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Matrescence performance repetitions: towards 'letting go'

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the work of artists engaging with matrescence to consider the (im)possibility of repetition in maternal art making and performance. We are keen to think through matrescence and artmaking processes together towards an eventual 'letting go' as both the mothers and the children move into a new life stage. We draw on the work of Young, Iris Marion [2005. *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*. USA: Oxford University Press] to introduce concepts around the home, Halberstam, J. [2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. London: Duke University Press] to examine the notion of futurity, repetition and return, and apply a psychoanalytical framing, in particular, the work of Ferenczi, Sándor [1988. "Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 24 (2): 196–206. doi:10.1080/00107530.1988.10746234]. We consider two contemporary shows – *GOO:GA* (Ballou, Hannah. 2021. *GOO:GA* (film)) by Hannah Ballou and the 2021 video re-working of *Tender* (Long, Josie. 2019. *Tender* (performance)) by Josie Long. In order to aid our engagement with the matrescence in various media representations, we also re-think certain historical examples of maternal creativity and artmaking including both our own and those of renowned women artists Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly and Bobby Baker.

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Introduction

In this article, we explore the work of artists engaging with matrescence (the process of mother-becoming) to consider the (im)possibility of repetition in maternal art-making and performance with a particular reference to shows created by two artists during their second pregnancies. The performances we discuss, by performance makers Josie Long and Hannah Ballou, are re-makings of the artists' own earlier works concerning their first pregnancies, which, the second time around, moved from live performances in theatre venues to digital works shared principally online. We consider the opportunity afforded by restaging in order to think about the impossibility of the return in relation to the maternal and the transformation of early parenting into a period of refiguring as well as eventual 'letting go' as new phases of life open up. The aim of this article is to think

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through matrescence, as the process of mother-becoming, as well as to consider repetitive artmaking processes and, finally, the necessity of finding an alternative maternal relationship as both mothers (including mother/artists) and children move into new life stages. Our consideration is framed around a putative maternal life journey in three sections: 'Becoming Mother (again)', 'Returning' and 'Letting Go'. We draw on the work of Young (2005) to introduce concepts around the home and becoming a mother, and Halberstam (2011) to examine the notion of futurity, repetition, and return in the ongoing daily activities of mothering and apply a psychoanalytical framing, in particular, the work of Ferenczi (1988) to position our maternal intersubjective relationships with the other (either the child or the performer who we watch in these performances).

We consider two contemporary shows – *GOO:GA* (2021) by Hannah Ballou and the 2021 video re-working of *Tender* (2019) by Josie Long. In order to aid our engagement with matrescence in various media representations, we contextualise this with certain historical examples of maternal creativity and artmaking including both our own maternal performances and those of renowned women artists Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly and Bobby Baker. Both *GOO:GA* (2021) and *Tender* (2021) are reframings of shows that the artists have previously made about their first children, now reconfigured during their second pregnancies. Through these shows we reimagine the mother again, as 'better' mother/artists, or as more effective performance makers and mothers, or as a mother beyond the early stage of becoming in relation to the baby.

In order to extend our exploration of the intersubjectivity of the maternal and to mark our discussion as a coming to knowledge together, we have employed an epistolary form, which we have argued elsewhere is aligned with a maternal, relational practice (Epp Buller, Šimić, and Underwood-Lee 2019; Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2021). This kind of relational exchange, here shared through a series of emails to one another that we have subsequently edited to shape for publication, not only allows us both a breathing and reflective space as we navigate through the experience of mothering older children and returning to thinking about matrescence but also makes visible our process of finding understanding together through an exchange with one another. As authors, it is our reflection back to one another of our concerns that allows us to forge new understandings, just as the maternal subject comes to know themselves through their negotiated relationship with their other. Additionally, *GOO:GA* (2021) and the restaged *Tender* (2021) were both made as digital artworks for socially distanced audiences in response to the closure of theatre venues during the Covid lockdowns. Our use of correspondence is a formal means by which we can engage with the necessary physical removal from one another and from the shows that we watched or that we encountered in our own writing and researching process during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK.

Ballou's *goo:ga* (2016) was initially created during her pregnancy with her first child and then restaged as a film titled *GOO:GA* (2021) during her pregnancy with her second child. Long's *Tender* (2019) details her experience of first-time motherhood; it was toured as a live show, at first in person at venues across the UK and then online when the Covid pandemic caused live theatres to shut. During her maternity leave with her second child, Long remade *Tender* (2019) as a film work, *Tender* (2021); she notes on her website (2022):

I'm sending this mailout with my month old baby asleep on my chest. [...] I'm on a break from giggling for most of this year but [...] if you want to see me do some stand up, my show

Tender is now up on gumroad.com. [...] This show was filmed in my garden, with an audience of my neighbours and some friends, and I really am proud of the chaotic and ramshackle vibe it gives off. (<https://www.josielong.com/2022/01/tender-stand-up-show-available-to-stream/>)

Similarly, Ballou states (no date):

