



## Interview with Elena Marchevska

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Interview conducted by Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee

Interview edited by Georgina Biggs, Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee

Elena Marchevska (MK/UK) is an artist and researcher that investigates the relationship between performance art, migration and environmental issues in the contemporary European context. She retrospectively and selectively writes about events that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a particular cultural identity. Her practice-based research is rooted in lived experience and she often uses (auto) ethnography and video essay methodologies as part of her working process. She recently finished the work on the two-year research project 'Finding Home' (2018-2020), a collaboration between researchers from Canada, Australia and UK.<sup>1</sup> Her collaborative digital conversation piece 'Third nature', was recently commissioned by performing.borders and Live Art Development Agency (LADA).<sup>2</sup> This piece is a series of short digital media-based reflections on lived precarious migrant experience, patched onto bigger discussions of the migration, feminism and care. Elena co-edited *Maternal in creative work: Intergenerational discussions on motherhood and art*, commissioned by Routledge Gender studies series.<sup>3</sup> This edited collection presents a novel understanding of the links between maternal experience and creativity.

[www.eleamarcevska.com](http://www.eleamarcevska.com)

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.projectfindinghome.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://performingborders.live/performingborderslive20/>.

<sup>3</sup> Marchevska, E., & Walkerdine, V. (Eds.). (2019). *The Maternal in Creative Work: Intergenerational Discussions on Motherhood and Art*. Abingdon: Routledge.

**Emily:** We are undertaking a study of the maternal through an analysis of performance, what impact has being a mother had on your artistic practice?

**Elena:** I started looking at parental themes in my work even before I became a mother. This is connected to my interest in working on migration. It's an exploration of my own history as someone who has migrated. When I was doing my MA studies in Chicago, I started a project that was based on the family history of my great-grandfather who also used to live in Chicago. I wanted to explore this very interesting inter-generational link. From the family stories I knew that he had been in America and that he came back and started the family in Macedonia, but I didn't know the details.

**Lena:** Did you ever know him?

**Elena:** No, no, I didn't. He died before I was born. He was the father of my grandmother, my maternal grandmother. At the same time I got the scholarship to Chicago my grandmother started to get dementia. She had a stroke and a very rapid onset of dementia. She gave me this whole box of documents and images from him. It was almost as if she was saying, "Oh, you have to go and find where he was. He was so sad that he never managed to go back, and now you have to go back." She had clearly held onto the box for very long time. At the time, because I was very young, I was a bit like, "Oh, what's this?" (*laughs*). I didn't know how to deal with these materials.

**Lena:** How old were you?

**Elena:** I was twenty-one. I mean, not totally young, but still young, especially to deal with those inter-generational things.

When I finally went there it was partially due to nostalgia as well as because of being away from home for the first time, being somewhere very far away for a very long period of time, that I started to explore the stories and the documents that he had left. My first project is me looking for these kinds of images or places and addresses that were disclosed in

the letters. I was looking at what was in those images and then finding what was there now.

It was as if I was having a dialogue with both him and my grandmother. I was also uncovering some very painful things from some of the letters. For example, the fact that he had only gone back to get married because at that time it was the custom to get married with someone from your country. I think that that is a common thing still actually for some countries (*laughs*).

Then the Balkan wars started, the wars that happened in the Balkan region between the first and the second world war. He couldn't travel - even though they had all the documents. I have a full visa document of his and my great-grandmother's. So, I suppose, they gave up in a way.

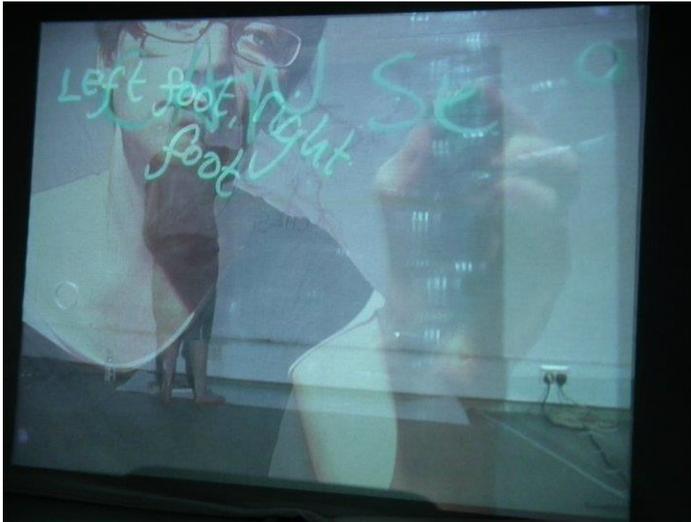
**Lena:** So they were supposed to go back to Chicago?

**Elena:** They were supposed to return. So, in a way, that kind of determines my own history and my own existence.

**Lena:** When was he in Chicago?

**Elena:** At that time there was a big wave of people coming from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was in the immigrant wave after the first world war, or maybe even during the first world war. There was that big wave of people leaving because of the wars. He left with some cousins and stayed there for ten years. When he came back he was older and ready to get married. He was ten years older than his wife.

That was my first very visceral exploration of this connection to places that you know but that you don't know; explored through someone else. It was about that inter-generational link that you establish. That became very important to me again when I became a mother because Angelina was only one when we moved to the UK. For me, the move was again very visceral. I was twenty-seven, I'd just had a baby, and I came here to do my PhD. I thought, "Oh yeah, I can do it. It's fine". Then I realized that it's a completely different country, a very different culture, that I had a baby, and that we were very poor. But I had to do this practice-based PhD.



