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COVID Collisions: teaching, making, and mothering in the locked-down domestic space.

I acknowledge the land on which I live, mother and work is the unceded lands of the Kaurna and Peramangk peoples of the Adelaide plains and hills. I pay my deep respects to their Elders past and present.

Keywords: Mothering, Matricentric Feminism, Motherhood, COVID-19

Introduction

This paper reports on and extends findings from my recent studio-led PhD project, *Making the New, Normal: re-presenting mothers' subjectivities and their creative potential against persistent patriarchal models.* The interruptions of COVID-19 led to an exploration of the ways the pandemic impacted women's and mothers' work, care and art making practices within public and private space. Research shows that while life under COVID-19 was often construed as a 'new normal,' there is little new about the gendered division of labour that marks mothering experiences in COVID lockdowns (Mannon, 2020, p.234). Instead, I argue that forced compromises in the ways we work, teach and learn, and make art from home, may further deepen the problems of the ideologies of neoliberalism, where care and domestic work are individualised as feminised responsibilities. Can we instead adapt our practices in ways that privilege the domestic sphere as a generative space of creative potential?

In March 2020 when the widespread impacts from COVID-19 began to be felt in Australia I was teaching in and Head of the Art History and Theory Department at the Adelaide Central School of Art (ACSA). I had a child in high school and a child in primary school. I was also part way through my PhD project. Grounded in matricentric feminism, this research investigates ways we practice care and value work in the locus of the domestic when labouring under the pressure of colliding shifts. Through representations of contemporary embodied mothering, I explore the possibility of working from home without compromising or romanticising the 'sanctuary' of the domestic space. Furthermore, it is important that forced adaptations are not normalised or taken for granted, but recognised as mentally and energetically demanding.

COVID-19 and the Persistence of Intensive Mothering

Western neoliberal, individualised models of motherhood still often privilege the idea of intensive mothering. The term 'intensive mothering' was coined by sociologist Sharon Hays and is 'construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive' (1998, p.8). According to academic and author D. Lyn O'Brien Hallstein (2006), the three central concepts of this model are that it is a mother's duty to be the primary carer for the child, that this care requires constant attention and energy, and that it is separated from professional paid work. Together, these tenets of intensive mothering make it harder for mothers to undertake work outside of the family unit whilst devaluing maternal care by positioning it as natural. This model also relegates care to the private, devalued, domestic space of the home.

Evidence continues to show that despite mothers' increasing involvement in the workforce – in fact most mothers participate in work outside of the home – they also continue to do the majority of domestic labour (Wilkins & Lass, 2018). Studies leading up to 2020 consistently showed only a slight increase in the amount of domestic work undertaken by men in heterosexual couples over the last few decades, and that women continue to be responsible for the majority of unpaid domestic labour and childcare (Ruppanner, 2019). In *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, Petra Bueskens writes that many women are disappointed to find their domestic roles and relationships revert to patriarchal gender norms with the births of their children (2018, p.7). In 2020 there was a proliferation of texts, from newspaper articles and academic journals to radio broadcasts and social media posts, that provided evidence that traditional gendered care roles remain in place within (western neoliberal, heterosexual partnered) families and shaped women's COVID-19 experiences.

Mainstream media continues to represent and perpetuate constructs of intensive motherhood. In their study of food advertising, Jinhee Lee, Ji Mi Hong & Hyuk Jun Cheong find that advertising often uses the motherhood tropes of the mother as a multitasker, both nurturer and worker; hence, the mother is presented as a 'supermom' (2020, p.598). This depiction of the mother who effortlessly straddles professional and domestic realms, her individual and maternal selves, represents a problem that Bueskens defines as 'a central dilemma in late modernity' (2019). Researcher Irem Güney-Frahm writes that because neoliberalism relies on

individualisation, 'the responsibility to manage one's daily life and to make the right choices is largely left to each individual' (2020, p.847). Thus, mothers must labour in a self-sufficiency model of care without taking into account the structural issues that result in their individual problems (Kisitu, 2020, p.221). While media outlets and politicians often stated that life under COVID-19 was unprecedented, there is little that is new about the gendered division of labour that marks mothering experiences in COVID lockdowns. Flexible, home-based work arrangements that have developed throughout this period, as mothers have struggled to cope with demands of work and family, are now being celebrated as new ways women can 'have it all.' But according to Kadoglou Triantafyllia and Katerina Sarri:

There appears to be an assumption that, during periods of economic crisis, women should be encouraged to return home to do what they know how to do best: bear and raise children (2013, p.40).

Hence, while the 'new normal' has been widely celebrated as a flexible alternative to the segregation of financially remunerated professional work and domestic care work, gendered labour conditions have been exacerbated in this period. Ideologies of intensive mothering have again been mobilised as women and mothers are exhorted to return to the home, where it is taken for granted that care work will occur alongside paid work and education. As in previous constructs of neoliberal motherhood, the work of mothers is individualised due to the failure to acknowledge broader structural inequalities and biases.

Collisions of Care in the Work from Home Model

In many cases post-COVID there remains the expectation that professional work will continue, at home, along with traditional home-based roles. I argue that forced COVID adaptations have continued to further fragment the work of mothers and domestic carers. Even before COVID-19, 'working at home was associated with higher subjective time stress and did not facilitate better work-life balance in the sense of increasing time in leisure and personal activities' (Craig & Churchill, 2021, p.3). Lyn Craig and Brendan Churchill find that working from home involves more multitasking, with many women blurring the boundaries between employment and family demands by performing paid work whilst supervising children at the same time (p.3). While switching the brain from one mode to another has been found to be physically tiring, having to think and do everything at once in the same temporal and spatial location is mentally exhausting.

During lockdowns there were instances when mothers' professional lives collided with their mothering roles live on television, demonstrating the pressures of fulfilling many roles within the same location – the home. In one case, Dr Clare Wenham, Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy at the London School of Economics, was interrupted by her daughter holding a drawing of a unicorn and asking the BBC interviewer's name (Figure 1). Wenham continued talking as she responded to her daughter and lifted her off the desk and out of view of the computer's camera, showing what The Guardian newspaper called 'heroic levels of patience and professionalism' (2020). In another interview on Sky News, UK foreign affairs editor Deborah Haynes was interrupted by her son bursting in to ask for biscuits. In both these instances, the mothers, each professionals in their fields working from home during lockdown, were interrupted by their young children who failed to respect the arbitrary boundaries between work and 'MotherSpace'.

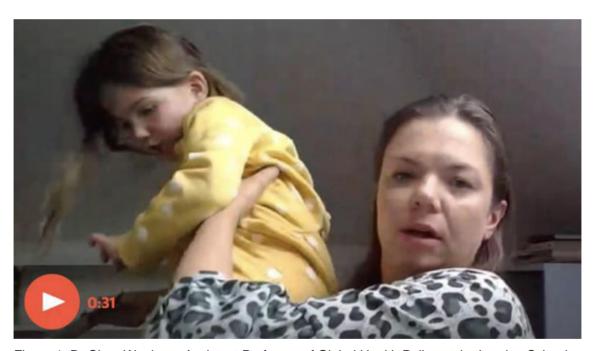


Figure 1: Dr Clare Wenham, Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy at the London School of Economics, interrupted by her daughter while being interviewed by the BBC on live television. (YouTube, 2021).

'Motherspace' has been defined by Marsha Marotta as being space in which mothering occurs, made up of the complex relationships between bodies, space and things (2005). Marotta also makes clear that mothering does not only occur in private in the home and that Motherspace extends to anywhere that mothering occurs — including public spaces like playgrounds and shopping centres, and even live on television. Mothers and their mothering practices are surveilled by others who

intersect with their Motherspace so they may feel compelled to perform intensive mothering. Artist Mary Leunig makes public a version of dysfunctional mothering with shocking effect in many of her drawings. Leunig's darkly funny drawings challenge the expectations of models of ideal motherhood and undermine the sentimentalised notion of home sweet home (Figure 2).

