a great source of energy, joined by the feeling of becoming a community, of building a *collective body* from/through materialized stories and voices. Through the collective automatic writing technique, we could write from the heart without filtering and judging the result immediately through a conscious mind. We have adapted, modified, and reshaped this practice during our different residencies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This collective endeavor was supported by my individual research as part of the Ph.D. Program *Art and Design* at Bauhaus University Weimar, where I was looking into feminist autobiographical writing strategies (Rich 1976, Kristeva 1984, Haug 1987, Baraitser 2009, Lorde 1982), feminist manifestos (Carla Lonzi „Rivolta Femminile“ (1970), Mina Loy „Feminist Manifesto“ (1914), Gisela Erler „Das Müttermanifest Thesenpapier“ (1987)) and feminist experimental writing practices (Blau DuPlessis 1990, Gallop 1988), autoethnography (Ellis 2004, Adams et al. 2015, Bochner / Ellis 2016), life-writing (Smith / Watson (2017), auto/biography (The Routledge Au-

In the following part, I will describe the initial collective writing exercise “Like so Many” (2018), which we executed during this first residency in the evenings after the kids had been put to bed. This writing exercise was our first attempt “to embrace, discuss, elaborate and exhale contrasting experiences and family stories, memories, fantasies, desires and horror scenarios related to Maternal Fantasies” (Kallenberger 2018) while still getting to know each other and each other’s stories. “Like so Many” (2018) is built on fragments and prompts from Adrienne Rich’s essay “Anger and Tenderness” (1976). Rich’s essay interweaves her thoughts and reflections on becoming a mother herself with excerpts from her own diary, written twenty years earlier in 1959 and 1960. The essay was published as part of her seminal book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) at a time when Rich was already an established feminist poet and writer.<sup>8</sup> Her essay was a complete revelation for us. We were struck by how she articulated maternal ambivalence through her personal struggles and shifting emotions as she confronted the conflicts of the writer mother and the hold of patriarchy over the experience of birth and motherhood. Alice Braun has stated in a more recent review of Rich’s book:

*What was truly new about her approach was, first, the blend of personal testimony and academic reflection (which has now become the new normal with the trend of personal essays), and second the intensely political focus. In effect she was dragging motherhood from the confines of the bedroom or the nursery to the public sphere of intellectual debate. She showed that mothers, far from being proverbial angels in the house, were every bit as part of the world of ideas as men, whose fatherhood does not*

*seem to affect their ability to speak, think or write. (Braun 2019)*

Inspired by Cixous, we took up the challenge *to write ourselves in* this history of feminist struggle and, more specifically, into this essay on anger and tenderness. To do so, we extracted fragments from Rich’s text and used them as prompts to inscribe, expand, and continue the storyline more than fifty years later. Hereby, we used the following fragments as starting points for inserting our own personal experiences:

- “Entry from my journal (month, year)” – to situate our experience within a specific time and location;
- “Like so many women, I ...” – to insert our individual selves and struggles into the wider context of historical and contemporary feminist struggles;
- “I could love so much better ...” – to take agency and make individual proposals on what should change, so that we individually could do a better “job” loving;
- “I have a very clear, keen memory of myself the day ...” – to access a cathartic moment which would possibly initiate change;
- “In order to live a fully human life we require ...” – ending with another proposal, opening up from the individual perspective towards the *we* as a collective of humans.

The topics ranged widely: One member was not able to “tell the difference between the rash caused by the hand, foot, and mouth disease and the rash caused by a sun allergy” (MATERNAL FANTASIES 2018). Another member chronicled how she unquestionably fell “into the role of automatically caring and preparing food for my family. To ask visitors if they would like to drink or eat something. My husband doesn’t have this reflex” (ibid.). Executing this role, she states, led to her complete exhaustion. Another member thought that she “could have loved so much better, if I had learned to love myself unconditionally first and as patient-

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to/Biography Studies book series) and anecdotal theory (Gallop 2002) as possible research strategies in artistic research next to discourses on maternal theory (O’Reilly, 2007) and feminist collective practices (Martinis Roe 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Rich’s timing parallels that of other artist mothers we encountered in our research, who only confronted the topic of giving birth to and raising another human being after they had already proven to be successful in other areas.

ly, forgivingly, gently and faithfully as I learned to love my child” (ibid.). A third member details in her text how she is “structurally and dramatically underpaid” (ibid.) and, like so many women, reliant on a partner for financial security. She succinctly describes in her text the feeling of alienation, of becoming disentangled from her own body, adopting a male gaze that judged other women’s bodies. From this estranged perspective, she reflects on her choice to prioritize her child’s well-being over her career. She assumes that she might get blamed for this “by all parties involved at a later point” (ibid.).