Marchevska, E. and. Nichol, C. (2011-2012)  
*Dia*. Performed at: Circuit Festival De Montfort University,  
Leicester, 02-03 June 2011.

landscape of Northampton as foreigners who belong and don't belong in that landscape. Since then that became a bigger kind of motif for me, to continue that exploration with the children. Then I had Marina as well. I wanted to really explore language, movement, and imagery, and how the maternal entails this kind of responsibility towards your children but also towards your culture and towards the culture where you are building a new home.

**Emily:** Has that feeling changed? It's a really broad question, but I guess it hangs on whether this feels like home to you. Also, where home is for you? Presumably, as your children grow up in the UK, this is definitely home for them.

**Elena:** If you are interested, I can send you a couple of videos in which we explore language formation because the children are bilingual. I was always very interested in their identity formation as well as my own identity transformation. I think that what is home for me is a very difficult question because, since 2002, it was hard to feel that I have a place. Now I'm probably most at home here because for the last five years we based ourselves in London. This is the place where we have been steady for five years. So this is probably home, or what we can call home for now.

There is a video that I have with Marina who was two at that time and Angelina who was five, Marina is very young and just forming language.

I had been encouraged by Jane Bacon, who is now the head of theatre and dance at Chichester University, to explore my maternal experience. So, in a way, this completely transformed my practice and my PhD project as well. I started to do a lot of walks with Angelina to map the city. At that time we used to live in Northampton. So we were mapping the city but also mapping our bodies within the

I ask the questions in Macedonian and she answers in English. We talk a bit about who we think we are. She says, "Oh, I think I'm British and Makedonski" (*laughs*). So you can see this dual identity in her. And then we have another video which I filmed when Marina was four and Angelina was seven in which both of them say, "Oh, we are British but we come from Macedonia". So there is a change of narrative as well in what they are saying, for me that's a long-term exploration. I don't know when or if I will feel it's ready to show to a wider audience. But I think that it's also exploring different levels of encountering the language, and I think that slightly comes from Lisa Baraitser's concept of encountering the maternal.<sup>4</sup> For me, it's encountering the maternal language through the experience of my children. I don't know if that makes sense.

**Lena:** Absolutely. I find it really fascinating because you were talking about Chicago and thinking about Jennifer Verson's work around *Migrant Artists Mutual Aid*. She is also from Chicago. She works with refugees and has her own story of migration as well. I thought it was interesting that there is the notion of Chicago coming through in both stories. Also when you were talking about your grandfather I am reminded of my great grandmother. She married a guy who was twenty years older than her who also came back from America. It's kind of an arrival of a person...

**Elena:** Of the man.

**Lena:** Of the migrant who came back. He was Croatian but he came back from America and was looking to find a bride back home in the village.

**Elena:** A bride. Yes, yes. So it seems that this is generational as well. There are some interesting stories to think about.

**Lena:** I was conversing with Jennifer and what we were talking about these notions of migrations and how much that influences your identity. Jennifer was also talking about small migrations that happen within the city and how big they are. For example, within Liverpool itself you have migrations in terms of race and interracial marriages and that's a different

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<sup>4</sup> Baraitser, L. (2008) *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. Abingdon: Routledge.

kind of migration but it stays within the boundaries of Liverpool - within the city. So what is migration? It is an interesting concept.

**Emily:** It interests me in terms of Welshness too. I'm English, married to an English person, living in Wales, and raising Welsh children, even though we don't speak Welsh. But we're both learning Welsh in order to catch up with our Welsh-speaking children. So they have the language of the place that they were born, and we don't.

**Elena:** This reminds me of everything that we're capturing, as well as the discrepancies of the language. It is a bit about how learning passes through the generations. That's very interesting for me in terms of what that intergenerational learning will be because I feel that we learn a lot about this culture through our children.

Being exposed to the new level of understanding of class relationships and the subtleties of language, nursery rhymes as well that talk about bigger cultural and political issues, really helped us to position ourselves as immigrants within the city. I think that maybe it's easier in London because it's a place where there are a lot of inter-connections. There are different cultures here already, even though the Macedonian community is very small. We know a couple of people (*laughs*) but really they're all dispersed throughout London. But there are bigger communities that you can easily get into.

So feeling that dependency was, for me, very interesting. I'd also be very interested in this collection of different elements with regards to the language and how language challenges and forms the maternal. I can record, for example, words and pronunciations of words spoken by both myself in English and then my children in Macedonian, and explore those grammatical modifications that allow the language to expand and change in their eyes.

**Lena:** My children all being born in Liverpool they're completely Scouse. My English is always marked by the accent and theirs isn't. I did this performance *Medea/Mothers' Clothes* (2004)<sup>5</sup> years ago as a part of my

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://lenasimic.art/artsprojects/autobiographical-solo-performances/medeamothers-clothes/>.

PhD in which I wanted to explore how you're marked through language. Because the moment you open your mouth you are asked...

**Elena:** Where are you from?

**Lena:** Yes, because obviously, just on the way I look, I blend in. You pass because you're assumed British.

**Elena:** Yes, yes. Because we're white.

**Lena:** Exactly. But then you speak in this way and suddenly it's "Where are you from? Why are you here?" etc. All these conversations you'd have in a taxi, where you have to define...

