Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í myndlist

Útskriftarverk og lokaritgerð

Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í myndlist

Camilla Patricia Reuter

Vorönn 2017
SISTERS

Geinargerð um útskriftarverk til BA-gráðu í myndlist

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The graduation piece *Sisters* is a triptych realized in the traditional medium of oil colors on canvas. Similar to my previous works, I emphasize on the power of colors in mediating emotion, which provides the possibility for a psychological transference between the artist, the art, and the audience. The work is a triptych: I've painted three faces, one of which is a self-portrait, the second a portrait of my half-sister and the third an imaginary merging of the two of us. The lucid magentas encircled by shadowy ultramarine blue create a magical aura, our faces shining and floating together like fantasy. The desire to address personal experience is in accordance with my previous works, which is interested in the deeply subjective, yet universal experiences of the feminine.

I don’t know my sister and have only recently started messaging with her online. She is what the Russian language refers to as “homogenous” half-sister, which means we originate from the same father but from different mothers. The trauma caused by our absent father, who deprived us from our natural language and cultural identity through his passive family role, connects, yet separates us as his children. In other words, absence becomes presence; for my sister has always been present for me, even if she has existed purely as a phantasmagoric figure. Encapsulated in the nature of trauma is the difficulty to articulate the past and the perceived, which explains why the undisclosed spaces of the psyche often search for solace through creativity. Until recently, my half-sister existed in my life purely as an idea; I have rarely mentioned her to anyone enquiring me of my siblings. It is not that I did not want people to know of her: rather, I’ve felt she belongs solely to me. Painting her face has made her emerge from the periphery of suppressed dreams into the realm of language and signs. I have painted her features with unbound affection, in the search for a genetic resemblance, while methodologically discovering the lost familial connection between us. *Sisters* is an attempt to mediate the range of feelings the creative process has pushed me through: from the onset of finally connecting with my sister through Facebook to finally daring to reveal the paintings to her and disclosing the dedication I’ve had for her of the fast five months.

I’ve always enjoyed the bodily nature of painting, ridding myself from the pressures of linguistic articulation. In my opinion, the corporeal dimension
brings forth the fluidity between the mind and the body, between the subject and object. Rather than thinking those two as opposite sides of a coin, I prefer the idea of the psyche and the corporeal as intertwined and reciprocal matter. Especially when painting larger paintings such as these, there is much movement involved, and a certain kind of dance is performed, which then transmits into the work through spontaneous brushstrokes and ecstatic bursts of color. Hence, the mind literally becomes mediated through the body, the body in turn invoking the mind into motion.
The Madwoman

On Creativity, Feminism and the Maternal in Art

Ritgerð til BA í myndlist
Camilla Patricia Reuter
Vorönn 2017
The Madwoman

On Creativity, Feminism, and The Maternal

Ritgerð til BA / MA prófs í Myndlist
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Vorönn 2017
Uttráttur

Í ritgerðinni greini ég þau þemu sem veita mér mestan innblástur við listsköpun: feminískra list og hugtakið kyngervi í skapandi samhengi. Þessi þemu birtast í list minni þar sem að ég tek mér stöðu myndbrjóts þegar að ég nálgest hið hefðbundna sjónarhorn á kvenleika, sem markast af lífræðilegri getu til að fæða börn annars vegar og glápnautn hins karlmannlega augnaráðs hins vegar. Í ritgerðinni er unnið eftir þeirri hugmynd að list sé sprottin upp úr og skilgreind út frá þeim félagsmennigarlegu táknerfum sem eru fyrir hendi í samfélaginu og að hún sé þar af leiðandi móttækileg fyrir gagnrýni. Sett er fram gagnrýni á viðvarandi hugmyndir um að listræn snígligáfa sé fólgin í tengslum karlmennsku og sköpunar, ásamt því að skoða hvernig sjálfsmynd listamannsins hefur áhrif á verk hans og túlkun þeirra. Verandi móðir og listamaður lítt ég til annarra kvenna sem hafa samtvinnuð reynslu af móðurhlutverkinu við listsköpun sína; Jenny Saville, Mary Kelly og Alice Neel; og skoða hvernig það hefur átt þátt í því að kollvarpa kynjuðum staðalimyndum. Í framhaldini er synt fram á að samband sköpunar og mæðrunar er ekki mótsagnakennt heldur gagnkvæmt. Staðreyndin að listakonur hafa í gegnum tíðina þurft að velja á milli móðurhlutverks og listferils sínir glögt hina viðvarandi karlmiðuðu staðla listheimerinsins. Með því að veikja aðygli á verkum þekktra listkvenna sem hafa notað móðurlegar upplifunnir sem innblástur í verkum sínum er reynt að afsanna þá mýtu að listakona geti ekki notið velgengni í starfí sinu samtímis því að vera móðir. Þetta er gert meðal annars með því að greina bæði nærveru og fjárveru hins móðurlega á ólíkum listaverkum, allt frá hugmyndalist til málverka. Máli mín til stuðnings er sótt í ritaðar heimildir sem snúa að kyngervi, bæði úrí höfðuverkum feminískra bókmennta sem og listfræði. Þá er einnig visað til listaverka úr ólíkum miðlum sem spanna bilið á milli listrænnar og bókmentalegrar tjáningar í því skyni að varpa ljósi á persónulegan innblástur listsköpunar mínnar.
Abstract