The above examples show how the mental load became heavier for many mothers under forced COVID adaptations. Marotta's theorisation of Motherspace as both private and public (where mothers are surveilled and judged) was borne out in different ways, as mothers working from home were interrupted in their professional work roles and the boundaries between work, home and care were blurred further. Motherspace was reduced in physical terms to the private domestic sphere where home sweet home collided with other intersecting and competing roles and responsibilities.



Figure 2: Mary Leunig, *There's No Place Like Home: Drawings by Mary Leunig.* Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books Australia, 1982.

Teaching and Learning from Home

COVID-19 restrictions made clear that in many families 'it's still expected that women will make their jobs fit around childcare and home schooling ...' (Ferguson, 2020). Helen Lewis, in 'The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics Affect Men and Women Differently,' argues there is a widespread assumption that childcare work is 'soaked up' by private citizens (2020). This assumption fails to acknowledge the intensity of care work, especially when paid work and care must be undertaken in the same time and place. I use digital photographs as records and artefacts of the intensity of this experience in my own home (Figures 3 and 4). My small, open-plan home became art studio, research office, work office, school classroom and leisure space for almost two months (a much shorter period than for others elsewhere in Australia and globally). While my sons were old enough not to ask for biscuits during online Zoom tutorials, I still worked with pets and family members traipsing in and out of the frame until I uploaded a photo of Marie Antoinette's bedroom as my wallpaper. This felt like a kind of betrayal to Leunig who depicts with biting wit the real chaos and precarity of mothering. However, this ploy enabled me to separate – albeit virtually - one shift from another. In this way I recorded lectures in my bedroom, had Zoom meetings on the floor with the laptop propped on the coffee table. I turned off the video function as I prepared food while attending meetings. At the same time, I tried to ensure my sons did not become completely disengaged from their learning as their teachers tried to juggle their own kids, pets and home duties (Evidence for Learning, 2020).



Figure 3: Zoe Freney, *Dining table and desk*, June 16, 2020, 8:16am, digital photograph.



Figure 4: Zoe Freney, *Dining table*, April 27, 2020, 8:50am, digital photograph.

Not fooled by the appearance of tropical islands and lush forests behind the heads of my Art History and Theory students on our weekly Zoom tutorial sessions, I reflected on my own sense of isolation and being overwhelmed when considering how remote learning may have been impacting my students. As Nerina Dunt (2021) writes in 'Network Recovery: Maximising the Educational Experience after Crisis Mode,' ACSA implemented online learning from 20 April to 26 June 2020. This was a wholly new experience for the private tertiary art school whose pedagogical approach is based on the face-to-face teaching of the atelier model. Dunt observes that in this necessary move to online learning students may have been at risk of 'hyperindividualism.' Recognising that intensive mothering models are also based on individualisation and a failure to acknowledge structural problems that isolate mothers and carers, I was acutely aware that students required particular supports to ensure their ongoing engagement in learning. My own reflections on the new intensities of Motherspace and the burdens of colliding temporal and physical demands led me to approach my Zoom tutorial classes in ways that privileged communication and care.

In this uncertain and demanding context it was important to practice an ethics of care towards students I otherwise felt detached from, students I only knew as moving images, or blank squares, on my laptop screen. Sara Ruddick's theorisation of maternal thinking, whereby the work of mothering generates new knowledge, became a useful way of adapting modes of mothering to pedagogy (Ruddick, 1989). I also reflected upon Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory, which advocates hospitality and compassion, recognising the violence of concepts of individualism and selfsufficiency of care (Ettinger, 2020). Jacqueline Millner writes that artists may be well positioned to re-evaluate care as a 'central concern of politics,' due to the resourcefulness they must bring to practice in order to counter the intensification of individualisation within neoliberal society (2019, p.164). While the friction generated by the forced adaptation of the COVID situation must not be downplayed, one way I navigated the collision of my multiple roles within the home space was to draw on knowledges gained in my mothering and art-making experiences to extend care and compassion into my approach to teaching. One way I did this was to encourage students to imagine the Zoom forum as a collective space, where they could share ideas and be heard equally.