**Elena:** Who you are.

**Lena:** Yes, and justify why you are here.

**Elena:** For me that's very interesting, those levels of whiteness and the assumptions that come with that. Especially because I'm here and yet in a way we are Eastern Europeans. We have a slightly different connotation in the British context. The question is often who are the Eastern Europeans, what is their role? Especially now after Brexit. So I feel that that's quite challenging and I feel that it is played out on many levels for our children as well. I mean with their surnames and different characters that they try to play in their lives.

**Lena:** That's an interesting take on the performance of motherhood and maternal subjectivity.

**Elena:** Thinking about that moment when you the mother and you the performed mother meet on stage makes me remember this piece that I developed as part of the PhD project.<sup>1</sup> I made this conscious decision to leave my children then come and perform this piece about the maternal. The piece was about all the maps that we developed of the walks across Northampton. The buggy was on stage and different domestic objects too.

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<sup>1</sup> Marchevska, Elena The Screen as a Site of Division and Encounter., 2012. PhD thesis, University of Northampton.  
<https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.588272>.

## Waiting



### Microprojects in proximity of walking and waiting

**Stage:** Waiting

**Topics:** Mapping; Sousveillance; Foreign; Motherhood; Divisions; Typologies;

**Tools:** Mobile phone camera, iMac

**Software:** Final Cut, Photoshop

**Method:** Recording my still moments every day with a mobile phone camera - reprocessing the data and creating documentation of the still moments - diary reflections on the stillness and movement

**Theoretical overview:** In my work, a typology is a specific type of series concerned with autobiographical exploration in which the elements have equal weight and no fixed sequence-in a sense, the pictures and the videos are modular. Through this method the personal blends with the political in my work. The micro-politics of walking and standing with my children are mapped onto the macro-politics of foreignness and mothering. In an almost diagrammatic fusion of the personal with larger cultural meanings, the separations and the black, negative space in my imagery and video allude to the border as an event in my life. This contrasts with the self-images that depart from traditional portrait formats, which use narrative, retrospection and historicisation. Creating the photographs and videos this way, I did not simply record past events, I both literally and metaphorically reframed these events.

*Marchevska, E. (2009) Microprojects in proximity of walking and waiting*

One question that came out after the performance was, "Oh, so where is the child?". That immediately made me question that, yes, we're performing the maternal but where is the child? The absence of the child became so big. That was the first question that came from the audience: "Where is the child?" I had always questioned this, the hard work of performing the maternal, with or without with the child. This is serious for me. It's very interesting as well because the children are completely peripheral. They're kind of like a necessary evil. I mean the audience shows no emotions towards them, the audience don't even talk to the children (*laughs*). This kind of performance is very much focused on that kind of maternal experience and...

**Lena:** ...and the bad maternal as well.

**Elena:** And the bad, bad maternal experience but also a celebration of that

period of you being a mother. I did another performance for a festival which was organized in Leicester by Helena Goldwater.<sup>2</sup> She invited me for the first festival and I collaborated with a dancer, Charlotte Nichol. We did this performance called *Dia* (2016) which was about the mother who is the wanderer. The one who wanders and mothers between different cultures. Charlotte Nichol is a single mother and she talked a bit about what it means to wander between and around these idealised roles of the mother. I talked a bit about how I also meander between what the culture where I come from determines or thinks a mother should be, and the culture that I live in now. I spoke about how I struggle with those stereotypes. We had Marina in that performance, who was six months and was performing with us on stage. We did it twice, once with her and once without. She had started crawling, she was constantly escaping. The focus then became so much on the child that it had taken away from the maternal. The maternal became somehow peripheral. So this question you pose about performance of motherhood on stage is for me the question of what a performance without children means, and then what it means when you have the children in the space. For me as a performer it's very difficult to separate the emotions when the child is on a stage with me.

**Emily:** So does it become more real when the child is on stage with you?

**Elena:** Yes.

**Emily:** So it perhaps stops being about performing motherhood and instead you are just in the business of mothering.

**Elena:** Right. Yes, yes.

**Lena:** I have just remembered now when I was performing my solo performance, *Joan Trial* (2005). It had little to do with me being a mother, it was more kind of me dealing with being a teenager. Neal and Gabriel had come to watch me. They were sitting in the first row and they were maybe, six and four years old, and I just completely lost it for a moment. I got really overwhelmed because there they were staring at me on stage.

**Emily:** Have your children seen you perform about them?

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://circuitfestival.yolasite.com>.

**Elena:** No, except that paper that the girls did with me at Leeds Beckett University for 'With Children: The Child as Collaborator and Performer' (2016) symposium. They were with me on stage but that was performed more as a performative paper and done together with them. It was a discussion with them about feminism. They are completely fascinated by that element of me being a performer and me being the mother. There was a very interesting article circulating recently about women finding pictures of their mothers when they were younger and inventing these stories about their mothers. I can feel that my children are aware of these other parts of me that they don't know. They also know that I'm developing this archive of documents from us and, for example, Angelina asks now, "So when are you going to show this? How is this going to be shown? If I don't want this to be shown, are you going to?" So they are starting to understand what I'm doing and how this becomes a bigger platform for other people too. This goes into the ethics in the way of asking, "Who is the author in this kind of work? Do we have authorship over the children?"