This essay analyzes themes most influential to me as an artist: feminist art practices and the concept of gender in a creative context. These themes are apparent in my work as I take an iconoclastic approach towards traditional images of femininity as either defined by the biological ability to reproduce, or as the fetishized object of the male-gaze. The essay studies art as defined and conceived within the existing socio-cultural sign systems and therefore susceptible to criticism. The objective is to question the canonical connection of masculinity and creativity as typified in the myth of the artist genius, and to study how the artist’ identity affects the work and its consequent interpretations. As a mother and an artist I look at other creative women who have incorporated the maternal experience in their art, and how such practices subvert gendered stereotypes, including artists such as Jenny Saville, Mary Kelly, and Alice Neel. Furthermore, the essay illustrates how creativity and mothering can constitute a reciprocal relationship rather than a contradictory one. The fact that women artists in the past have had to choose between becoming a mother and pursuing a career in art, show how masculine standards die hard. By taking into consideration successful women artists who have adopted the maternal as a creative source, my intention is to disprove the belief that an artist cannot be a mother. This is done in part by by analyzing the absence and presence of the maternal in art works from conceptualism to painting. To further support my thesis, I apply a variety of writings on gender related to feminist literature and art theory. Although a painter myself, the creative references in this essay come in all mediums, crossing boundaries between artistic and literary expression in order to illustrate the variety of personal inspiration to me as an artist.
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Introduction – The Split

I paint because I am a woman.
(It’s a logical necessity.)
If painting is female and
insanity is a female malady,
then all women painters are mad and
all male painters are women.

It is the split I keep going back to, the subject around which I nervously circulate, afraid that it might devour me like Saturn devoured his son (Except in this scenario it is the mother devouring the daughter). "We think back through our mothers"\(^2\) said Virginia Woolf and demonstrated the necessity of a creative matrilineal heritage. It is the cleavage which underpins the creative process and the female unconscious, from which the infamous hysteria arises. A construction like any other trauma, the unsewable rupture is the result of an unprocessed memory, an event that resurfaces in times of change or takes the form of recurring dreams. It is what defies the wholeness of one’s identity, sanity and the social desire to conform. Creation on the other hand, is the energy generated by the tension between that which one is unable to express by words—because of the fear only clamor would come out—and the skin, which protects the ego from unraveling likes marbles on a floor. The angst of failure is always present in the female psyche, where there is a fine line between a paralyzing desire and a motivational craving for perfection. The feminist literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar referred to this feeling as the anxiety of authorship in their 1979 book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. According to the authors, creative women struggle with a different kind of anxiety from their male colleagues, influenced by the lack of female predecessors and the authorial difficulty to claim her own voice.

What Dumas suggest in her poem is not only a variability of gender roles but a contestation of the genius myth: the belief that creation is inherently masculine and that

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insanity becomes the pinnacle of greatness only when endured by men. Hence, insanity in its mundane form is inherently feminine, embodied in the image of the farcical woman with childlike mannerisms. Take for example the agoraphobic oddball Emily Dickinson in her virginal white gown, scribbling down poetry in seclusion surely only for her private pleasure; or the art world’s tabloid queen who rarely gets featured in the context of serious art talk, PYSCO SLUT (fig.1) ”Mad Tracey From Margate” Emin. Both of these creative women have featured the split in their work as a representation of the identity’s event horizon, a place of no return where the subject’s sense of self threatens to collapse and to spiral into a realm of ga-ga. It is left for the artist to rebuke the myth, embrace her inner madwoman and to confront the many contradictions inhabiting the unconscious mind. The source of my work resides in the split of the non-verbal, which art has the ability to transform into a concrete image. To visualize experience in the form of a painting is a process that takes place in the sacred space of the studio. To produce an aesthetic object is to address oneself through non-verbal communication, where the formation of colors and forms is like unloading a collection of visual memories.

In Strangers to Ourselves (1991), the feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva writes of the foreigner as the "hidden face of our identity." The foreigner is what makes social conformity an impossible task, but whose presence the artist should be grateful for, rather than confronting her with a xenophobic prejudice. Essentially, the foreigner represents the other underlying the feminine ideal, like the character of Bertha Mason, crawling on all fours, works as an unsuppressed double for Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë’s famous literature classic. The Kristevan foreigner desires to break free from the confines of patriarchal repression. The description of a "choked up rage deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency" makes me identify with the concept of the foreigner. Through self-portraits and representations of the feminine I study my identity as a woman, a lover, a mother, and a daughter. The art I produce inevitably relates to a larger social discussion on gender, and as a feminist artist my work is inherently political. The objective of this essay is to analyze my own art practices in the theoretical context described above, and to further investigate my relationship with creativity.

