

Alternative Maternals

Lindner Project Space
Großbeerenstraße, Kreuzberg, Berlin
3–9 August 2014

ALTERNATIVE MATERNALS

Acknowledgements

Alternative Maternals is a visual arts exhibition that took place at the Lindner Project Space in Berlin in August 2014. Through a variety of expressions the show combined diverse lenses of absence, rejection, memory, legacy, scandal, autonomy, physical body and social media. Each work dismantled the collective characteristics by which the maternal is recognizable or known.

Curated by Laura González, Ph.D.

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Transart Institute

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With thanks to every person who has chosen to mother or not to mother; who has been an influence in shaping alternative meanings of the word maternal.

OTHER MOTHERS

Laura González

My mother wanted me to be a divorce lawyer. During my teenage years, I tested her patience with my willfulness and I suppose my super-human capacity to argue with her put the idea in her head that I should earn a living with what was perceived to be strong in my nature. My mother and I have never been close. Yet, there was a moment in my life when I have never understood someone so profoundly. My grandmother, her mother, was in hospital and, from her sick bed, kept nagging my mum for no apparent reason. Only my mum (not her two sisters) was the recipient of this insistent henpecking. It was constant, disapproving, damning. That my mother chose to confide in me, tell me her worries and fears, surprised me, but not as much as my own patient answer to her, my care and my unlimited love. I recognized what she was going through and was sorry for her suffering. This shared moment gave me insight: despite our differences and our distance, my mother is forever inscribed in me.

To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, one is not born, but rather becomes, a mother.¹ In this becoming, an invitation to alternatives and possibilities is apparent. There are no ideals to real motherhood, despite what the manuals say. Part of the reason for this is that there are many sides to motherhood, for example, pregnancy, birth, lactation, miscarriage and loss, love, disappointment, projection, sexuality, as well as womanhood. 'Mothers, like analysts, can be good or not good enough; some can and some cannot carry the baby over from relating to usage'.² The maternal is biological (that infamous clock), embodied, affective, experiential, social and cultural. It is visible and invisible at the same time; a balancing act. It is political too, for the demands of mothering are at odds with those of paid work. Art, a realm of practice adept at showing conflict, is the perfect site to articulate the fall between the real and ideal mothers, to create new models of knowledge despite the challenge of juggling both mothering and studio practices. The works in this exhibition are a direct engagement with sons and daughters, mothers and grandmothers, or their absence. Most of the pieces are created in the interstices between outside employment and caring; some while mothering, others while grieving. The five artists in *Alternative Maternals* focus on the political through activism (and artivism), on the relational in the experience of engaging with either a fiction or an actuality of the maternal bond. Through their experiences, they have had to re-make themselves.

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, London: Vintage, 2010 (1949).

2 Donald Woods Winnicott, 'The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications' in *Playing and Reality*, Abingdon and NY: Routledge, 2005 (1971), pp. 115–127. The quote is from page 119.

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What is new about their proposition is their presentation (rather than re-presentation) of the maternal as art.³ This is about mothers but also beyond them, into the act of mothering, into the universal maternal.⁴

Miriam Schaer does not have children. Her previous work, *Babies (Not) on Board* explored psychosocial aspects of making this choice. She embroidered statements such as 'your not having children was the biggest disappointment in our lives' on garments for babies and displayed them on hyper-realistic dolls while inscribing her own body through photographic self-portraiture. For this exhibition, Schaer addresses motherhood from another angle: her own mother Ida, the witnessing of her ageing, and Ida's relationship to one of the hyper-realistic dolls she named Tabitha. The work is intimate, considerate but also heart-wrenching. The maternal is here transposed, ambiguous, and the daughter takes care of the mother. Yet, the mother does not let go of her care. How could she?

Isabel and Luca Dudley Pecora (b. 2000 and 2003) are the daughters of **Deborah Dudley**. The three of them together have created *Brain Candy*, a series of conversations raising issues about being brought up in a culture where an adolescent's daily image consumption is rivalled only by the consumption of sugar in her American diet. *Brain Candy* is a celebration of identity, self-image and self-representation, while critically examining portraiture and the link to one's image outside oneself. Educating children is complicated, manifold, but one gets the sense in Dudley's work that listening, giving space and time to the other, is key to nurturing and thus, to self-actualisation and agency. Both generations learn from each other co-creating these works.