**Emily:** And whose stories are we telling?

**Lena:** It's interesting in terms of ethics for the future. With my *Medea/Mothers' Clothes*, I still wouldn't want Neal and Gabriel to see it. It is too much. I wasn't thinking about what I was doing for the future.

**Elena:** I mean that was my idea with that piece where I said the audience asks, "Where are the children?" There I talk a bit about that ambivalence of the maternal as well. I talk about how I had made a mistake bringing my child here into insecurity, to this precarious life because of visas. You know, we were not sure if maybe tomorrow something will happen and then we will have to pack and leave. By that time, Angelina was five and we had moved six times, so I was questioning that level of precarity as a young mother/artist not bringing in a lot of money and living in these conditions. So it was me questioning my own decisions. There was a kind of ambivalence in the performance that can still be easily misinterpreted by children, especially if they are not at that age where...

**Emily:** It's interesting that we talk about these mother-children ethical

relations, but we didn't talk about the relation to relaying your great-grandfather's stories. So there is an ethical care we feel we have to consider concerning the children. But we don't seem to feel the same ethical responsibility for other people whose tales we're recounting or who we are related to in some way.

**Elena:** I write a bit about that in a reflective article for *Studies in the Maternal*.<sup>3</sup> For a while I felt a bit angry with my grandmother for leaving me these stories of my grandfather because I'm not the only grandchild. There are other grandchildren who could have shared that responsibility with me, finding out that actually he didn't have an easy life. Going to Chicago, charting a new territory, and really trying but having to live in very poor areas such as Greektown. He probably worked very long hours. There were these images with him and another woman. I didn't want to believe that there might be other stories. I had this innocence, but all these things started to really make me question, "Did he have someone else as well? Maybe this whole story that we have is false. Maybe he didn't return because maybe there was something, or someone else".

**Lena:** Questioning your own existence, because if he'd returned, maybe you wouldn't have existed.

**Elena:** I still sometimes question this. I still have those photos and I still feel a bit uneasy about that history. I feel a bit angry with my grandmother as well because she'd been keeping them for so long and not asking him when he was alive. But I think this obsessive memorising comes from a very, very recent age whereas back then a lot of things were somehow left ... (*laughs*). I don't know. Maybe it was a bit like the context in Macedonia as well. I think they lived in a very small provincial town.

**Emily:** Also living through tumultuous historical events; extraordinary events.

**Lena:** This kind of responsibility towards our grandparents is very interesting. I remember when we were writing our maternal manifesto and there was a bit you, Emily, wrote about your

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<sup>3</sup>Marchevska, E. (2016) 'The Place Where We Were Last Together: Encountering the Border from Within', *Studies in the Maternal*, 8 (1): 3.

grandmother.

**Emily:** Yeah, and I then decided to take it out.

**Lena:** I loved it and I really wanted it to stay there. But you said “no, I can't” and it was deleted.

**Elena:** Yet they are stories that need to be told. Last year, because of this project that I did with LADA on displacement and privilege, I was invited by the University of Zadar to present a paper. It was a conference on migration. It was in November and there were no flights to Split or other cities close to it. So we had to fly to Zagreb and then take a car journey to Zadar. We decided to go with the family because Zadar is very pretty and we wanted to have an extended weekend. There was some work on the roads and we were re-routed through some villages that are now in Croatia, in Krajina, on the border with Bosnia. There were still signs of all the violence that had happened there during the wars. We were driving there and we started to feel a bit like this wasn't what we expected because it's twenty something years after the wars. The kids got very shocked actually and they were like, "What happened here? Why are these houses burned?" So we were, "Ok, so now we have to have this conversation". I mean, we were very young when that happened as well but, it's a part of our history. So we said to the children, "Okay, we will talk about it". We arrived in Zadar and when we sat down in the evening Marko said, "Do you know, I have never talked with my parents about the wars." And I said, "You know what, me neither." We realised we had never talked about it. Somehow we just get on with it. We know that happened, but we carry on. We know there were refugees and horrible things but we never actually talked about it.

Over the summer was the first time I asked my parents about the memories that they have about the wars, the start of the Yugoslav wars. So I wrote down these five key memories that I have. I remember there were some protests in Split, and then there was a soldier who was killed, and after that very quickly the whole thing started. Then we also had some very personal stories because during the wars, as you know Lena, there were a lot of weapons that kind of came to civilians in a way. I had

a cousin who was killed by another child because these weapons were being kept by parents at home. These were very early memories. Also we couldn't leave because my Aunt still lived in Montenegro and the borders were closed. So, all of these stories are in a way stories about the wars.

We talked with my parents and I asked about these five precise events. For me this was very interesting in terms of inter-generational stories and the maternal, and how much I tell my own children. Then the maternal in terms of my own mum who was very protective. She's like, "Yeah, I remember that, yeah, I kind of..." (*laughs*). She willingly contributed, although she was guarding me. Then, for half of the questions, my dad was like, "I don't remember. No, you remembered that wrong. No, it wasn't like that. No, I don't remember doing that " (*laughs*). It is about how we tell these stories, how much we hold, and how a part of that language is also lost through of the loss of memories.