5 Julia Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, 1.
6 Ibid.
In the trial of two of the members in the art collective Pussy Riot, a psychological examination concluded that the artist Nadezsda Tolonnikova suffered from a personality behavior with symptoms such as "stubbornness and a tendency to insist categorically on her own opinion."\(^7\) Albeit verging on tragicomic, the diagnosis does well in illustrating a cultural allergy towards outspoken women. As a daughter of a vernacular Russian man, I am familiar with the feeling of being defined not by my actions but how well I conform into the feminine stereotype. Therefore, to make art is to break the silence.

1. From Immanence to Transcendence: Re-claiming the narrative

According to Simone de Beauvoir, women throughout history have been systematically denied the existential right for transcendence, or the right to express oneself by engaging in creative practices with concrete outcomes. Instead, women have been confined into a realm of what Beauvoir refers to as immanence, a life of repetition and voicelessness. Hence, the woman artist acquires a position of conflict, where she must find a way to negotiate between the immanent and transcendental roles. Every person by definition balances between these two states, except it is only the oppressed who experience an identity crisis once given the ability to actively express their minds. To transform what Beauvoir regards as immanence into a transcendental activity, such as art, is to demonstrate the value of the feminine experience. Yet the idea of immanence seems to reinforce the idea of masculine forms of creativity as superior - painting versus crafts, sculpture versus pottery making - and intentionally undermine the female experience. Think of the domestic, the mundane, the mother: perhaps repetitive, yet all with deeply a transcendental core with a meaningful outcome for the individual. Hence, the reason lies not within the activities themselves, but in the fact that the spheres traditionally inhabited by women are automatically downplayed as less significant.

Contrasting immanence and transcendental experience as hierarchical only enforces the idea of traditionally feminine activities as less creative and innately passive. Therefore it also imposes the idea of masculine forms of transcendence as the standard, towards which women should strive at the cost of renouncing their own gender. I am a mother and an artist. Therefore the decision to utilize the maternal experience in art is an attempt to question the division between immanent and transcendent acts. Feminist art pursues to disrupt the power balance and to question any age-old binaries working on behalf of the patriarchy. As such, the decision to paint professionally is already a feminist one. Both the canvas and the paintbrush

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9 Ibid., 98: “Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, she is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence.”
10 Ibid., 37: “Woman’s drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself?”
have been masculine tools for so long that only a few decades ago a woman’s work was commercially better off when claimed by her husband.\textsuperscript{11} For many of women artists associated with the feminist awakening, turning away from painting was a necessary statement for reclaiming the female body from historical masculine representations. Today, painting has been relieved from its canonical history as an increasing number of women artists adopt the medium in their practice.

For myself as a woman artist, the split represents a point of separation from the paternal ancestry. I see art as the act of self-knowledge, which allows me to explore the myth of the madwoman, and to create alternative aesthetics discontinuing the misogynist pathos of male predecessors.

In the essay \textit{Laugh of the Medusa} (1976) the philosopher Hélène Cixous invites women to the creative stage by declaring: "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violent as from their bodies."\textsuperscript{12} Deconstructing the socio-cultural phenomena labeled woman calls for feminist psychoanalysis, confronting the psychological illusion, revealed after a Marxist critique\textsuperscript{13} has stripped her bare from material relationships. For once the hysteric becomes an artist, she is immediately confronted with the cultural oxymoron of a thinking female.\textsuperscript{14} In Elke Krystufek’s \textit{Space Cadet} (2000) the self-portrait includes the following sentences: "How can one be an artist without being an artist,"\textsuperscript{15} and "the disappearance of the body in cyberspace but in fact still dragging that sucker round all the time,"\textsuperscript{16} as a reminder on how the woman is always drawn back to her body, even in hyperreality. This erroneous connection of performative identities and biological difference has defined her as \textit{the other}, reduced to a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Here I’m referring to the popular American artist Margaret Keane, whose husband Walter Keane sold her paintings under his name during the 1960’s. See David D’Arcy, “Art As Identity Theft” Observer, October 12, 2014, http://observer.com/2014/12/art-as-identity-theft-tim-burtons-big-eyes-premieres-at-art-basel-miami-beach/.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Marxist Feminism as defined by Reference.com: “Marxist Feminism refers to a particular feminist theory focusing on the ways in which women are oppressed through capitalist economic practices and the system of private property. According to this theory, women are exploited in the home and in the workplace because much of their labor is uncompensated”, accessed January 1, 2017, https://www.reference.com/world-view/marxist-feminism-afa84658e7ff7d1#.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Griselda Pollock, \textit{Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories}, (London: Routledge, 1999), 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Elke Krystufek, \textit{Nobody Has to Know} (Frankfurt: Portikus, 2000), 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
still membrane under the male gaze. Against the cultural overflow of phallocentric representations, the woman artist has to locate her own narrative outside the passive desired.