GOO:GA will 'audit' the results of the feminist parenting ideals expressed in goo:ga by seeing what her now 4-year-old thinks about gender. The piece also explores the impossibility of recreating a moment in time in autobiographical performance [...]. Even though the biological process is the same, everything is different in a second pregnancy [...]. (<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/googa-ii-the-film>)

As the artists themselves point out, both Long and Ballou return to earlier works and to earlier pregnancies. There is something compulsive and compelling about that return, about the attempt to repeat, to do it 'better', to finally understand, or better still, to understand it is impossible to grasp the totality of maternal experience and knowledge. We ourselves are also enacting something of a repetition in this writing, returning again through this close reading of performances of matrescence to the early stages of pregnancy and nurturing babies, as well as our own creative responses to this stage, a maternal period of matrescence that we are both now long past in our personal lives. The return always includes a loss – we can never truly recreate the performance or the pregnancy or the early motherhood stages. In the impossibility of redoing revealed by the return, we are reminded of the temporal nature of matrescence – that a becoming together of mother and child must inevitably move towards letting go of this particular relationship and moving towards a new subjectivity, which may or may not be as interlinked, but will always be different as we and our children grow out of the initial period of matrescence.

In the first two correspondences included here, written in 2022 and initially shared at the Feminist Research working group at the IFTR conference in the same year, we introduced some of our thinking about both the return in relation to second children and restaging for intimate/digitally distanced audiences. Although there is growing attention being paid to maternal performance,¹ the particularities of second children are often overlooked (perhaps much like in life), as is the mothering of older children and adults. On returning to our writing in 2024, and in the light of this specific call to think through matrescence and media, we decided to re-examine the particularities of mothering and artmaking in this fragile state of mother-becoming, historical and contemporary, with an emphasis on the relation between audience and artist, taking into account our own subjective identifications and understandings as audience members and as mothers recollecting our past mothering and imagining our future maternal relations. This is linked with thinking through the public/private space of the domestic and maternal areas which we previously explored (Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2021), but which have been cast in a new light through the Covid pandemic and the move to digital and online performances for small, intimate, or invited audiences. Covid forced a move to online encounters where the public realm of theatre and the domestic space of both audiences and performers blurred. The performer and audience members are often both engaging from their own homes with *Tender* (2021) filmed in Long's garden. Audiences also access the work alone or with a small group of close family and friends (the Covid kinship relationships established by the invitation to form a 'bubble' with just a chosen few during the lockdowns), as is highlighted in *GOO:GA* (2021) where Ballou performs to an empty theatre bar a single audience

member. As well as the formal consideration of private and public afforded by online theatre, matrescence necessitates a public sharing of what might otherwise be considered a most intimate relationship between mother and child. The private, and often difficult, thoughts of the performers in relation to their maternal status are laid bare for an audience member to consider and to find connection within an encounter that evokes Lauren Berlant's conception of intimacy as 'an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out a particular way ... Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding public' (1998, 281). This intimate relationship, where we are permitted to peer into the performer's private thoughts and spaces and where they are invited into our living rooms, muddies the boundaries between what is shown and shared and what should be kept to oneself, which we have, again, attempted to engage with in our writing through our use of the letter form.

We have decided in this article to stage our own return of sorts by adding additional sections that reflect on our earlier watchings of and thinking on *Tender* (2021) and *GOO: GA* (2021) as well as more generally on the various media that artists and that we ourselves have employed when becoming mothers. We end on the acknowledgement that mother-becoming is also paradoxically about the ability to let go and embrace a new stage in our own lives.

Becoming mother (again)

Dear Emily,

It was bitter January and I watched *Tender* (2021) from the comfort of my living room couch. At the time I was unwell and was binging on online theatre. What made *Tender* (2021) stand out was its authenticity. It was the show that didn't make me lament not being there ... there, in the summer garden, amongst the invited audience members from the real world. I clearly wasn't one of the selected few. I wasn't invited. I wasn't a part of Josie Long's context. Furthermore, the other audience weren't the ones through whose eyes I was watching the piece. The performance was filmed in such a way that I was a voyeur casting my gaze over the performer, her family, her house, her garden, her neighbours and her chosen audience. I never belonged to that summertime context, to the light-hearted jokes about motherhood, to the same old complaints we all have in our early weeks and early months as mothers and so, I never lamented the loss of it ... Crucially, this distance held me, and assured me I wasn't getting a worse experience than the real audience (as I felt when watching some other pieces of online theatre which made me envious of the in-person event that I was missing; the crucial difference being that this *Tender* (2019) in-person show was only for the select few, and my own position was clear as a voyeur from the start).

There, in the summerish world of *Tender* (2021), I observe a new mother, doing a stand-up performance about the experience of mothering, those early days, weeks and months. I hear lots of familiar stories about sleepless nights and that well-known feeling of being the very first person to have ever given birth and become a mother, to have ever embarked on the journey of mothering ... There was yet another birth story – magnificent and ordinary in equal measures ... The performance also included some references to climate change, to the concerns about the warming world now that one is a mother, jokes about Greenpeace and a long gone £20 paid towards the attempt to save the planet ... but in essence,

thematically this piece was a confrontation with the new, the shock of motherhood, the phase we have elsewhere named Aftermath (Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2021, 107–132).