**Lena:** I was in Belgrade. My friend Tina and I went to the Museum of Revolution, Tito's grave too. I went to school with Tina. We were in this museum and the eighties telly came on, and it was that language, the language of the news, the socialist news that we had everyday at 19:30. It was suddenly there. The sound of it felt just like listening to your childhood.

**Elena:** I think it is also about how certain decisions were made for me too. I remembered one question and that led me to lay out the key memories that I have from that period. One that I remember clearly was about the referendum in Macedonia to become independent from Yugoslavia, because all Yugoslav Republics went through referendums. As a child I remember being very confused "What we are...What we are not?" etc. because previously all of us in Yugoslavia claimed that we are Yugoslavian. I mean I knew that I was ethnically Macedonian, but we were Yugoslavian and that was a very big thing.

**Lena:** Absolutely.

**Elena:** I remember asking my parents about it saying, "But why do you vote now for us to be Macedonian? Why we can't still be Yugoslavian?" and

then my Dad being very nervous. If we consider what was happening back then, of course he was nervous. I'm now at the age my parents were when that happened. So for me it's interesting to look back at that now having two young children of my own, you have to think a bit about what it would mean - losing all security. I mean, it is like Brexit times one hundred. At the age of forty to forty-five years old you could lose everything that you worked for. My father also worked for a Croatian company that closed after the referendum so he lost his job as well. When I interviewed him he said, "No, you never asked us about the referendum" (*laughs*). "I don't remember you asking, you were very young, you didn't know what was happening." So I was like. "No, Dad, I remember asking you and you saying to me that's our decision, you don't know what this is about". So, you feel that somebody else made the decision for you, a decision that kind of determined...

**Lena:** I am so angry at my parents and at that whole generation, the whole break up of Yugoslavia. I have so much anger and whenever we talk I can argue, argue, argue, argue, because I just can't process it, to be honest. How they fucked up all our lives.

**Elena:** Which is what is happening here a bit about that generation who voted Brexit.

**Emily:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Elena:** In a way I feel like that's a similar thing to making these decisions that will impact younger people. It's very important for our generation to actually talk about it. And to bring in the perspective of the maternal in relation to this because that decision, that referendum, actually affected where I am now, which is somewhere else. My children grow up in a different country. It might have happened either way, but I know that our generation are the brain drain generation. I think that eighty per cent of my friends live abroad. A kind of generation that really actively sought to leave because it was so devastating to be in these countries. I mean now it's slightly better, in the region at least. You should read this amazing book *Yugoslavia, My Fatherland (Jugoslavija, moja domovina)* by a

Slovenian writer Goran Vojnovic who is of our generation.<sup>4</sup> One of the only writers who tried to provide a precise account of what our generation feels about the war. I read it in Macedonian. He's a theatre director as well.

**Lena:** I feel very much connected to my grandparents. They were the ones that were building Yugoslavia, not that I have any delusions about Yugoslavia, but at least the idea was something else. It didn't work out, clearly.

**Elena:** Yes (*laughs*).

**Lena:** But they were socialist ideals. This is where my parents and I argue the most because I'm so anti-nationalistic.

**Elena:** For me nationalism is the worst too, but mainly because we went through that as children. I also have arguments with my parents, for example, they always bring flags to my girls. I'm like, "Why bring these?"

**Emily:** What does nationalism mean to you then? For me, nationalism is a difficult term because it can mean a certain sense of xenophobic identity, which is perhaps the nationalism you might be talking about and that we're dealing with Brexit for example. But then, it could also mean something around the small nation asserting its rights, which, for me, is quite a positive thing.

**Elena:** In terms of cultural identity, as you said with the Welsh, I think that it's amazing that they now teach Welsh in schools and that the language is not lost, that we are still aware of the culture; a specific culture in Wales that is not completely absorbed by the English. But I feel, at least in the region where I come from, that it's like this kind of ethno-turbofolk version of nationalism which is very much looking for a past that never existed, you know? For Macedonia, for example, it's tragic because it's a kind of compartmentalisation. You know, looking for a past which not there, like Alexander the Great. Who knows what happened then? Then, you know, there is also this whole thing that we have with Greece as well about the name based on history that actually neither Macedonia nor

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<sup>4</sup> Vojnović, G. (2015) *Jugoslavija, moja dežela*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba.

Greek people in a way can claim because it's an ancient history (*laughs*).

For example, the Slav people came in, then Turkish, and then the Ottoman. So I think that there is more influence from the Ottoman Empire than from Alexander the Great in Macedonia. It was under the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. So that's why for me, having these grand illusions, which is kind of happening slightly with Brexit as well, is like having this kind of colonial illusion also. The idea that again we will be this grand empire. It is very dangerous...

**Lena:** One clean version of history. And how we are going to rate history etc. It's extremely limiting...

**Elena:** So that's why I think that these autobiographical projects are so important. They show these personal histories, so that we see the personal is political. Because in these works you really see that there is no clear entry point here in terms of migration, that things can always go both ways.

**Emily:** I'm just wondering if that leads us into a question regarding the moments of undoing.

**Elena:** It is the personal journey inwards to undo care, which, in my case, is the generational narrative around migration. Questioning care through creating contexts in which to witness the porosity, the transfer of identity between a mother who is an immigrant and a child who is British, not by blood but definitely by upbringing. It is definitely something, which shifts from the individual to a wider context and then back again. I think that's definitely something that moves into undoing.