There is a tendency towards sensationalism in the interpretation of the private lives of women artists. The feminine tragic adds into the mystique, which in turn threatens to reduce the art into a purely therapeutic practice. To highlight the personal experience has a different outcome from the Vasarian glorification of artists when applied to women, for instead of reifying a universal image of man, women’s stories focus on fulfilling the abnormal. Hence, her creative efforts can be trivialized as personal and relative against the grand narrative of universal phallic experience. Think of the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi, or the suicide of Sylvia Plath, and how personal anguish has come to define the interpretation and glorification of their work. To me, a woman artist, using self-portraiture is a daring feminist statement, which says: "I am the raconteur of my own narrative. I speak for myself."

17 Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 9.
18 Refers to Giorgio Vasari, the writer of *Lives of the Artists* (1550). Referred to as “the immortalizer of artists” and the origin of the artist as creator-myth; see Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", 156.
19 Pollock, 9.
20 Ibid.
2. Confronting the Gaze: Feminist theory in Art

The feminist revolution in art over four decades ago commenced the process of reclaiming bodies, which has since become an influential cultural and social theory challenging linguistic binaries working on heterosexual premises. In 1972 Laura Mulvey wrote in connection with Allen Jones’ exhibition of women-as-furniture: "women are simply the scenery onto which men project their fantasies. It is time to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires." As noted by Mulvey, Jones’ sculptures portrayed the female body exclusively as a fetishized object, functioning in fact as mere prosthesis for the real exhibit of the show, namely the phallus. The problem with the phallocentric art world is that it loves nothing more but images reinforcing the myth of the masculine creator genius, to the extent where male fantasies are privileged and excused when presented in the divine context of aesthetic experience: Jones himself has commented on the feminist critique of his work: "As an artist, I have a responsibility to art. As a human being, I have a responsibility to society." Jones’ thinking reveals the underlying double standard of Western art, which seemingly functions as a sovereign entity above social and cultural critique. Except that art is defined and conceived within the existing socio-cultural sign systems, and therefore cannot pretend to possess a superior status beyond criticism. The feminist art historian Griselda Pollock ironically writes, "Feminism … always so uncouth and insensitive to aesthetics, and of course, always bringing things down on the personal level, not being able to keep things like art and society apart."

2.1 Subverting Images: Gender, Sexuality and Identity

From the feminist revolt of the early seventies emerged the contemporary discussion on sexuality, which emphasizes plurality, alternative communities and gender fluidity. The concept of intersectionality coined by the American scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in...

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22 Ibid.
24 Pollock, 103.
1989 proposed that identity is a multifaceted construction of overlapping social and cultural categories. Intersectional feminism is interested in identity as the crossroads of definitions, which together form a unique mosaic. Hence, gender, race, nationality, social class, mental illness or physical disabilities all influence our perception of the self. The individual flare is what makes interesting art, for who could argue their work to exist separate of identity. In my opinion, addressing sexuality in art is to speak about more than just sex, whether through a self-portrait or by depicting others. The South African artist Steven Cohen, who was recently found guilty of sexual exhibitionism because of tying a live cockerel to his penis for the public performance Coq/Cock in Paris, has stated of his work: “It's about identity – it's not about fucking.”

My interest in pornography takes a cartographic approach in visualizing “the dark continent” of female sexuality, which famously left Freud himself bewildered. To employ pornographic signs and imagery for subversive purposes has been the tool for many feminist artists, who have rejected censorship as further perpetuating the silence on sexuality. In my opinion, differentiating between “good” and “bad” porn is useless, for desire does not function according to good taste. Pornography offers an outlet for the rainbow of fetishes and sexual habits, which otherwise are left suppressed. Furthermore, I have found much beauty in depicting naked bodies, which often transcend their dirty origins into a realm of aesthetics in my work.

In the drypoint series entitled Naked Finland (fig.2) I illustrate the voyeuristic desire of an anonymous internet community. The attractive eroticism intents to demonstrate how sexual gratification and aesthetic pleasure are not opposed to each other but rather reside in parallel contexts. After all, the gratification one experiences during the creative process is not so much a different sensation from erotic titillation. The language of pornography is like an X-rated playground of visual stimulants, where gender is acted out in its most vibrant and imaginative ways. By transforming the pornographic crudeness into a beautiful dance of continuous lines, dirty pics are turned into gallery specimen. Similar to the artist Ghada Amer’s stitched porno canvases (fig 3.), Naked Finland aims to capture female desire in

26 Sigmund Freud, The Question of Lay Analysis (1926), “We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology.”
"explicitly feminist critical situations." The unintentional comicality in these amateur bedroom confessions stands in stark contrast with the sterile world of industrial porn. A humorous example is the print of a female hand with long acrylic nails clutching on an erected penis, the man’s striped socks still on. Having read recently about how Tom of Finland’s homoerotic drawings were stolen (all but one) from an exhibition held in Germany in 1973, it is rather amusing to think back at how my print was taken from the Kynleikar exhibition at Tjarnarbíó in 2015. The erected phallus obviously intrigues.