In many ways, this material was too familiar, but what was new was the form, the edit, the online experience which brought the intimate and the private performance into my home, my living room, my wintertime sofa. There was something ‘tender’ about this piece, about the exposure, a revelation of one mother’s story, complete with her family, to her chosen audience of friends and neighbours, a peek into someone’s personal world, which was well managed in terms of providing the audience with a chance of observation, managed voyeurism, between the private and the public.

One moment stood out for me, Josie Long didn’t reveal the baby’s name – there was an attempt at the protection of privacy even in this revealing narrative to the select group of audience members who were her closest, even when they most likely knew the baby’s name. At this moment I felt acknowledged as a distant viewer, unsettled and returned to the public view of this intimate world. I was reminded about the importance of ‘relations’ in maternal performance, the ethics of making which resurface in many maternal performances – reflexivity being paramount. The mother/artist considers herself, her child(ren) and her others, those that are close and those hidden on the sofas of winter living rooms. There is care in this exposure – a call for considered, reflexive, maternal relations. And it might be that it is through performance repetitions that such maternal care is revealed and reconfirmed.

I am reminded of Iris Marion Young’s essay about home – ‘House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme’ – and its radical reconceptualization as the space of agency. In Young’s words home carries ‘critical liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values’ (2005, 124). Young follows bell hooks in suggesting ‘home can have a political meaning as a site of dignity and resistance’ (2005, 146). In this case, in *Tender* (2021), home is re-imagined as the performance space where a maternal narrative is enacted and reimagined. The garden becomes the public realm, a space of meaningful encounters where maternal identity is probed and negotiated in front of others – Young concludes that ‘Home is the site of the construction and reconstruction of one’s self’ (2005, 153). There, in Long’s garden, that construction and reconstruction of one’s self is played out publicly in front of a small group of invited audience members. It is through maternal performance, and its repetition at home, that the artist’s maternal identity is reconsidered. The editing of the film and the mother’s knowledge it will be distributed with worldwide reach, makes her reconsider her family’s privacy even further.

I wonder about these maternal re-imaginings that take place as I return to the beginnings of my own maternal journey. Reading Hanscombe’s (2018) account of passing judgement in the delivery suite of a hospital, at an older mother, Barb, and her infant daughter, Amy, who eventually falls off the bed in the hospital, I was viscerally reminded of my own first night with my firstborn in the hospital. Utter exhaustion, almost a hallucinating state of mind. I picked up my crying baby from the see-through plastic cot. He must have been crying, helpless as he was, swaddled, immobile. I breastfed him, whilst wondering if this was the right thing to do. Unsure, alone, I rang for the midwives. I don’t think anyone came; or if they did, they re-assured me I was doing the right thing.

After finishing the feed, I was too tired to put the baby back in the cot, so I fell asleep with him on me. I woke up in terror. I am not sure how long we were asleep, it could have been twenty minutes or two hours – we were both so unprotected. All turned out fine. But

what if, what if ... a cold sweat of dark thoughts, what if he fell out of the bed, just like baby Amy in Hanscombe's narrative. As I was reading it, I remembered this fear even before the act happened, as if I had a premonition as to what was to follow in the narrative. I edit and rethink my first birth story.

There's potential in the return, in re-imagining, in recasting the narrative for a new set of observers, readers or audiences. The process of mother-becoming never stops, there is thinking back to those foggy first hours which offer an opportunity for re-assessment of our birth stories, but there are also present and future re-alignments with our new roles as mothers to older or adult children.

Love
Lena

Dear Lena,

As you watched *Tender* (2021), I watched Hannah Ballou's *GOO:GA* (2021). Unlike *Tender* (2021), this is not filmed in a private domestic space, but it takes the audience into perhaps the most intimate of relationships – that of the mother and her unborn child – and makes it a highly charged political site of resistance around the cultural expectations of pregnancy. The show is, at first glance, a reworking of Ballou's earlier show *goo:ga* (2016). She repeats many of the same songs and uses the same script. Once again, she opens the show wearing a leopard print bikini and dancing on a yoga ball while heavily pregnant. Ballou states that she needed to give her second child 'the same attention as [her] first', setting up an equality of care that also recognises her children as individuals. We are able to see the show then, from the very beginning, as a reworking. Ballou is affording herself the chance to re-write with the benefit of hindsight; however, the circumstances of her pregnancies are wildly different and, because so much is similar in the content of the show, these differences become striking. Firstly, this show was made during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and has had to pragmatically change form from a live show to a film. The digital form, and the inherent distance in time and space that film creates between audience and performer, parallels the need to socially distance during a pandemic. This distance is made more profound by Ballou's choice to record *GOO:GA* (2021) in an empty theatre with a laugh track, presumably taken from the recording of her first show, and later, by bringing one socially distanced audience member into the space with her. The second difference, which is revealed almost immediately after the performance starts, is that Ballou is joined by her very young daughter. The child, who we are informed was the 'foetal co-star' of *goo:ga* (2016), performs various roles throughout the show, including interviewee, provocateur, obstetrician complete with dressing up stethoscope, and so forth. Another change is that Ballou's dog, who made an appearance in *goo:ga* (2016) has now died, and so, in *GOO:GA* (2021), appears in the form of ashes in an urn. However, the most significant change of all is that, in this pregnancy, Ballou has found out that her unborn child has a rare heart anomaly that may or may not prevent him from surviving the pregnancy and birth. Where in *goo:ga* (2016) Ballou focussed on her child's gender as the great unknown of pregnancy, this time she uses the viability of her pregnancy (to use the medical term), or death of her unborn child (to venture into much more emotive language), as the point of tension at the centre of the show. In both *goo:ga* (2016) and *GOO:GA* (2021), Ballou is able to describe her child as 'Schrodinger's baby', punning on both/and offered by the famous