In these early days of motherhood, all of us had experienced firsthand a rupture to the fantasy that “women can now do it [all], even have it, or that they would have it if they just tried hard enough” (Ahmed 2017: 5). This was the initial impetus to gather as a collective in 2018 and to deliberately join this intergenerational dialogue, building up on prompts of one of our self-chosen feminist ancestors. In order to create spaces and opportunities for people to express difficult experiences, the first step is turning to each other and acknowledging that we all have some kind of wound. Our collective automatic creative writing sessions offer a framework for vulnerability and for inscribing care, allowing us to “converse with each other and heal each other” (Ndikung 2021: 68) through reading and listening as a *collective body*. The process of our collective writing enables us to name, engage, encounter, and tackle the unresolved and expanding social, economic, and political inequalities that have harmed and pained us.

Building a communal safe space for interpersonal engagement requires a foundation of solidarity and mutual trust. Through automatic writing and listening to each other, we reveal ourselves layer by layer, releasing what we might not have shared in a personal conversation nor in a more formal text.<sup>9</sup> Over time, these collective writings became central elements to our work, as, for example, material to build voiceo-

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<sup>9</sup> For this reason, I have not directly referred to the authors’ names.

vers and statements performed individually or collectively in choirs for our film. To hand over our individual writings to other members to edit and perform them, elevated our experiences from the personal and transferred them to the surface of our *collective body*. In this way, we responded to the second-wave feminist mantra “The Personal is Political” by adding “Motherhood is not Personal” (MATERNAL FANTASIES 2020). As an experience and an institution (see Rich 1995), motherhood is a social institution that functions ideologically and politically (see *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* 2010). Thus, motherhood can be understood as a social and political position; a relationship and a responsibility; a metaphor (see Cixous 1976: 881) and much “more than a metaphor” (Haraway / Goodeve 2000: 82-83) for a situated self, engaged in complex sets of relations formed by inevitable interdependence (see Engster 2005: 50-74; Kittay 2001: 530).<sup>10</sup>

Polyvocality, an important term for our practice, enables a work to have multiple narrators and/or follows varied narrative voices and perspectives from different characters. Later, we discovered how polyvocality was described and introduced as a method in the social sciences in order to enhance an intersectional analysis, which can “shift from one voiced interpretation to another and, in so doing, deepen, expand, and problematize these same analyses” (Thimm / Chaudhuri / Mahler 2017: 1). Our *collective body* generates a polyvocal visibility for our individual concerns while at the same time bypassing the conventional mainstream single hero storyline. This single hero storyline is just “another part of our rugged individualism and hero culture, the idea that all problems are personal and they’re all soluble by personal responsibility” (Solnit 2019). Feminist writer Rebecca Solnit denounces it further as “a framework that eliminates the possibility of deeper, broader change or of holding accountable the powerful

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<sup>10</sup> This second reading embraces the existence of care-givers who are men, transgender, two-spirited, and non-binary. The maternal encompasses the full array of human identities, expanding along with our imaginations and senses of self.

who create and benefit from the status quo and its myriad forms of harm.” (ibid.) According to Solnit, these “lone hero narratives,” which “push one figure into the public eye, but they push everyone else back into private life, or at least passive life” (ibid.), paralyze us and withhold any actual change.