If artistic creativity is compelled by sexual desire as suggested by Freudian psychoanalysis, then taking into consideration the hierarchies defined through sexual differentiation is, by extent, the deconstruction of visual language. Understanding the omnipresence of visual representations and the power of perception as active participants in the formation of ideological relationships could be regarded as the professional responsibility for the artist. Furthermore, the artist who desires to conceive yet another fetishized object into the commercial spectacle, should first ask oneself whether the piece brings any meaning into our everyday culture of visual pulp. In my opinion, there is ultimately nothing more tragic but a consumerist attitude towards visuality, a pseudo-art that listlessly conforms into the overflow of hollow imagery. It is at this point the Foucauldian notion of sexuality as linked to social, economic and cultural power becomes obvious, suggesting that artistic practices have the capability to make that connection more translucent. Guy Debord writes of the power of visuality: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” Therefore, creative subversion of images excites radical thinking. I believe that the subversion taking place can be executed through subtlety, which is mediated to the viewer by sharing a moment, a connection of shared identities. In this context, radicalism does not require obviousness, but rather becomes clear through a concentrated perception. Painting requires observation and patience through which the spectator is given a possibility to transcend the obvious to perceive something previously clouded from the senses. In the end, it is the viewer who conceives the meaning of the work through a subjective reading, and has the ability to become radically influenced.

3. I, The Artist and a Mother

The artist is still a profession strongly defined by the myth of the male genius, governed though patriarchal institutions with a long tradition on male authority and patriarchal values. Mothering is simply regarded as incompatible within the creative sphere. As ironically said by the art historian Griselda Pollock; "Men create art; women merely have babies." Therefore some women artists who define themselves as feminists see logic, albeit a flawed one, in renouncing maternity as contradicting their creative identities. Tracey Emin has stated on the subject; "There are good artists that have children. They are called men," while insisting that having children would require a compromise between her maternal and artistic duties, "I would have been either 100 per cent mother or 100 per cent artist."

But what happens when the artist becomes a mother and fails to adopt the masculine standard? Helsingin Sanomat, the largest newspaper in Finland, recently published a written opinion by a mother, who after four weeks of breastfeeding decided to quit because she felt the increased estrogen levels adversely affected her libido. According to the mother, she could no longer put the newborn baby’s needs before the man’s, and deduced that an active sex life of the parents would eventually benefit the baby more than her milk would. Another Icelandic lifestyle magazine featured an entrepreneur mother on the cover of their 2015 October issue with a pseudo-impressive subtitle, "Had a teleconference during labor." These two stories are related by their obvious post-feminist tones, with their unrealistic expectations laid on women and above all, the mother. Roughly forty years after the feminist revolution, women are told that childbearing is nothing but an excuse from ‘getting it all.’

It is in the context of these falsifying descriptions of contemporary motherhood I decided to create a video piece entitled MILK as a reaction against the post-feminist atmosphere. The philosopher Jean Baudrillard has suggested that pornography has merged into our daily visual culture to the extent where its constant presence becomes hardly noticeable.

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33 Ella Alexander, "Tracey Emin: 'There are good artists that have children. They are called men,'" *Independent*, October 2, 2014,  
34 Ibid.
35 "Imetys tappaa parisuhteen – kun siirryin korvikemiaan, seksihaluni palasivat,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, November 25, 2016,  
36 *Víkan*, October 2015.
“Sex is everywhere, except in sexuality” is seems to be the contemporary paradox of femininity. The fact that many expecting mothers feel disturbed by the idea of breastfeeding is a symptom of a perverted culture, where the sexualizing women has lead to a strange situation of alienation from our own bodies. In MILK (2016) I use lactation as a sign of otherness by adding an almost uncanny element to the bodily function. In the female body, there is so much discharge: blood, water, placentas, and milk. The pulp which provokes abjection, as a state between desire and repulsion when the differentiation between the self and the other collapses. As described by the philosopher Julia Kristeva: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.” In the black and white video the artist sits still, while drops of milk start to trickle down her armless shirt. What starts as unnoticeable staining soon transforms into a gush of pouring white liquid, soaking her breasts. The lactation is spontaneous, like witchcraft performed on cue. The piece is an attempt to demonstrate the mystification of the female body and to elucidate the relationship between the body and mind.