**Lena:** What do you think about maternal aesthetics? Is there such a thing as maternal aesthetics? If there is, what are your maternal aesthetics?

**Elena:** I think that one thing that I see in my own practice, and I have seen it in other artists' work, is that moment of accepting imperfection, of the DIY element, and the element of time. I think that time is very related. Like in your manifesto when you are counting the days and then you say

“interruption”.<sup>5</sup> For me, this always threatens the work so much because for a long period of time I was very aware of those interruptions. I was angry at myself, and the children who brought about the interruptions, especially after Marina was born. I think that partially as a result of this, and partially the pressure of my PhD, I had a very bad bout of postnatal depression. Then I started to really think about what that interruption means for my practice. That, for example, it means for a month I won't be able to practice. I can't do work, and that I will have to leave the paper or the performance or everything, and just look after the child and myself. You know, attend to these things. So I feel that interruption is a very formative element of a maternal aesthetic, and it's definitely a formative part of what I'm doing. So I think that you are defining some of that messiness and interruption very well in your manifesto. But there is also an element of incompleteness and not ending things, which I feel is part of a maternal aesthetic, precisely because you know that a discussion will continue as the children age and as things change.

**Emily:** Can I ask you about the need to take care of yourself as an interruption as well? This is interesting in terms of switching that notion of interruption to one of self-care as well as maternal care of the other. I was reading Audre Lorde before we met and her notion that you have to take care of yourself because if you're not cared for you can't fight for the revolution, you can't do activism of any sort without a foundation of self-care.<sup>6</sup> Can you talk about this or rather about self-care?

**Elena:** As part of just sustaining your practice you have to have those moments of self-care or you will completely burn out. There is that kind of production cycle, and it's why maybe I want to do this project because a production cycle is so essentially in opposition to what you can really do as a woman who mothers and who cares. I mean both for children but also for others.

**Emily:** Do you mean the production cycle of touring theatre?

**Elena:** Touring theatre and producing theatre. It is something which is

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<sup>5</sup> Šimic, L. and Underwood-Lee, E. (2017) 'Manifesto for Maternal Performance (Art) 2016!', *Performance Research*, 22 (4): 131-139.

<sup>6</sup> Lorde, A. (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. Silver Press.

fundamental and yet I feel that that cycle is actually something imposed from outside. It doesn't come naturally. I mean if you consider companies like Forced Entertainment, they have different cycles that take into account the aspect of self-care more, the aspects of interruption, the aspects of "we can't do this now so we will do it later".<sup>7</sup> I studied under Lyn Hicks who talked a lot about those moments of breaks, because they sometimes had to take three month breaks in their devising process. Goat Island worked for two years sometimes on a project and had a different model.<sup>8</sup> It feels that actually when the capitalist production model is ingrained in the theatre, somehow we became slaves to this productivity motto. I know that a lot of people, including me, work against it. I can't work, I profoundly refuse to work, (*laughs*) within those parameters, which are imposed on us.

**Emily:** Were you able to not work with those structures because we're able to make a living doing something else?

**Elena:** Yes.

**Lena:** Because we're funded, aren't we?

**Emily:** We're funded. Exactly. We're funded by our institutions therefore...

**Elena:** Although, I think that it isn't only that. Helen Cole recently wrote about sexual harassment. It was a letter and she talked about her decision to move from theatre into live art practices precisely because they're mainly led by women and have slightly different cycles.<sup>9</sup> So she mentioned Lois Keidan who would give you extended time in order to produce something, which would probably not be granted if you worked for a different institution that works with different cycles.

**Lena:** This reminds me now of Lisa Baraitser's Skype lecture for Mothernists II conference in Copenhagen and her reference to Kathi Weeks's book *The Problem with Work* (2011).<sup>10</sup> But I am still very, very

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.forcedentertainment.com>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.goatlandperformance.org/goatland.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.liveartuk.org/blog/fk-off-weinstein-and-all-of-those-like-you-by-helen-cole/>

<sup>10</sup> Weeks, K. (2011). *The problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

concerned that we mention people like Lois Keidan, Lisa Baraitser, and Helen Cole, and we wouldn't know about them if they weren't so productive. Do you know what I mean? I don't know what to do about that. And yet, we are concerned about what the life cycles of certain things are. For example, look at the three of us now. The three of us are very productive and yet we are the ones that are going to talk about being unproductive.

**Elena:** Yes (*laughs*).

**Lena:** I went to drama school so I know that particular cycle of producing shows.

**Emily:** Or they are produced quickly and they last forever in the Western touring theatre cycle

**Lena:** Okay, absolutely.

**Elena:** Yes.

**Emily:** You've got the same show, just changing actors, or making some correction.

**Elena:** Yes but it is clearly working against our own needs and I think the industry leans more towards this, especially in the kind of productions you describe because very quickly they can change. For example, the woman who becomes pregnant will get changed for a younger model, you know (*laughs*).

**Emily:** Yes.

**Lena:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Elena:** I agree with you that there is also this invisibility. A lot of woman still can't afford to do this work. That's why I feel it is like problematic in a way to propagate this model of touring in which you can take your children with you because it doesn't solve the problem long-term. We need to have better provision of childcare. The state has to take responsibility for that. In Yugoslavia childcare became so cheap that it allowed women to work.