From the beginning, it was a crucial act for us to read out loud from the texts that we had written for ourselves, to read them for and with each other in order to speak about “unspeakable things unspoken” (Morisson 1994: 123). Through listening to each other's stories, we carved out a communal space of sharing and relating to one another's personal histories, sensing each other's individually and culturally framed perspectives and lived experiences. By witnessing and relating to each other's autobiographical writings, we began to slowly connect our divergent opinions and journeys to build affective relations with one another. They became a fundamental collective working technique, which we used in a ritualistic way before or after collective work sessions. To hide our individual identities and concerns while simultaneously gaining empowerment and strength from and through the communal power of solidarity, which is inherently part of the collective entity of being many, we have built *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as our *collective body*, able to speak polyvocally *in* and *with* many voices. From the text material of this writing exercise, we created a collage built out of fragments of our individual responses floating around a large photo collage condensing one scene from our shooting at *betOnest*, where mothers and children were climbing up and rolling down from a massive sand pile, into one time-lapse still image. In the process of working on the image-text installation “Like so Many” (2018), we strongly debated which pronoun our collective text should use: The *I*, the *she*, the *we*? In the end, we settled on the pronoun *he*, once more, as an experimental try-out to change the biologically framed position of speaking when thinking about motherhood.

### “Tell Me How to Disappear” (2018): Regretting Motherhood in Full Sight

The desire to subvert the easy understanding of visibility as an act of empowerment led to the artwork “Tell Me How to Disappear” (2018) (Fig. 1), a long-shot image depicting four women and one child. They are staged in front of a former storage building between industrial remnants, such as cement pipes and tubes. In the center of the image stands a female-read person in a bright blue jumpsuit. Her body forms a C-shaped bow, with the head resting on a large concrete pipe. On her head sits an oversized green tube that connects to the pipe like a charging cable. The pipe is pointed towards the sky. Her posture exemplifies the mother figure leaning on, resting, recharging, and possibly receiving support, or even recovering strength from the boldness and stability of the cement pipe. Another mother's body on the left side of the depicted scene is dressed in black. Her shoulders are covered by a light purple shell, similar to a beetle's armor. Her upper body and her head bend towards the inside of a spacious metal tube creating the outline of a cracked arc. The metal tube is covered by a mix of spalling colors. Two other performers with masks are staged in seated positions in-between. Their postures echo Auguste Rodin's famous sculpture “The Thinker” (1904). The pregnant performer close to the center of the image in a bright yellow dress is wearing objects that look like large blisters, breasts, or thorns on one of her feet and hands.

“Tell Me How to Disappear” was the first image we produced together with the children at *betOnest*, an artist residency at a former cement factory in the vast rural area of Uckermark in East Germany. This post-industrial complex became a temporary location for filming and action, a rehearsal stage for the group's first artistic collaboration. To this residency, we took our ‘body extensions’, *papier mâché* props of oversized feet and arm extensions, wings, and other fantastical objects that we had pre-produced with the children. Papier-mâché is a

very easy-to-use technique that most kids are familiar with from nursery school. It is cheap, fast, and accessible, consisting merely of ripping old newspapers and soaking them in glue.

Mikala Hyldig Dal describes in one of our writing sessions the imaginative differences she observes between the kids' design drafts and drawings in comparison to the extensions produced by us the adults:

*"My daughter created a birdlike-dinosaur (does she know birds are the last dinosaurs?), with extending elements to be attached to her bottom and her nose; Hanne's boys created monsters, oversized paws of claws and green, a huge lizard foot to go with it; Rosemarie, Olga's daughter, was becoming a mythological creature that, too, can fly (are angels remnants of dead birds?). The grownups' extensions were abstract, mostly: a device that will ground you by making the bottom half of your body into one piece, melted into the pavement; one that will draw silence to your headspace by removing all upper orifices; one that connects your breast with your mouth so you may continuously feed yourself; one that makes of your uterus an expandable housing project with the capacity to accommodate inhabitants of all ages"*  
(MATERNAL FANTASIES 2021)

We used these playful objects to interact cheerfully with the location, with each other, and with the children. With these minimal visual elements, our body extensions, and a specific color scheme of our clothing, we sought to create a colorful tension between the social invisibility of maternal care, which is commonly reduced to isolation in private homes, and this pale, bleak, post-industrial stage and artificial (non-)white cube outdoor setting.