3.1 Iconoclasm: Deconstructing the Cultural Illusion

To differentiate between social roles and physical bodies is not only important for women but to anyone identifying themselves outside binaries. For the LGBT community rebuking naturalism is imperative, among other things, for legalizing equal parental rights, which are most commonly opposed by arguments relying heavily on cultural and traditional bias. The matter is a subject of a prolonged political debate in Finland, where legalization of gay marriages will finally happen in 2017, followed by administrating adoption rights for same sex couples. As long as families outside the Oedipal paradigm are not lawfully recognized, a heteronormative culture will continue to prevail, endorsing differentiation based on the contrasting identities of masculine and feminine. Without a demystification of the mother, gender inequality will continue to exist, oppressing not only women but by extension anyone.

wanting to become an equal nurturer. The forced sterilization of transgender people, which is an obligatory part of gender reassignment surgeries performed in countries such as Finland, is yet another alarming example on how human rights are disregarded in order to maintain binary positions. The moral reasoning behind the practice boils down to the very interchangeability of the words mother/woman versus the oxymoron mother/man.

Deconstructing the mother stereotype starts from the icon of the Virgin Mother. In her idealized flesh, the mother predates language and culture. The artist Catherine Opie, known for her gender-bending photography series, confronts the stereotype of the feminine maternal in a self-portrait nursing (fig. 4). The artist’s butch appearance with short hair and a strong figure disrupts the balance, yet the symbiotic connection between the mother and the child is palpable in the concentrated gazing of each other. The picture subverts iconic images of the nursing Madonna, exposing the visual authority behind representations.

One of the most iconic American painters known for her unconventional style of portraying the maternal is the artist Alice Neel (1900-1984). Her portrayals of mothers and children are often shockingly grotesque and honest, loaded with contradicting emotions of maternal anxiety. In Futility of Effort (1930) the artist paints a bleak allegory of an accidental death of a baby, only a year and a half after losing her own child.41 The crawling baby had been strangled between bedposts while the mother had been ironing in the kitchen. The thin coat of gray reveals the weave of the canvas, the sparse brush strokes illustrating a moment of muteness. The image of a dead child is the primordial abject of every maternal unconscious.

Much of the theoretical discussion in Alice Neel’s work takes a sensationalist approach to the artist, interpreting her paintings as therapeutic practice and in the context of her perceived personal suffering. The ahistorical approach dismisses her art as a product of its time and therefore related in the contemporary social, cultural and visual sign systems. For art does not simply materialize detached from the surrounding world, but inevitably speaks of the artist’s identity defined by social class, nationality, gender etc.

3.2 From Motherhood to Mothering: Contemporary perspectives

41 Jeremy Lewison, Alice Neel: Painted Truths (Yale University Press, 2010), 102.
Whereas the first generation of feminist artists was fighting against the traditional division of labour and cultural falsification of the maternal, the contemporary generation of artist mothers often portrays the subjective landscape of mothering. The message is that there is no essential mother any more than there exists an essential woman. In order to re-define the maternal identity in contemporary terms, such primitive ghosts need to be exorcised through a re-visualization of the maternal. By portraying my personal experience of going through pregnancy and becoming a mother, my intention is to illustrate how the maternal is a diverse and multifaceted subjectivity and in continuous flux like any other identity.

In an attempt to confront the psychoanalytical ghost of the mother as a passive extension of the child, theoretical discussion on the maternal has come to adopt ideas of gender performativity as presented by the feminist intellectual Judith Butler. The conversation has taken a shift from a fixed state of “motherhood” into an active, reciprocal practice of “mothering.” The maternal subjectivity has also been portrayed as traumatic, or even an absent experience. Tracey Emin’s *The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl* (1991) is a provocative installation piece mourning the life which never was. A public confrontation of the trauma of abortion, the piece encapsulates the many discordant sentiments related to the artist’s intimate experience. To publicly address the issue of abortion is a political statement, but also underlines Emin’s decision to not to become a mother in order to maintain her status in the art world. On the other hand, plenty of successful women artist have children, to name Jenny Saville as an example of another successful YBA (Young British Artist). In a monumental painting entitled *The Mothers* (fig. 5) the artist presents a self-portrait balancing with her two squirming babies. The image bares an iconic reference to a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, deliberately challenging the serene posture of the Virgin and Saint Anne conversing with their well-behaved little divinities. The feeling of movement and fluidity in the corporeal presentation of Saville’s work has undoubtedly influenced my own technique. After all, she is an extraordinary painter and an illustrator of bodies. However, there is much less realism in the paintings I try to mediate through a memory in the flesh. Recently, I have taken a turn towards abstraction, studying the dimensions of the body in a surrealistic manner. I start by sketching the same positions over and over again, until the forms have become internalized in the hand, and I am able to reconstruct the image again without resorting to the original photograph. The process imitates an anatomical study, which

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42 Emily Jeremiah, “From Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond. Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought,” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*.
slowly evolves into an image of its own (fig. 6) Repetition is an attempt at perfection, through which one discovers previously unseen forms.