**Lena:** Cheap and available.

**Elena:** My grandmother worked, and my mother worked. I don't know a woman in my life who didn't work. So it's precisely because there was this provision of childcare. Even as a middle-class woman, the childcare is still very expensive in the UK.

**Emily:** Yes.

**Lena:** In Yugoslavia, or even Croatia now, there isn't so much this desire to stay at home as there is in the UK. You know, here there is this desire not to work. That needs to be considered as well. Then there are these online forums too. So you have stay at home mums versus working mums.

**Elena:** Which is also in *Motherland*.<sup>11</sup>

**Lena:** Absolutely. But also, for example in *Mothers Who Make*.<sup>12</sup> When I worked with Annie and Duška on the *Mums and Babies Ensemble* this was also one of the topics that arose.<sup>13</sup> This idea that, "Well I want to have the right not to work". I think Matilda Leyser was saying this.

**Elena:** Yes, she was part of that.

**Lena:** I think those are very important questions, quite related to these cycles of production.

**Elena:** But then there is also this issue of mothers who have the luxury to make the choice not to work, and not a lot of woman have that choice. I didn't have a choice. I had to start work when Marina was five months old because I was doing my PhD and both of us were teaching because we had to work to survive. I wanted to stay at home more but I couldn't. I know that a lot of women are in that position. As an immigrant I couldn't because I was not entitled to child benefit or things like that. If I had been that would have changed our situation a bit.

**Emily:** There were so many reasons why someone couldn't make choices.

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<sup>11</sup> *Motherland* (2016) BBC Two.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://motherswhomake.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://lenasimic.art/artsprojects/maternal-matters/mums-and-babies-ensemble/>.

You sometimes simply don't have that choice. I had no choice but not to work, because Lillian was ill for a time. You constantly have to wrestle with choice or lack of choice, for whatever reason.

**Lena:** Thinking of my teenage sons Neal and Gabriel, I note that Gabriel is very productive and Neal is not.

**Elena:** *(laughs)*

**Lena:** I love remembering myself as a teenager through my son and kind of how he can't be bothered.

**Emily:** *(laughs)*

**Lena:** For example I want him to finish the Duke of Edinburgh award so I say, "You started it so you should complete it, come on." But he's just like...

**Elena:** Whatever *(laughs)*.

**Lena:** Whatever *(sighs)*.

**Emily:** Yes.

**Lena:** He just can't be bothered... there is kind of an unproductivity there which, to me, is maybe more of what these academics are talking about. Like these teenagers who don't fit into the systems and they don't really care about it.

**Elena:** Exactly, in a way they don't need to fit. But I think it's a new thing this productivity. I don't think it was like that ten years ago. Suddenly that productivity became so much about how you're valued, how you're chosen, how you get jobs etc. You have to have this, and this, and this, and then even this is not enough. We were talking about grants and because I sit on a committee my colleague suggested we organized this big conference. In previous years we would have done just that, but now we have a new colleague who was like, "Oh, that's not enough. What kind of productivity is that to organize a conference? We need to have an edited collection out of it". So it's not enough that you have to organize a conference for one hundred people and do all that is involved with that

*(laughs).*

**Emily:** That's interesting.

**Elena:** I think Lisa Baraitser suggests every generation has to learn the lessons from the beginning. These are lessons that actually we can somehow never learn, that we can't learn, you have to go through the same mistakes again. I think that's something which might be partially connected to maternal representation, the idea that you can only represent what your experience of the maternal is. It might resonate with others even though no two experiences are ever the same.

**Lena:** You don't want to listen, do you? I mean listen to the other generations.

**Emily:** I was performing the maternal manifesto to our second-year students and I had some really interesting responses. One of the boys in the class, and I use boys advisedly because he was about 18, he said, "Oh, I kind of get what my mum has been trying to say to me after you did that".

**Elena:** (laughs)

**Emily:** It's just that you can't hear it from your own mother, but he could hear it from me (laughs). It was easy for him to hear it from me because it wasn't about him. He couldn't hear it from his mother as the implication of her talking about her experience of motherhood is that she is saying "When you were born it completely changed my life, for the better, but also sometimes for the worse" (laughs).

**Elena:** That's interesting.

**Emily:** But when I presented him with the politics of all that, it was at a distance, so it was easy for him.

**Elena:** But I think it's so important to actually highlight these issues in this revival of the maternal. There was an interest that was slightly crushed by that late second-wave, and third-wave feminism in terms of how the maternal is so limiting in terms of confining women to the home.

Now there are more publications. If a woman now starts to do research on the maternal there are definitely more materials available. For example, Demeter Press.<sup>19</sup> There is this proliferation suddenly of work around the maternal. Some of it, aesthetically and in terms of representation, is quite problematic.

**Lena:** Absolutely.

**Elena:** But I feel that also it's very important that it allows us to really to trash those ideals about the maternal, to reconsider what maternal means. When I was starting my PhD in 2006, there were a couple of people who knew about - [to Lena] your work, but it was very unnatural to talk about that. Roberta Mock had this one maternal project.<sup>20</sup> But there was not yet enough of a vocabulary around it. Yes, and there was Mary Kelly in the sixties and Andrea Liss and Lisa Baraiter's book.<sup>21</sup> You could discuss it sporadically but I feel that now there's much more available to us. Then a lot of new initiatives started coming from both the US and Europe. So this revival of the maternal is very important because for a while there was this shying away from the subject. It is important now to bring the maternal to the forefront. I mean it was always kind of there but it was a slightly uncomfortable territory for woman to really claim, to cherish it and to also talk about that kind of ambivalence of the maternal and hardship.