philosophical cat. In *goo:ga* (2016) Ballou was playing with the both/and of her unborn's gender, but this time, as Ballou notes, the stakes have got higher for her baby is at once both alive and dead.

GOO:GA (2021) brings the audience on a profoundly emotional journey, and Ballou's lightness of touch when dealing with such personally charged material is remarkable. Beyond this, and beyond the very particular specifics of Ballou's child's in-utero diagnosis, the show also gives me an opportunity to reflect on the return. At one moment in the show, Ballou muses on how her biggest regret from the original *goo:ga* (2016) performance is that at the moment she removed her costume in that show, she clumsily undressed. In *GOO:GA* (2021) she uses the same costume, but this time has altered it with Velcro and uses the formal advantages afforded by the film to simply have her dress disappear from her body. Ballou has perfected this moment through repetition and artifice. The cunning, and very obvious, use of camera trickery here demonstrates the impossibility of ever re-visioning an earlier moment or an earlier pregnancy. Instead, we see the joy of playing with that moment anew, opening up the world to whatever possibility might arise.

J. Halberstam notes that heteronormative futurity is prefigured on an assumption that things will repeat across generations, that repetition is inevitable and inescapable. They posit that queer temporality offers an alternative, more optimistic view, where time loops back but is not doomed to repeat (2011, 75). Halberstam is concerned with the potential offered by forgetting, which they are careful to point out is different to suppressing or denying (2011, 84–85); however, I also see the optimism of a non-linear time in Ballou's show in relation to remembering and remaking. *GOO:GA* (2021) revisits and repeats pregnancy but also offers the chance to consider past events as something new. We gain knowledge through our repetition of the past, yet each new pregnancy offers us a chance to rework, to learn, to unlearn, to make a potentially better future.

Love
Emily

Returning

Dear Emily,

It is February 2024. We return to this writing, to this memory of digital performances of early motherhood. Matrescence, the time of mother-becoming. This is about a transition, just like adolescence. With children aged 23, 21, 16 and 10, I am beyond its reach, I am passé.

When do I stop becoming a mother? There is learning that occurs even now, when the children are older and have left the nest. I am reminded of my own early maternal journey. Does the essence of my mothering remain the same, or do I change with each new child? Do I get better with it? I foolishly believed I did, but I also noted that with each new child there was less energy towards exclusive mothering activities. I found myself skiving, improvising, knowing I could get away with it ...

At the moment I am attending 'Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis', online, weekly, at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, run by The British Psychoanalytical Society. As I read our set reading, I can't help but reflect, yet again, on my maternal journey: 'Oh, if only I knew this when I was first becoming a mother'. The questioning on how

to be a good enough mother, how to best contain my crying infant or my needy teenager or my adventurous adolescent never seems to stop. And I tell myself that I tried, as I try, again and again, four times, each time anew. And each time, different, and probably just about or not even, good enough. I do wonder if mother-becoming has anything to do with psychoanalytic knowledge, if such knowledge would have been helpful or would have hindered the process even more deeply. I wonder about artmaking too, and what is its relation to mother-becoming.

I think of technology and (artistic) representation of my experience of becoming a mother as it changed with time. With my baby number 1 in 2000, my dominant mode of archiving was a 'memory box', photography, and a baby book. With number 2 in 2002, it was mostly about photography. I was yet to discover 'maternal performance art'. I stumbled upon it with the creation of a live art piece *Medea/Mothers' Clothes* (2004) – my most visceral performance of mothering, a comment on becoming a foreign mother and mis/fitting into its idealisation. With number 3 in 2007, I developed *Contemplation Time* (2007–2008), a journal with photographs. I also engaged in a live art event *Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Simic* (2008) at Source Café in Carlisle, where I performed the bedtime routine whilst allowing the audience a peak into my maternal journal, photographs and recorded voice over. With number 4 in 2014, I was blogging through *Friday Records: A Document of Maternity Leave* (2014–2015). I was much more aware of needing to be 'in survival mode' with the last two children. I was keen on asserting myself and my identity as a mother/artist. With my last child, there was an attempt at bringing *Friday Records* into a live space of the Dublin Live Art Festival in 2016, but I was alone on stage; number 4 remained my digital baby.