One of the most significant works in the history of feminist art examining the maternal is the conceptual documentation by the American artist Mary Kelly, entitled Post-Partum Document. Realized during 1973-79, the piece maps the maternal consciousness and the relationship between a mother and her child over several years, gathering together a vast amount of documentation along the journey. For Kelly, the decision to explore the maternal relationship through the semiotic language of conceptualism was a reaction to performance, which she felt only further advanced the division between the "real" male artists and women as natural performers to be gawked at. The conscious decision to exclude any representations of the mother was necessary in order to avoid the kitsch and sentimental visual language. Additionally, the minimalistic representation enabled Kelly to critically distance herself from the deeply personal subject, which she had chosen to portray with meticulous precision, like a pseudo-scientific study. With an interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the documentation performs a feminist psychoanalysis on the relationship between a mother and her child, revealing the alternative maternal subjectivity with moments of anxiety, self-doubting, and fear of the inevitable separation. The artist rejects mimesis and instead concentrates on describing the narrative though language and mundane artifacts, as secondary objects referring to the main personages’ presence. Yet, although the body is never directly present, Post-Partum Documentation is all about the politics of the body by addressing the paramount issue of reproduction. Moreover, choosing to work with her personal life Kelly stated that the role of the mother was no less meaningful or artistically of lesser value than any other relationship.

The myth of the art world closing its doors at the second the artist becomes pregnant is strong, but rather than a reformation of the patriarchal order she is expected to conform. When a powerful artist such as Marina Abramović decides to accept the image of the male genius as the standard, she fails to acknowledge that rejecting motherhood as antithetical to personal freedom is not subverting anything; rather she endorses the idea of creativity as a masculine.

44 Mary Kelly, interview by Douglas Crimp, Mary Kelly (Phaidon Press, 1997), 16.
feature. Hence, artists who have found creativity in their pregnancies and domestic lives go against the patriarchy by demonstrating that the two identities are not mutually incompatible but rather collaborative. For me, the personal has always been the most productive subject in my work, as my interest lies in transforming the internal voices into an experience of transcendence through painting. Therefore, to visualize the relationship between my child and myself is natural: it says who I am.

3.3 The Expecting Mother as a Cultural Sign

The relationship of feminism and mothering is ridden with the fear of natural essentialism. As Simone De Beauvoir writes; "Tota mulier in utero," says one, "woman is a womb." The discussion on maternity has been reluctant to acknowledge the material, insisting that there is nothing but the cultural in the maternal body, and assuming otherwise would automatically reinforce the paternal authority of culture. It is as if feminists were to acknowledge the material dimension as capable of influencing the cultural, all their efforts in canceling out the biological bias would be thrown out of the window in a heartbeat. Culturally coded as passive, soft and sentimental, some feminists have rejected the mother as an ancient relic hindering women from realizing their full potential in the system. Hence, the artist who decides to take on the subject of maternity confronts the feminist fear of reifying primordialism. The anxiety seems illogical, considering that feminist art addresses the split between nature and culture, artists often working with the body to reveal its performative dimensions.

Eroticization of the pregnant body, maiesiophilia, is considered to be an "unnatural attraction" in the Western culture of repressed sexual drives. Instead, the round belly is glamorized and becomes a fetishized object: Vanity Fair’s 1991 cover of Demi Moore expecting exemplify the channeling of desire through a commodified idealization of the body. The portrait is a totalitarian one, echoing once again the inert skin of the virgin mother and pregnancy as a cultural sign.

47 Beauvoir, 23.
48 Jeremiah, 26.
Against the classical portrayal, in the painting entitled *10 weeks* (fig. 7) a moment of intimacy is revealed, where the pregnant body is subjected to the critical eye of the expecting mother. The image does little to glamorize, and the face is completely cut off in order to not distract from the personal examination of the body. The reflection from the mirror remains private through anonymity. The gradually forming hill marks the beginning of anticipation and the mental growing process into becoming a mother. The breasts are still flat, exposed and casual like the whole of the female body, in the natural state one never sees it publicly: as de-objectified and demystified.

As a woman with a libido I struggled with understanding the desexualization of pregnant bodies. The discomfort and feelings of insecurity by my rapidly changing figure into what Sylvia Plath refers to as ”a melon strolling on two tendrils,”⁵¹ made me want to document my body in the opposite, spiteful and yes, disturbingly sexual manner. Posing for the camera with my crotch wide open, I thought of Yurie Nagashima’s self-portrait *Expecting-Expected* (fig. 7). The photograph presents a young pregnant woman with her protruding belly, cigarette in her mouth and a leatherjacket on, showing the middle finger not only to the absent father but to the society at large. She has the attitude of a rebellious punk, which stands in total contrast with the image of the submissive mother. With a decidedly unfeminine fierceness, the artist confronts the gaze of the beholder and the cultural control over bodies one has grown sick of. The provocative posture suggests the artist has far but lost her sexual libido, a common misconception deriving from the Holy Virgin Mother, the original anti-sex symbol. Although my pregnant documentations have acquired a slightly more subtle nature in the transformation from photographs to paintings and drawings, I like to think that the sexual reference remains. The reason for the necessity of transformation between mediums is because the photographs are a visual reference to facilitate anatomic rendering, rather than indented as a completed work.