I also wrote about single mothers. You heard my paper.<sup>22</sup> There are platforms emerging where woman can talk about this in a wider sense, in terms of the wider politics such as what it mean in terms of class, or if you're a mother who sits in a traditional relationship or not. There are many ways for us to open up the maternal now.

This is the impact of all these discussions that we have had in the last five

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<sup>19</sup>See see <https://demeterpress.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Mock, R., Roberts, C. and Way, R. (2006) 'The M(other) Project', *Body, Space & Technology*, 6(1).

<sup>21</sup> See <http://marykellyartist.com/>.

Liss, A. (2009) *Feminist art and the maternal*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. Baraitser, L. (2008) *Maternal encounters: The ethics of interruption*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>22</sup> *The Mothernists II*, Astrid Noacks Ateliers, Copenhagen, 14th Oct 2017.

<https://www.mothervoices.org/news/2017/9/3/the-mothernists-ii-who-cares-for-the-21st-century>.

or six years. We are definitely bringing up more platforms that allow women to articulate this experience better and, you know, the mother needs that as well. I think that's my hope at least.

**Lena:** Yes, totally. I think so. To hear other voices, yes. But, honestly, do you think it is cool to do it or not? Because you know I found that, for example, when I was doing autobiographical solo performance during my PhD I didn't ever frame it in terms of the maternal. I don't want to identify myself anymore as an autobiographical solo performer. The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is seen as, so bloody cool, it can sit in an architecture, it can be critical arts practice.<sup>23</sup> Even though it's dealing with the domestic, you can frame it in a cooler way.

**Emily:** But is that not because the Institute is very radical in its politics?

**Lena:** Yes, it is activist, but it also has all these cool words attached to it like 'the public sphere'.

**Emily:** Yes, but I'm sure that's to do with the idea of the Institute as a radical space, because as soon as motherhood starts becoming a radical practice, it becomes instantly more public. I don't know if that's what cool means, but it is then in the public realm for interpretation. If that's what you mean by cool, that it is open and there are ways in for people to appropriate it as well, to appropriate it into our own discourse and aesthetics and whatever the agenda is. The radical is surely enabling of that.

**Elena:** I think it's very specific. It's a very specific experience isn't it? It's kind of so familiar to a lot of people, mainly because we have all been a mother or had the lack of a mother. I'm thinking, it is not only gender specific, but it's a very specific experience from the everyday. Because of that everydayness and the mundaneness of motherhood, it is so difficult. I was interviewing Roberto Sifuentes, who used to be in La Pocha Nostra, and has a solo practice now and one thing that I can clearly remember from his interview was that he was talking about identity performance.<sup>24</sup> For a very long time it was not cool to make these kinds of projects about

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<sup>23</sup> See <https://dissentathome.org/>.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidvl-collections/itemlist/category/68-pocha.html>.

your race or about being a Chicano artist. He teaches at the institution where I did my MA, at the School of the Arts Institute of Chicago. He said that for a couple of years, he had students coming to him to tell him “your so uncool, who cares about being Chicano?”. But actually, that's what you do and it's something which is very cool and something which is also uncool. Something, which will be cherished and embraced by institutions, and something which will be completely rejected. But if it's your obsession there is the need to be consistent.

**Lena:** Well, you need to have integrity or support. What I find is that if you're working with a lot of different disciplines, you realize how certain words or phrases carry much more value and recognition. Who speaks the right word? This becomes a kind of critical capital about certain words, which, you know, makes certain topics sexier. How sexy can the maternal be?

**Elena:** Yes, because it is connected with the domestic. Isn't it?

**Emily:** So much.

**Elena:** I don't know. I understand your point. Maybe because we are in this field, for us it's very important and impactful. I know that for a lot of women it is part of their reality, even if they may not create work around that. This relates to the inter-disciplinary dialogue as well. That is why this book that we are editing is having so many inter-disciplinary dimensions, people coming from fine art and architecture and performance. Maybe that comes from my collaboration with Valerie Walkerdine as well because she comes from psychology.<sup>25</sup> Valerie is not a mother but she has explored the maternal through class: the mother-daughter relationship in terms of the daughter coming from one class and the mother coming from another class. So she made me aware of different approaches to the maternal.

**Lena:** I remember Stella Sandford who wrote some beautiful work around affective labour. At one of these London maternal conferences she said, “You know, when I come to a philosophy conference and open by saying

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<sup>25</sup> Marchevska, E., & Walkerdine, V. (Eds.). (2019). *The Maternal in Creative Work: Intergenerational Discussions on Motherhood and Art*. Abingdon: Routledge.

I'm a feminist, everyone is like, oh. When I say I'm a Marxist it's like, oh my God. But when I say I'm a mother it's like, oh, wow this is just horrific, what's this person going to say?".<sup>26</sup>

**Elena:** But now being a feminist is cool again.

**Lena:** Yes, I think feminism is. But we are stuck with the maternal which I mean is fine but...

**Elena:** Somebody needs to.

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<sup>26</sup> *Motherhood in post-1968 European Women's Writing Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Dialogues conference, School of Advanced Studies, University of London, 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013.*