For "Tell Me How to Disappear", we used the "freeze game" as a playful method to integrate the children in the artistic process. In this children's game, everyone dances as the music plays. When the music stops, each player must freeze immediately and hold that position until the music begins again. If a player does not freeze immediately, s/he does ten jumping jacks during the start of the next round and then re-joins the dance. We liked this 'kids' game because it resembled the tableaux vivants, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century parlor game, where actors or amateurs

imitate statues or paintings as 'living images'.<sup>11</sup> Our collectively set up instructions state that we will produce the tableaux vivants in rotational order. Each role, from director to performer and camera person, is rotated within the collective. Each director chooses an art-historical reference and a location, and directs the performer in the scene. As the director of this image, I wanted to create generic figures of absence, colorful 'hidden mothers', which was originally inspired by the uncanny vintage photographs of Italian-Swedish artist Linda Fregni Nagler. My hidden mothers are stand-ins for all mothers longing to (temporarily) disappear. They are placeholders for mothers who might even regret their motherhood (see Donath 2015: 353-359). There were many days in my early experience as mother of an infant child on which I felt strangled and confined by this omnipresent social expectation to present to the public (whether in real life or on Instagram) always a happy, caring, loving mother while the concealed work of calming tantrums, cleaning up poop, and interrupted nightly sleep should stay forever hidden in the private sphere.

Haytham El-Wardany's monograph "How to Disappear" (2013) was an additional inspiration for the above-described image. His text had provided us with a set of aural exercises on how to disappear, reappear, join a group, leave a group, and other necessary skills. Somehow, these exercises had triggered the visualization of 'my maternal fantasy' wanting to disappear. There were so many moments in my early days of motherhood where I wished someone would take over to take my son to the playground or to pick him up from the nursery when I needed to work longer hours. I was missing this village that everyone says you need to raise (your) children in, and it was tough for me to be the only caregiver to my son as a single mother. On the other hand, El-Wardany's aural exercises in-

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<sup>11</sup> Performed in large groups, these living images were an integral part of military parades and a major feature at festivities for royal weddings, coronations, processions, and royal entries into cities. Sometimes the living images were mounted on elaborate temporary stands or performed on the stages of school plays or at fairground sideshows.

spired the concept of our *collective body* on how to work and be with each other as individual artists merging with but not submerging into a collective form. Individually, we come from diverse artistic and cultural backgrounds. We raise our children in differing family constellations and apply various parenting techniques. In this sense, as a collective, we have developed a communal form and a collective, artistic practice which allows us to “oscillate between being deeply inside the collective process and taking some distance” (Silva 2021: 129). After spending some intense days at a residency together, eating, sleeping, and producing at one location together, we would return to our individual lives and to a mode of meeting every three weeks for an afternoon at the studio. “Unintentionally, we established as a strategy the possibility of being in-between” – of being in\_visible – “which allowed us our differences in approaches and opinions, precisely because we recognized each other’s mutual commitment to a collective aim” (ibid.: 129).<sup>12</sup> We have accepted that we do not speak as one voice. Instead, we implement “the right to opacity” (Glissant 1997: 190) as “the real foundation of relation, in freedoms” (ibid.) while our individual voices are amplified through the polyvocality ingrained in the collective body.

### Conclusion & Outlook

As I have shown, our *collective body* emerges from a seemingly minoritarian status and has grown through our collective journey during the past five years, the exhibitions, workshops, and presentations we were invited to, and the connections we have made and built both locally and virtually. It seems to me that the discourse around ‘maternal in\_visibilities’ has moved from the margins towards the center. It was greatly magnified through the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted rising inequalities and

structural forms of discrimination of people with care duties. However, the pandemic has also enabled us to expand our virtual bonds, to present and share our work and tools in online conferences and exhibitions.<sup>13</sup> Through Instagram and the international distribution of our publication “Re-Assembling Motherhood(s)” (2021), our wider network of allies has grown and we are receiving messages from other mother artists, ranging from Australia, to the Philippines, Brazil, Sweden, and many more countries, on how empowered they feel by the work we do as mother artists.

In recent years, a couple of initiatives have emerged in Germany that address these issues on a political level: from *Kunst und Kind Berlin* (2018) and *München* (2018) to *proparents* (2020). In 2019, German artist Marcia Breuer wrote a manifesto titled “More Mothers for the Arts” [“Mehr Mütter in der Kunst”], asking: “Do we want to live in a society that disqualifies women in the arts for being a mother? Do we want to renounce the artistic works of women that have gained access to another field of experience through their motherhood?” (Breuer 2019). In March 2021, researcher and writer Hettie Judah presented guidelines she had written with a group of artist mothers on “How Not to Exclude Artist Parents” (Judah 2022) at an online discussion hosted by *The Freeland Foundation* in London. These instructions were widely shared on social media and have by now been translated into more than 15 languages.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Peter Thurn observes this mechanism as typical for the initial phase of an artist collective, where everyone is able to push aside individual ambitions in favor of a social commitment towards a common aim (Thurn 1991: 124).