In her video piece, **Linda Duvall** lies down in the thick Saskatoon winter snow for her son, who is not there (or physically anywhere). Her mother-love and her mother-loss are present through ritual, place, landscape, sublimated in a visually arresting film that has cadence and slows your breathing. In her work, words fail, only the enormity of the earth, the actual land they shared when he was alive, can provide some consolation, an attachment to what is, and will forever be, absent. After all, some consider the Earth a mother too. The film demands time, compassion, patience and, in return, gives serenity, guidance. The mother-son bond at its best.

Jeca Rodríguez-Colón also explores mother-son contact. In her chaotic, crazy installation, the mother (and the woman) is pulled into many different roles, broken into pieces that function separately but have to make sense together. She is dependent and autonomous at the same time.

³ This follows closely on Natalie Loveless' proposition in *New Maternalisms*, 'a weekend of performance, performance-based video, artist talks, and community events exploring the materiality of motherhood', at FADO Performance Art Centre in Toronto, from March 23 to 25, 2012. See, Natalie Loveless (curator), *New Maternalisms*, available from <http://www.performanceart.ca/upload/NM_booklet_v4.pdf> accessed 16.06.14. Although the five artists in this exhibition are women, we do acknowledge that motherhood is a role and, as such, not confined to the feminine.

⁴ To paraphrase a well-known feminist sentiment or slogan: all of us have or had mothers and some of us are one.

When she is there she cleans, she cooks, she cares, she consoles, she organises, she shops, she labels, she plans, she carries, she takes, she brings back. When she is not there, she makes herself present and does her tasks in advance. She creates. In her piece, the direct relation between the labour of the artist and that of the mother becomes evident, especially in the performative element, *Desde Adentro*. Her disarray is organised, discerning and very systematic. The work works; it has to.

Rodríguez-Colón's piece contrasts with **Valerie Walkerdine's** screendance filmic installation and performance, where a lyrical neuroticism draws the viewer into the depths of a tie marked by the female line. It explores how the perpetual work of women in a context of insecurity transmits itself to the body of a small child, who feels it but does not know its provenance. It is conveyed in an endless dance, a tangle of movement, a snatch of song. Although nothing can be brought back to life from the Underworld, where the Shades continue their ceaseless movement, can they be freed enough to let the child live? Her work shows the relational complexities of inter-generational family connections where Antigone's predicaments are embodied and re-lived in a visceral way, as an expression of *extimacy* – intimacy outside.⁵ In the skin of the film and the mouth (from where her voice emanates), organs that connects inside to outside world, we descend somewhere neurotic where we are allowed to be. That's all the child asks.

Being a mother or someone's child, as you can see and will know (for we all have a mother, known or unknown), is no simple task. There is an abundance of advice on appropriate bedtimes, how to relate to your daughter's first boyfriend, your mother-in-law, what to do with an Electra complex. This is helpful material but it is not the whole story. Through visual expression, the women in *Alternative Maternals* give sense to this bond as mothers, daughters and artists. They implicate the viewer, inscribing her in a confidence, as my mother did when giving me the gift of her questioning, her suffering, the finding of her place within her own mother. Women, men, sons and daughters; together, we become, bound in the maternal.

Laura González
Berlin, August 2014

Laura González (Spain/UK) is an artist and writer. When she is not following the footsteps of Freud, Lacan and Marx with her camera, she teaches postgraduate students. Her current project explores knowledge and the body of the hysteric through film, dance, photography and text. She is the co-editor of a book entitled *Madness, Women and the Power of Art* (InterDisciplinary Press, Oxford, 2013) to which she contributed a work in collaboration with Eleanor Bowen. www.lauragonzalez.co.uk