And yet, babies are so visceral. They can't be contained by themselves. They spill with their paranoid-schizoid position (Klein 1946) in the first four to six months of life. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein notes that infants undergo an important and rather aggressive phase early in life when first realising they are separate from the mother/primary caregiver, but hopefully can also develop an internal ability to remain okay about it. Thus, the paranoid-schizoid (aggressive) position is interchanged with the depressive (reparative) phase. However, this is not happening without an enabling context, what Donald Winnicott has described as a 'holding environment'. We, as mothers, or primary care givers, are supposed to do the 'holding' (Winnicott 1965) and 'containing' (Bion 1962) in order for babies and toddlers to develop into somewhat reasonable children and functioning adults. We, the mothers, do the loving work. We offer them structures. But we are also held responsible. Does art help or hinder such a delicate process? Does the hyper-awareness of maternal artmaking do some of the containing work for us? Are we mothering/artmaking? After all, artmaking is about framing and holding, through representation and order.

I am reminded of a short video I made, as a part of *Friday Records: A Document of Maternity Leave* (2014–2015). This video is titled *100 Days with James* and it's almost exactly 10 years old, having been made in April 2014. Here is my mothering/artmaking, stuck in the process of matrescence, yet again, this time with my fourth. As I view the film again, and go over the online blog, I wonder, who is all this maternal documentation useful to beyond myself? It is indeed my own reflection on my last baby, as my last opportunity to do it right. But how much clarity and care is there in it for the presentation to

audiences? Isn't the time and space of matrescence primarily about oneself, as a mother? There is indeed so much of me, and my own maternal subjectivity assertion in the video.

Embarrassingly for me now, I always seem to be fighting with someone imaginary, with the big Other, claiming my space. Difficult. Almost aggressive, possibly reminiscent of the paranoid-schizoid position. Hard maternal becoming. In *100 Days with James* I speak over my baby. The baby becomes secondary. I am conveying a kind of exhaustion, at the limits of the intense time of care, having to do something for myself. The drive is for oneself, it's not necessarily for the other of the audience.

Yet, when talking about matrescence art, I want to insist on the question of 'others': the public, the readers, the audience. They were so well considered by Josie Long in the online *Tender* (2021), which was effectively a repetition. One might say: but aren't new mothers too busy with baby tending, holding, containing and self-care to think about the audience and to consider them properly as they are mother-becoming? Isn't matrescence art just pure documentation, creativity indeed, but not necessarily art? At what point do the new mothers consciously become artists, willing to exhibit their process of becoming a mother? At what point does a mother turn her back to the baby and face the audience? Does such a turning have to happen? Can't mothers/artists do both, hold the baby and confront the audience? Do we get better at this with each new child and each new maternal performance?

I'm reminded of Susan Hiller's piece *10 Months* (1977–79), which I have recently re-encountered at Tate Britain, part of *Women in Revolt!* (2023–2024) exhibition. Systematic photographic images of a protruded pregnant belly, reminiscent of a foreign landscape or the surface of the moon. The fleshy mass is changing with each new entry, over ten lunar months. These photographic images, as well as the accompanying pregnancy journal entries, are carefully presented towards the others. The seventh month's writing titled 'Knots and knows' states some thoughts on art, which I sense relevant to my own discussion in terms of matrescence, artmaking and consideration of audience:

SEVEN/ Knots and knows, Some NOT's & NO's about art- –

1. The subject matter of a work is not its content.
2. A work's meaning is not necessarily the same as the 'intention' or 'purpose' of the artist.
3. There is no distinction between reading images and reading texts.

Here, in this correspondence we privilege words through which we hope to arrive at some kind of meaning-making. I'm puzzled by the distinction between the subject matter and content, but I am keen to consider the form. Two other early maternal artist pioneers, Mary Kelly and Bobby Baker, also featured in the exhibition, albeit Baker with a reconstruction of *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1976). Re-encountering their work makes me think through time with different media before the proliferation of digital photography and video. Mary Kelly's work *Antepartum* (1973) is a short simple video which features the artist's pregnant belly, rising and falling with each new breath. This is a predecessor to a much more widely known complex artwork documenting Kelly's maternal journey with her son *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979). A labour-some effective document.

Baker's well-known maternal performance *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988) is made following her break from being an artist and becoming a mother in 1980, and 1983 to her two children. It takes her a few years to face the audience, again. Reflecting on her own '1980–1988 interlude in work as an artist' Baker writes:

Also, I later realised, I found it extremely hard to see myself as an artist once I had children. I lost my sense of 'self' and status alarmingly quickly. ... It was only in 1985 when I realised that there was no precedent within my family history for women doing what they wanted once they had children, as opposed to their duty, that I was able to consciously give myself permission to change that and start planning a show again. (Barrett and Baker, 2007: 47–48)

I want to underline the phrases 'later realised', 'consciously give myself permission' and 'planning'. These are the words which exert decision-making, a recognition.