<sup>13</sup> “International Perspectives (2): MATERNAL FANTASIES” (2022), Culture Collective Scotland; “Domestic Documents: Spaces of Care & Crisis” (2022), Pleasure Dome, Toronto, Canada; “ART/MAMAS – Film and Motherhood” (2021), VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver, Canada; “Reading Assembly: Care” (2021), University of Reading, UK; “Opening Up / Closing in” (2021), Performance Art Bergen, Rogaland Art Center, Norway; “January Blues” (2021), SPILL Festival of Performance, Ipswich, UK; “A Woman’s Work” (2021), European Prospects & Fotogallery, Cardiff, Wales; “Caring Infrastructures” (2020), HKW New Alphabet School #Caring, Berlin; “personal space” (2020), Surface Gallery Contemporary Art Gallery of Nottingham, UK; “Café fotográfico - Maternidad, Identidad y Representación”, (2020), Youtube channel hosted by NOTRO espacio, Ushuaia, Argentina.

To conclude, I would like to contextualize *MATERNAL FANTASIES* within the current transgressive moment in (art) history, which seeks to propose an alternative to the concepts of the ‘rational mind’, ‘the visible’, and ‘light’ as the primary conditions of the singular modern self. The (late) capitalist logic of expansion and growth seems to expose the limits of this post-Enlightenment paradigm. *MATERNAL FANTASIES* seeks to undermine an easy understanding of visibility, which is something that differentiates them from earlier generations of feminist artists and that goes in agreement with Johanna Schaffer’s critic of the prevailing conditions and modes of becoming visible (Schaffer 2008: 234) and with Peggy Phelan’s concern about how visibility is falsely equated with a more political and economic power (Phelan 1993: 10). As outlined above, *MATERNAL FANTASIES*’ works revolving around in\_visibility address a complex relation between wanting to be seen and wanting to disappear. All members of *MATERNAL FANTASIES* are artists and mothers (or, in one case, a longtime aspiring mother), who are *performing* the role of the mother in both daily life and on *MATERNAL FANTASIES*’ “stage”, e. g. the *betonest* setting of “Tell Me How to Disappear” (2019). These roles are not identical or necessarily autobiographically intertwined. The “performer mother” is aesthetically accentuated through monochrome-colored clothes, props, and tools and becomes hyper visible on stage, while actually disappearing and representing something else (Phelan 1993: 150), driven by “the recognition of the desire to be seen *by* (and within) the other” (ibid.: 153).

In addition to the critique of the modern Eye/I, the collective body has become increasingly important in contemporary art. The Documenta fifteen exhibition signals a paradigmatic shift in the re-evaluation of collectivity and collective work as an alternative to a market-driven art world. Documenta fifteen’s curatorial approach, based on the practice of *lumbung*<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>14</sup> “Lumbung, which directly translates as “rice barn”, refers to a communal building in rural Indonesia

implements for the first time large-scale strategies of co-curation, decentralization, and a collaborative model of resource use – in economic terms but also with regards to ideas, knowledge, programs, and innovations. *Ruangrupa*, the artistic directors of Documenta fifteen, initiated from the beginning collective negotiations for the distribution of funding, while later, in the exhibition space, making transparent the networks of relations in which the exhibited artworks were produced and are situated. This resonates with the art of *MATERNAL FANTASIES*, which combines utopian world-building, artistic strategies of in\_visibility, an intergenerational discourse, and collective artistic production with a recurring pragmatic re-evaluation and re-negotiation of their collective working structure and collective body.<sup>15</sup> Collectivity is crucial to our practice, in particular because the maternal body has the “potential to become two” (Battersby 1998: 2). Yet, how we can avoid the risk of biological determinism in relation to women’s physical capacity to become pregnant is an important issue in this case. Defining the collective from the maternal standpoint is complex and requires further thought.