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4. Twelve Months - My Perception of the Maternal

Nine months of restless hibernation, rising like yeasty dough.
A discharge, a birth.
*The first three months are the most difficult*, I am told.\(^{52}\)

Twelve *Months* (fig. 8) is an aesthetic contemplation on the corporeal metamorphosis of pregnancy and the ascension into motherhood – or *mothering* as the proper term should be. The transformation of the self as the inward reflection of the external is presented through a visual narrative of eight separate canvases united into a single surface. The somber oil colors for me reflect the darkness of polar nights and the Icelandic blue twilight, as alluring to a sense of melancholy residing in the mind. The dark opening in between canvases allure to *the split*\(^ {53}\) and the separation between former and new identities. To have eight canvases instead of nine is to leave the narrative open- and to signal that there no clear beginning nor an end. The visual language resists conforming to art historical representations of motherhood as the ultimate feminine realm of sentimental joy. I believe that reducing the emerging relationship between a mother and her child to a naive state of all-pervasive euphoria dismisses feelings of anxiety as a natural part of the process. Pregnancy as a metaphysical transfiguration inevitably influences the mind, which can become a psychologically alienating experience for the mother. Instead, *Twelve months* aims to portray the maternal experience as a complex state of an identity in flux. The narrative blurs the line between the period of pregnancy and the first three months after birth by purpose. By taking a minimalistic approach to labor my intention is illustrate the continuity before and after birth. Rather than by a shocking climax, the mind transcends into the post-natal reality gradually.

A sense of mental dislocation is often experienced by women during and after pregnancy, which can sometimes acquire the form of post-natal depression. The crisis of identity is induced by society’s demands to experience constant happiness and to repress any feelings of anxiety as unmaternal and unfeminine. The pregnant body becomes shared not only with the child but the surrounding community, as people approach the growing belly and

\(^{52}\) Camilla Patricia Reuter, *Artist statement*.
\(^{53}\) See Introduction.
vehemently scrutinize any behavior considered unmotherly. Consequently, a schizophrenic state emerges, where the body becomes divided between the social construction and the locus of identity. In these self-portraits I retrieve the memories from the period of twelve months, aware that what I might recollect is no longer identical to the actual moment. To realize that the perception of our past selves might deceive us is to give in to aesthetic interpretation. Hence the blurring of colors as a technical reference to the artist Gerhard Richter, the master of past recollections. *Twelve Months* portrays a dialogue with a memory, a shadow figure, which serves as the apparatus for expressing a variety of undisclosed affections left unspoken.
5. Conclusion

The decision to become an artist derives from the pleasure of creation as much as the inevitable anxiety one experiences when striving for perfection. The creative process derives from within, turning the non-verbal clamor of the unconscious mind into visible aesthetics. To locate my art practices in the context of feminism demonstrates how the work is not merely an outcome of a therapeutic practice, but connected into the existing visual culture. The personal in my work can be interpreted as a subversion of gendered stereotypes and as an attempt to look deeper into the mundane performances of identity. My intention is to explore the feminine without resorting to censorship, and to reveal personal moments of detachment and solitude behind the gendered act. The creative process is an attempt to visualize the split of the unconscious mind, and the metamorphosis, which turns immanent sentiments into transcendental actions. To address the blurred lines between the internal and external realities questions normative behavior and the hierarchies which follow.

The maternal portrayals in my work resist the masculine tastes of the phallic art world, but most importantly they are the studies of a subjective experience and the acquisition of fluid identities. I propose an alternative narrative to replace the pearly skin of the Madonna by taking an iconoclastic approach in portraying the feminine.54 As a contemporary woman artist I should not have to worry for my career because I chose to became a mother. Rather, it is the institutions which should facilitate emancipation by acknowledging the traditionally excluded. Unraveling the myth of the creative genius is undoubtedly a part of the process, for one does not need a prick to make art.

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Figure 1. Emin, Tracey. *Psycho Slut*. 1999. Appliqué on blanket. 96 in. x 78 in. (243.84 cm x 198.12 cm).

Figure 2. Reuter, Camilla Patricia. *Naked Finland*. 2015. Drypoint prints. Various sizes.

Images:
Figure 3. Amer, Ghada. *And the Beast*. 2004. Acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas.

Figure 4. Opie, Catherine. *Self-Portrait Nursing*. 2004. Chromogenic Print. 40 x 31 in. (101.6 x 78.7 cm).
Figure 5. Saville, Jenny. *The Mothers*. 2011. Oil on Canvas. 270 × 220 cm.

Figure 6. Reuter, Camilla Patricia. *Untitled*. 2016. Oil on canvas. 90 x 65 cm.
Figure 7. Reuter, Camilla Patricia. 10 weeks. Oil on canvas. 100 x 75 cm.

Figure 8. Nagashima, Yurie. Expecting-expected. 2001. C-print.
Figure 9. Reuter, Camilla Patricia. *Twelve Months*, detail. 2016. Oil on canvas. 520 x 90 cm.