I return to myself, and the process of becoming a mother, yet again, for the fourth time. I look back critically at the video works I created. Was there a sense of desire and a decision to speak outwards? The journal *Friday Records* was semi-public; whilst it was published online, it was never advertised as a public document of maternity leave. Why did I create the *100 Days with James* film? What about *Full Term* (2013), which was created in collaboration with Julieann O'Malley and presented at a few exhibitions and online?

Are these artworks at all, or 'just' matrescence creative documents? Does it even matter? Returning to these works, I now know that these films were effectively, in the first instance, made just for me, not even for my child, not until he's much older. They held me, and nurtured my creativity, as a mother/artist. I now know that the works are, more than anything else, my assertion of being an individual, an exploration of my maternal subjectivity, in my matrescence struggle, subsumed in mothering duties, the too muchness of it all.

Inevitably, once published online, the online films and the blog become a part of a broad context of maternal art, claiming that this mother/artist can. She is allowed. She is also here, belonging to the world, seeking acceptance and recognition, wanting to assert herself beyond her being lost in the messiness of the daily mothering practice.

My previous email discussed Josie Long's online performance *Tender* (2021), an artwork that hits the balance right, being domestic and intimate, and, at the same time, opening to audiences at large. The piece is small-scale and yet online. I conclude that lots of matrescence artmaking is about maternal creativity and also community-building, networking and encouraging one another through matrescence and beyond, towards all the wonderful changes that are yet ahead of us, with our children and eventually, without them too, something I am having to contend with now that two of them have left home.

Love
Lena

Letting go

Dear Lena,

I'm thinking again about the performances we initially wrote about two years ago, which were themselves reconsiderations of earlier performances. And I am thinking about the conversations that we have had when trying to understand mothering as it

is represented in performance and as we have experienced it. In those early conversations, both you and I were trying to make sense of the mess of maternal experience and how maternal performance can be a space to pay attention to the often hidden or dismissed world of care – is this still what you are thinking about? Are we still, despite our children growing into adults and our relationships with them transforming, overwhelmingly stuck in reinventing mothering, eternally repeating matrescence? You ask questions in your email about what it means to make maternal art and ‘turn towards the audience’ – is it that we are making our maternal experience public and thus moving it to a position where it might be repeated beyond ourselves and our private recollections? Halberstam notes (through an analysis of the children’s film *Finding Nemo*) that forgetting enables a kind of queer repetition and the potential to do things again and again; each time redoing them, making them differently and making them current through continually bringing them to mind. Applying this to maternal art (both our own and those of the artists we have considered in these emails), repetition becomes an essential act of remaking and making important, a move into the public. These works by Long and Ballou, where early parenthood is repeated, reconfigured and discussed again in the very public arena of the digital artwork, or the works of Baker and Kelly that you and I have only ever encountered through documentation, offer us so many opportunities for remaking, restaging, and thus reimagining again and again. Can they offer us a way to embrace both remembering and repetition and to find ‘new forms of knowing’ (Halberstam 2011, 54) through forgetting and repeating? When my second child was born, it felt as if everything was necessarily new and strange as well as being oddly familiar. Of course, the second child is not a repetition of the first and we are not simply repeating or remaking our mothering as we did it before. Similarly, Ballou’s *GOO:GA* (2021) is not a repetition of *goo:ga* (2016), but a new show in which some parts of the old show appear the same, others take an entirely different form, and other parts are entirely new content. Many of the words from *goo:ga* (2016) are uttered again, repeated verbatim from the script of the first show, for example, the song that she performs about how privileged she is as ‘the right kind of mother’, but even when saying (or singing) these exact same words, the circumstances and characters surrounding them have changed and so they cannot be the same words or contain the same meaning. The changes for Ballou are radical – she is talking about a pregnancy with major complications as opposed to a fairly straightforward first pregnancy – but in any case, the changes are an essential part of pregnancy, which can never really be repeated and is discovered anew with each new foetus.

This discussion of things recurring but never being the same turns me to the well-rehearsed argument that theatre is always ephemeral and can never be repeated (Phelan 1996; Schneider 2011); but does it gain a new resonance when applied to the maternal? The performance always disappears, as does the infant child who evolves into the adult (or not) and remains only in traces, fragments and memories. Similarly, we, as the mothers of infants, no longer exist. Instead, we are now the mothers of teenagers – and in your case the mother of fully grown adults.

As I return to Ballou and Long’s performances, I question how they may enable a new form of knowledge in their reworking of old shows and I also wonder about how the digital format enables me to return to these works in ways I often can’t when I watch live theatre. When I re-watch, I notice new nuances, notice what I have remembered

differently (I won't say wrongly here – I might have remembered portions of the script or actions incorrectly but my memories, whether factually accurate or not, alert me to what it is that has resonated with me or what these shows have made me think about). In returning to performances, both in memory and in documentation, and returning to early motherhood through my recollections, through the traces left upon my body, or through the hundreds of photographs, mementos, and the writing that I collected when I was a new mother, we can notice our forgetting, notice our remembering and notice our reworking – reworking over time and reworking with each new child. And yet, the cliché of parenting advice is that you should treat all your children the same and make sure that love and other resources are apportioned fairly. Ballou opens *GOO: GA* (2021) with black and white footage of *goo:ga* (2016) before she enters the stage wearing the same leopard print bikini she wore in the first show. We are invited to gaze upon Ballou's body and my brain turns to a sort of weird spot the difference from her first show – is she carrying the same? Is she at the same stage of pregnancy? Has she aged at all? Fairly quickly, Ballou points out many differences – not least that she has had a blow-dry before recording this film. Ballou signals to us that the idea of repeating the same event or paying each child the same attention is a fallacy in no uncertain terms.