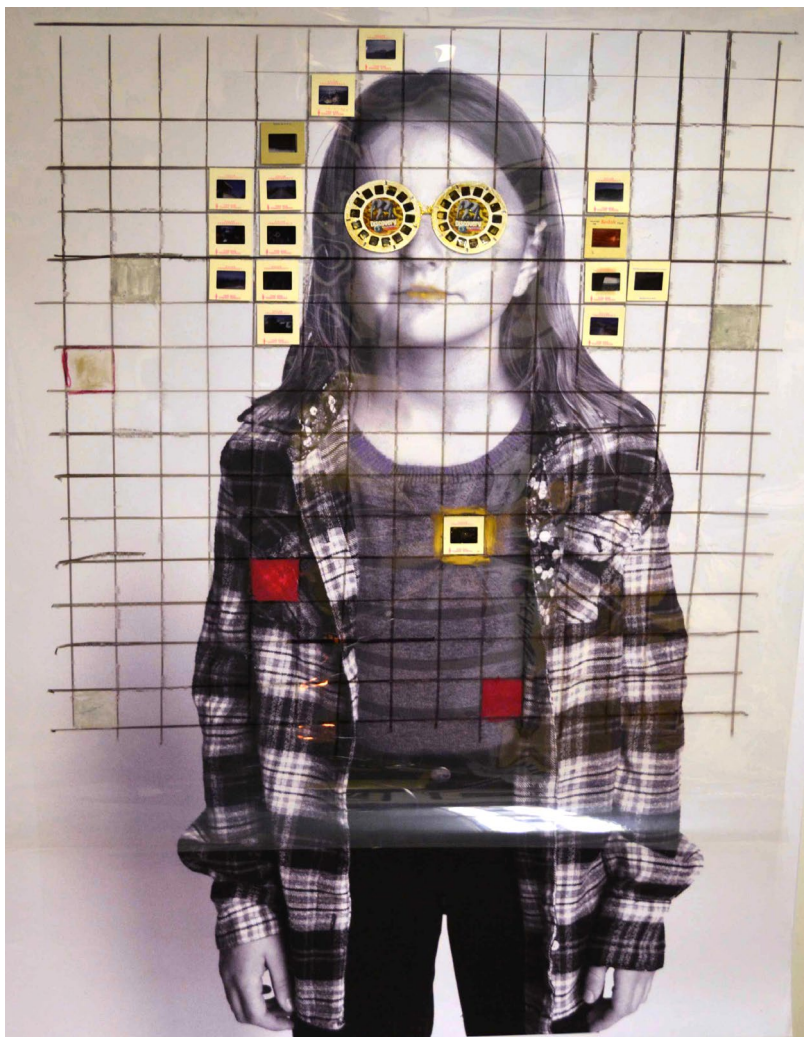
⁵ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60*, trans. by Dennis Porter, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 139. Winnicott also developed the concept of the *inside outside* which Alison Bechdel contextualized in her graphic memoir *Are you my Mother?* London: Jonathan Cape, 2012.

Deborah Dudley

Brain Candy

Examining personal relationships to photography is the focus of my practice and a way to involve others in a conversation about the complex power, manipulation and magic of photography in our lives. Using photographic portraiture, video and mixed media my work seeks to initiate dialogues on social, political, and personal areas of interest. My current body of work is the result of conversations and collaborations with my daughters, Luca, age 10 and Isabel, age 14, and their peers. As American adolescents, they consume millions of still and moving images each year in advertising, marketing and entertainment. While digesting hours of media, they are simultaneously responsible for producing and publishing millions of images narrating their daily lives through social media. Understanding the dynamics of images as cultural candy for the brain as well as deconstructing the mechanics of image making, and how it informs identity and perception of self, has become a critical conversation in navigating the intensely photographic saturation of our lives.

Deborah Dudley (USA) was born in St. Louis, the fourth of five children. After receiving her BFA in photography and BA in Art History from Washington University in St. Louis in 1989, Dudley worked in diverse disciplines and locations including Cairo, Limassol, Berlin, Chicago, San Francisco, and New York City before moving to Potsdam, NY where she lives with her spouse and two children. www.deborahdudley.com



Deborah Dudley and Luca Dudley Pecora
Brain Candy 001, 2014

Digital output, plastic, acrylic,
oil pastels, and found objects
154 x 112 cm

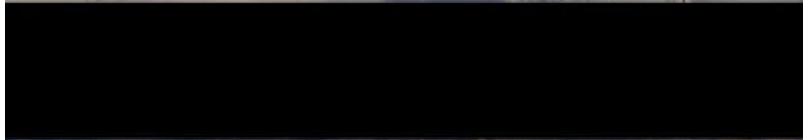
Linda Duvall

Walking with the Trees that We Planted Together

Unlike the art historical version of the sublime with roaring waterfalls and dramatic vistas, I focus on a barren sandy and windy section of the Canadian prairie. As I wander this land, I reveal echoes of my complex and sometimes painful relationship with this place. My videos are absent of narrative, but within the slowness of the unfolding performative gestures, one gets hints of the intensity of my complicated history with this place.