A 2021 Evidence for Learning Insights paper investigates COVID impacts on Australian school learning outcomes. It finds that schools seeking to assess rates of student disengagement 'were less focused on using indicators related to academic progress, ... and educational aspirations during the learning at home phase of COVID-19, prioritising indicators related to immediate issues such as communication, access and wellbeing' (2021). ACSA management and staff also focussed on student wellbeing at this time. Dunt reports how inbuilt interactivity on the online platform was important in contributing to 'students feeling connected to one another ... and built wellbeing and resilience amongst classmates...' (2021). ACSA's 2020 QILT results showed extremely high student satisfaction from this period (Dunt, 2021).

My research into the impacts on women and mothers of working, making and mothering from home allowed me to reflect on the ways teaching and learning at home may be a fragmented and individualising experience. These findings impacted my approach to teaching online, causing me to focus on students' wellbeing and to foreground the importance of communication and connection in our virtual interactions.

Mother-Artists: Compromise or Adaptation?

Working and/or studying from home may have exacerbated the experience of home as an ambivalent site for many parents and carers, as the multiple shifts of work and care all converged in the home, a site that researchers Fiona Jenkins and Julie Smith argue policy-makers and employers 'took ... for granted as a background support of economic life' (2021, p.22). For mothers who are also artists, the home has long been recognised as a contested space. Maria Walsh writes that artist Louise Bourgeois, 'returned again and again to the theme of the house as the progenitor of fear and anxiety (using) The trope of Freud's 'familiar unfamiliar', mapped onto the female body and the house...' (2012, p.4). Bourgeois repeatedly represents the home as both a sanctuary and site of women's oppression (Wye, 2017). For many with care and professional duties during lockdowns the home's function as sanctuary may have been overtaken by a sense of entrapment and the burden of its responsibilities. These are ideas I explore in the textile sculpture Work From Home, 2023 (Figure 5). The familiar motif of the house is rendered in barely-there tulle and stiff painters linen, representing both the invisibility of care work and the looming realities of house and home. Juxtaposed in this way the houses embody a multiplicity of readings of home and the work undertaken therein.

For mothers who are also artists the idea of being relegated to the home has meant both a devaluing of their care work in the ways outlined above as well as a denigration of their professional art practice. In the 1980s Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock described the hierarchy of the arts as diverging from fine art to craft during the Renaissance (1981, p.50). Parker and Pollock use the example of embroidery to show how, from this time onwards, there was an increasing amateurisation of art relegated to craft status. They write that:

a crucial factor in this development was the growing separation between the public and private spheres, the home and the place of work... the external world of work became the sphere of men exclusively, and the internal work of the family and the household was the proper business of the woman (p.60).

Thus, the products of the proper business of women were ascribed lower value than the undertakings of men. Still today the domestic as subject matter and the creativity inherent in mothering have largely remained undervalued and underacknowledged, their productive potential overlooked.



Figure 5: Zoe Freney, *Work From Home*, 2022, Tulle, painters linen, thread, Dimensions variable. Photo: Grant Hancock



Figure 6. Zoe Freney, Bending, 2021, digital video, 0:40:40.