I logged into Vimeo to watch Ballou's work again and it brought up old videos of mine, which I haven't looked at in years. One of these videos was footage from my 2009 show *Patience*, which I made during my pregnancy and in my 'matrescence' period with my first child. There she is, walking through the park as a tiny toddler, wobbly on her feet, here is her ultrasound scan – my uterus represented in the blackness surrounding her forming self. I didn't take nearly as many images of my second child and I never made any artworks about my experiences of her birth or early childhood. Perhaps this was a failing in me as her mother or perhaps it was that I simply realised where it was important to put my attention. There was a kind of obsessive pull in me to document the first time around, which I didn't feel with my second child. And, if I am honest, I was so distracted by trying to look after two small children that I also simply did not have the energy to think about making any work, which reminds me of your observation in your email that *100 Days With James* was, first and foremost, made for you and that you didn't initially worry about making it for an audience. Despite this initial lack of concern with the public presentation of *100 Days*, you, and Ballou and Long, have managed something that I could not in making your experiences public with your later children.

These days, neither child is interested in having me photograph them and they have both banned me from making more artworks about them; instead, they want to document their own lives, take their own pictures and frame their own representations. They are angered by the pictures of them as younger children on my mantelpiece, fridge and phone. Apparently, I chose the least flattering images. My eldest child asked me to stop performing the work I made about her birth knowing that this isn't how she wants the world to see her. We recently went on holiday to Madrid. It felt like an ending – we are moving towards the last time all four of us will travel somewhere together. Despite the kids' protestations, I took pictures on this holiday, trying to capture the moments and hold onto them so that I might remember them when the children are off busily living their own lives. I know I will rose-tint these memories and remake them without the grumbling and petty arguments. I will remember this as a lovely time of

unity and shared experiences and forget the tensions that inevitably arise when four people spend an intensive period of time together. The artworks that Ballou and Long have made keep us returning to the complexity of mothering second children, of re-entering matrescence, and avoid the trap of sentimentality or rose tinting that my holiday snaps enable. Forgetting and remembering as represented in artworks is complex and nuanced, and takes account of the impossibility of ever doing mothering the same.

Love
Emily

Dear Emily,

It is difficult and beautiful to feel and know that our children are out there making their own representations of themselves in the world. What you write about resonates so much with my own experience of letting go, and I well remember my fantasy about 'the last family holiday' which took place in Iceland in the summer of 2018 – which in the end really turned out to be the last, before the divorce.

These days, in the new configuration of the family, mother and sons, I even cherish our collective family dinners, when we are all five together. I was with the four of them in Dubrovnik for Christmas, and this felt really special. Yes, I am painfully aware that such times are becoming less available.

Oddly, it's loyalty towards the grandparents, my parents, who are both 80 this year, that is keeping us together, as a family.

I am keen to tell you about my children as they are now, and our social media relations.

'Do me a Facebook post', my 16-year-old demands. 'Again? OK'. And so my Facebook feed is a celebration of his prom, birthday and GCSE results day. And here's my public performance of mothering, and pride, except in this case it's been orchestrated by the demands of the child and not the mother.

The older two wouldn't make such a request, if anything, they are more likely to warn me against displaying their images, and my related feelings, on social media. And then there's me, and my action of carefully putting together a celebratory 10th birthday post for my youngest, documenting the 10 birthdays he's had. I note that the most visible change, the moment of becoming a boy, rather than a cute babyface, is between the ages of 5 and 6. How he's grown up! With some trepidation I remember that was also the year of the divorce, of the family, as he knew it, breaking apart. My children are growing up. Social media photos and videos allow us to stop time, to record, to pause, to remember. And also to be publicly recognised in our mothering.

I also have 23- and 21-year-olds, the ones who have left the nest. In the end (oh, the fantasy of 'the end'), something tells me that the matrescence is also going to become a process of letting go. A child leaves the nest, all the material stuff that is left behind will eventually need to be sorted, and with it, all those maternal documents, all that maternal art ... all these forgotten moments of becoming a mother. There is too much nostalgia there.