For example, in one action, I push familiar rainbow colored birthday candles into a crusty snow surface and then struggle to light them in the cold. Most of the candles eventually begin to burn, flickering wildly in the wind, while one wonders when each will be snuffed out by natural or other forces.

Linda Duvall (Canada) has completed degrees in Sociology and English (Carleton University) and Visual Arts (OCADU and University of Michigan), and is a Professional Affiliate at University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Duvall has had recent exhibitions in Shanghai, Toronto, Montreal, Lendava (Slovenia), San Miguel, Guatemala City, Regina and Barcelona. www.lindaduvall.com



Linda Duvall
Walking with the Trees that We Planted Together, 2014

HD Digital Video
(still image)

Jeca Rodríguez-Colón

A Sneak Into My Maternal Room

A Sneak Into My Maternal Room is an installation piece where the different realities, dualities and dichotomies of my maternal experiences collide. It includes objects that represent my relationship with my post-partum body, the breast-feeding versus bottle-feeding dilemma, my maternal manifesto and other elements related to my maternal labor. To complement the installation I will perform *Desde Adentro* a new dance piece that explores my kinaesthetic and emotional relationship with the chaos of my maternal room.

Jeca Rodríguez-Colón (Puerto Rico) is a dancer and choreographer whose work is connected to different aspects of the maternal kinesthetic language in space and the politics that surrounds it. She holds a B.A. from Hunter College in New York City, with concentrations in Dance as well as in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. She is an alumna of Hemispheric Institute's EMERG-ENYC initiative and is part of EmergeLab at Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX). www.jecarodriguezcolon.com



Jeca Rodríguez-Colón
Because.....2013

Plaster, slip, hand-embroidered
maternity bra, cloth diaper
Dimensions variable.

Miriam Schaer

(w)hole

(w)hole is a meditation on my 89-year-old-mother's passage through dementia employing photographs and possessions she found meaningful. The photos show my mother, a former maternity nurse, and a realistic doll to which she became attached. Symbolizing her increasing confusion, I altered the photos by stapling, sewing, lacing, piercing and peeling the prints, as well as by slicing some apart and weaving them back together. The prints are mounted in thrift-shop frames of a type my mother always liked and rest atop a dresser purchased from a Berlin flea market. The drawers display in a disordered state objects representing possessions she valued.

(w)hole is also an exploration of the relationship in which children of ageing parents increasingly find themselves, as their parents live beyond the point they can care for themselves. The parents become, like small children, the responsibility of their own children, now adults.

The work of Miriam Schaer (USA) work has been in numerous exhibitions including the Museum of Art and Design in NY. She is a NYFA Artist Fellow and is included in the Sackler Center's Feminist Art Base at the Brooklyn Museum. She is a Lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Book and Paper MFA Program at Columbia College Chicago. www.miriamschaer.com