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where a community’s harvest is gathered, stored and distributed according to jointly determined criteria as a pooled resource for the future. As a concrete practice, *lumbung* is the starting point of documenta fifteen: principles of collectivity, resource building and equitable distribution are pivotal to the curatorial work and impact the entire process—the structure, self-image and appearance of documenta fifteen” (Documenta Fifteen 2022: 8-9).

<sup>15</sup> See “Curating a collective body: A Non-Idealized Concept of Care” in *Curating with Care*, London: Routledge 2023.

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## Maternal Thinking.

### A Commentary on the Article by Magdalena Kallenberger

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In a seminal essay titled “Feminism and Modernism”, which was included in *Framing Feminism. Art and the Women’s Movement 1970 – 1985*, art historian Griselda Pollock thought about the “role of culture in social reproduction” (Pollock 1987: 79). Cultural theory thus turned its focus on the role of culture. But what about the complementary observation to think about the ‘role of social reproduction in culture’? We need to understand both: the role of culture in social reproduction and the role of social reproduction in culture. Today, there is the emergence of feminist and queer feminist practitioners active at the intersections of art-making, theory-making, and collective organizing who redefine the image and imaginaries of the labors of social reproduction. Berlin-based artist group *Maternal Fantasies* have chosen to invest their energy in joining together culture and social reproduction arriving at new ways of practicing cultures of social reproduction collectively, collaboratively, and maternally. Magdalena Kallenberger, who is part of *Maternal Fantasies*, unpacks and critiques the maternal individualism/individualized maternalism that was invented and implemented by colonial-imperial-patriarchal modernity and popularized by Western art by way of continuation of Christian iconography-as-ideology. Defying the imperative of maternal individualism, Kallenberger investigates lineages of mothering otherwise by inscribing *Maternal Fantasies* into stories and narra-

tions of feminist mothers who formed feminist art collectives and brought together self-curation, collective care as mothering, and practices of art-making that resisted individualization/isolation as mothers and as artists. While (feminist) mothers are made hyper-visible by the role culture performed in social reproduction, (feminist) artists were being made invisible by the role social reproduction performed in culture. Entering deliberately, decisively, and fearlessly into the gap between visibility and invisibility, Kallenberger inhabits the gap with un/ease and makes her reader feel the frictions and potentials, tensions and desires that come from redefining and reorienting the relation between culture and social reproduction from the in\_visible gap. Inspired by Kallenberger’s writing, at once autotheoretical and collective, I would like to respond to her thoughts with the following reflections:

*What makes a mother a mother?*

*What makes a mother other?*

*What makes (m)others maternal?*

*How does the maternal other mothers from others who are not mothers?*

In Western art history the ideal(ized), norm(alized), norm(ative) image of the mother can be traced back to the Madonna who nurses, the Madonna who embodies and makes visible the capacity of the female body to be bodily re-

productive. Bodily reproduction became social reproduction became essentialized maternalism/essential maternity.



Fig. 1: *Madonna Litta*, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, circa 1490, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Per the Madonna, the maternal became a belief system. Beliefs are never natural. Beliefs are always social. Yet, beliefs can naturalize. The naturalization of the maternal became a source for primitive accumulation and relentless capitalist extraction. The regulation of the maternal be-

came the blueprint for the colonality of gender through the colonization of motherhood. The definition of the maternal became the projection for changing patriarchal norms, expectations, and desires that continue to impose themselves directly into the chain of life.

These are the legacies that created the conditions of colonial-capitalist-patriarchal maternalism. These are the legacies which radical maternalism resists, unlearns, and undoes.

Today, as artists are re-entering into the fraught and complex and complicated and contested body-territory of the maternal, they make daring and productive use of autotheory and of new and vibrant materialism to imagine new maternalisms.

While fighting the ideological legacies of essentialized maternalism, artists like *Maternal Fantasies* also aim to re-invent the imaginaries of the maternal by way of image-making. Visibility is not the answer to invisibility. But making visible can be a way to change imaginaries through images. Therefore, image-making remains a territory of feminist, queer feminist, and trans feminist visions for re-defining and re-claiming what the maternal can, could, and will be.

## ***Literature***

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