Recently I have started using BeReal, a time-based app, where users are asked to document their daily existence, with two photographs, front and back, of their mundane existence. An app that would, I am guessing, suit mothering documentation. My two eldest children, the ones who have now left home, got me onto it. I find myself using BeReal as a compulsive mechanism of communication between us. Oh, yes, it's about spying

too! I know where they are. I know they are alive. They are fine in Utrecht and London. But BeReal is not art. Back in the day, the conceptual frame that BeReal demands could have been considered as an artistic format, but now, primarily, this is a means, a form, that's become widely available. There is not necessarily an artistic intention behind it from the users. I don't think of my BeReal photographs as art, not in the slightest, I think of them as a mechanism of communication with the older children. I am mothering them this way too. They are my only friends on BeReal. And, I am controlling, knowing their whereabouts, but also learning to let go, which is crucial. BeReal can also be about framing a daily narrative, providing a story. Here's the dramaturgy of our everyday life.

Poetics of the daily. Like blogging through *Friday Records*, like *Contemplation Time*, both of which would nowadays, in the time of the proliferation of documentary practice, seem too ordinary. I wonder how many new mothers use BeReal.

And this makes me wonder, in connection with the older children, am I still providing them with some kind of containment, and being good enough at it? This time, allowing them and myself to let go.

There is too much fear and overwhelming love in mothering. So, one smothers with attention. A friend said to me some time ago that she would be happiest if she could just keep all the babies in bed with her, locked up in one room. Jokingly, of course. This stuck in my mind, the image of stunted growth, the children who were never allowed to grow up because of the mother. Sándor Ferenczi's well-known psychoanalytic paper 'Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child', first published in 1933, provides an account of sexual abuse, trauma, but also 'oppressive love'. These lines struck a chord:

Parents and adults, in the same way as we analysts, ought to learn to be constantly aware that behind the submissiveness or even the adoration, just as behind the transference of love, of our children, patients and pupils, there lies hidden an ardent desire to get rid of this oppressive love. If we can help the child, the patient or the pupil to give up the reaction of identification, and to ward off the over-burdening transference, then we may be said to have reached the goal of raising the personality to a higher level. (p.203)

For the child, this is about development, and growing up. Same for the mother. For the child, this is about letting go. Same for the mother. When I brought these lines to our Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis seminar discussion, someone said, this was about freedom. So, I'm thinking towards freedom here, letting go. Something I have to contend with now is the matrescence art of letting go. Letting go is a part of mother-becoming.

Love
Lena

Final thoughts

Matrescence is mother-becoming which remains a source of inspiration and reconfigurations, artistic and otherwise. The matrescence period is a time of looking both forward and backward, both (re)discovering anew and forgetting our pasts. In the inherent multidirectional temporality of the works we have considered in this chapter, we find both a return to and a letting go of certain conceptions of what it means to engage in the early stages of motherhood, which will always inevitably become erased and only available to us in half-memories and reconstructions. In Ballou and Long's returns to earlier maternal

experiences, both artists are able to revisit the act of bringing a child into a world that seems threatening; a world that is in the midst of a pandemic, climate crisis, and health-care inequalities, and in which their children will face myriad challenges. Long and Ballou are concerned with bringing new life into a world that can be conceived of as in breakdown and chaos, or in *GOO:GA* (2021) where Ballou's child may not survive to birth, and yet they imbue their works with optimism through the act of conceiving, carrying and caring for babies, who they position as inherently linked to a future of action and hope. In digitally re-imagining earlier works, Ballou and Long are also pushed into more intimate considerations of their audience. Ballou works with one lone and loud male audience member who happens to be her friend and colleague, whilst Long gathers a community of friends and neighbours in her garden, both gesture towards the audiences that will encounter the digital works in their own homes and contexts. We see these artists rework and repeat their matrescence experiences in artworks designed for online distribution and, in watching them, are also pushed to reconnect with our own early maternal experiences. In these works, we find ourselves, as both audience members and as mothers, reflecting on our own matrescence and our future as mothers, as we return to and pass through various impermanent pasts and imagined futures. Similarly, we are able to revisit seminal works by mother artists Hiller, Kelly and Baker through documentation, and new curatorial practices like the *Women in Revolt!* exhibition at Tate Britain. Documenting performance and embodied action, and documenting matrescence, always points towards an audience yet to be who will experience this work in some other, as yet unknown, place and time. It is never possible to identically recreate our maternal experiences, either through our second children and repeated acts of mothering or through re-staged live shows, digital performances, or documentation of artworks, but in the act of trying we are able to both remember and reimagine, to make new and to reminisce, and in doing so, we might come to understand matrescence anew, both as a time of becoming a mother and of moving towards letting go and the perception of freedom. Yet, bearing in mind and heart, that the process of mother-becoming never stops as each mother must find new ways of being throughout their life.

Matrescence art, or creativity, is a nurturing space for the mother/artist, who is negotiating her new identity, be that the new identity of the mother of a baby or the many new maternal subjectivities that we learn to inhabit as our children grow and our maternal relations transform, and creating her own network of support, her artistic context. Matrescence artmaking can often also become about recognition, a kind of intimate public acknowledgement and confirmation of one's fugacious, evolving and private identity, as a mother/artist, to which we can return and which we can make again.

Note

1. For recent publications on the maternal in performance see Aughterson and Moriarty 2024; Kinser, Freehling-Burton, and Hawkes 2014; Marchevska and Walkerdine 2020; Šimić and Underwood-Lee 2021.

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