Miriam Schaer
(w)hole # 5, 2014

Digital print, staples, found frame
12.7 x 10.16 cm

Valerie Walkerdine

The Maternal Line

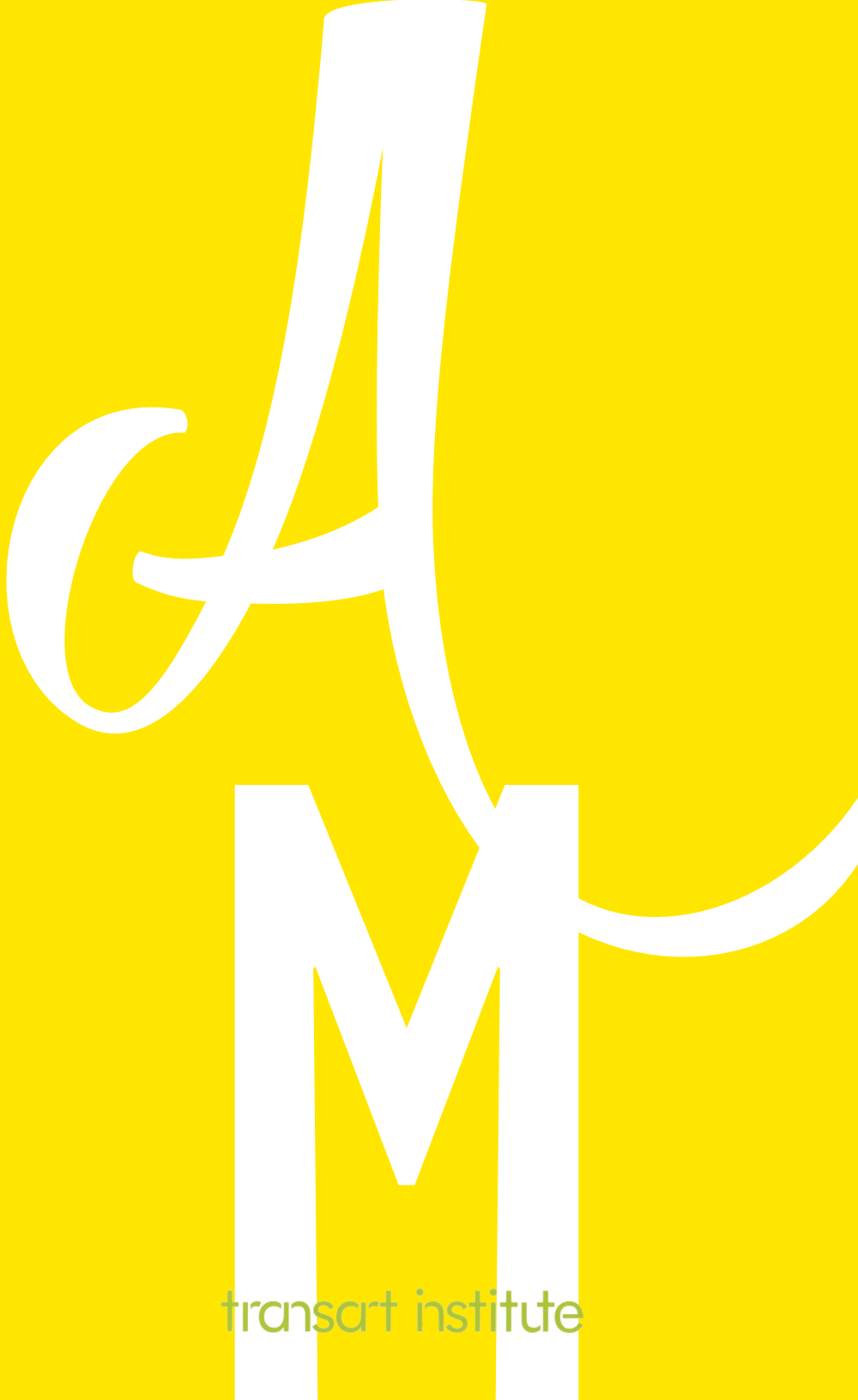
What is it like to only feel half alive? Why did the previous generations feel this way and what did they transmit down the maternal line? *The Maternal Line* is a video installation and performance engaging with the ways in which traumatic experiences are passed down the maternal line and experienced in the present generation. Set in the underworld, the work seeks to understand how experiences are conveyed to us in ephemeral ways through the body. Showing dancers, the video conveys a feeling of a dark space and is accompanied by a live performance, using an extended vocal range, based on the work of the Roy Hart Theatre.

Valerie Walkerdine (UK) is an artist who works across media, combining film, video, installation, performance and drawing. She has exhibited in the UK and overseas, having been a recipient of the New Contemporaries award in the UK. She is also a psychologist and cultural theorist, currently working on intergenerational transmission. www.valeriewalkerdine.com



Valerie Walkerdine
The Maternal Line, 2014

Video installation with performance
(detail)



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