As my own multiple shifts and roles collided in locked-down Motherspace, my strategy to overcome the pressures of multitasking was to adopt the identity of the mother-artist. Journalist Alicia Eler writes, 'For the mother who is also an artist, or for the artist who is also a mother, compartmentalizing the experience of motherhood away from art is one option; the other is to integrate it into the work itself' (2013). This integrated, adapted identity is embodied in the video still, *Bending*, 2021 (Figure 6), where the figure is artist and mother, exerting exaggerated effort in the absurd act of bending over backwards to pick up a child's toy. This image seeks to convey the potential for adaptation as well as its disproportionate demands on women and mothers. Adaptation is not natural and effortless but requires creative responses, that themselves need to be recognised and valued. Rather than taking for granted that women and mothers are naturally and intuitively suited to undertaking multiple roles

in the home space, this work depicts the physical realities and energetic costs of these demands. Defining myself as a mother-artist is a tactic that privileges my mother-knowledge and creativity within my art practice. While it would be wrong to think all these roles could be smoothly integrated, I reimagined this experience as field work for my PhD research project.

As studio painting again became an impossibility for me, as it had been when I was mothering babies and small children, I adopted instead more traditionally home based and feminised domestic practices, such as sewing and needlework, bringing aspects of mothers' overlooked, private experiences to attention. The resulting hand sewn garments, such as *Incubator*, 2022 (Figure 7), in turn bring the private spaces of the maternal body to public attention, to challenge accepted norms of motherhood. This 'egg suit' describes the difficulty and discomfort of nurturing dependent others. The suit is stiff, heavy and cumbersome to wear, the eggs fragile, delicate and precarious. Wearing the suit requires a level of physical and mental multitasking, thinking one's body in relation to the precious cargo. In some ways this describes the mental load of lockdown work and care.

Textile artist Ema Shin also recounts how she creatively adapted her practice during extended lockdown periods, moving away from producing large scale tapestries to instead make small, hand-held embroidered forms, 'that could easily be worked on for short periods' within her living room studio (Figure 8) (2020). These shifts in scale in Shin's practice remind us of the historical divisions of fine art and craft, and their gendered connotations. While Shin's adaptation was creative and responsive, it was also necessary – in order for her to continue practicing as a mother-artist, it was incumbent upon her to make smaller work, that would fit physically and metaphorically around the needs of her family.

It is vital that these shifts are not construed as a natural outcome but that they represent the compromise of a skilled artist whose practice was forced to inhabit shared space and time. Imaginative and creative adaptive responses to lockdown restrictions by mother-artists show the potential for the home to be re-evaluated as a site for creative potential. Curator and art historian Lisa Slade suggests hopefully that our COVID experiences will bring 'our domestic world, our intimate world ... closer [to the surface] than it has ever been' (2022). Optimistically she hopes this may lead to 'renewed power in the domestic,' an idea that avoids the sentimentalisation or idealisation of the home and recognises the multiple pressures of work and care.



Figure 7: Zoe Freney, *Incubator*, 2022, painter's linen, silk, shell buttons, thread, chicken eggs Photo: Sam Roberts



Figure 8: Ema Shin, from the series *Hearts of Absent Women* 2005-2022

Conclusion

COVID made clear the necessity to develop relational practices that embody an ethics of care, taking into account children and others in the suggestion of alternatives to neoliberal, individualised motherhood (Millner, 2019). Similarly, in seeking to maintain connections with and between students in online teaching models, I hope to have extended into my teaching practice an ethics of care, led by a matricentric feminist approach of compassion and hospitality (Ettinger, 2020) that endures beyond the pandemic period. Rather than conforming to ideals of intensive mothering, of succeeding in all roles at once, alone, these practices accept the potentials of adaptation on the condition that creativity and wellbeing are also considered. While I am back at work in the classroom and the studio, it is perhaps misguided to believe we have moved easily into a post-COVID period. We must be careful not to leave this pandemic period unexamined. Mothers who are also artists may be well-placed to challenge the ideologies of neoliberal motherhood and the intensification of these under COVID conditions. Mother-artists often draw upon embodied experiences of mothering in opposition to the patriarchal constructs of motherhood. Perhaps our teaching can similarly benefit from an examination of the potentials of creativity and relationality of the domestic sphere to counter the individualisation and isolation of students through online teaching and learning.

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