

Revisiting the 'Maternal Attitude' Conference: Curatorial after thoughts & reflections

The **Maternal Attitude** conference took place on Saturday 17th November 2018 at the [University of South Wales](#). The conference was a collaboration between the artist, curator and mother [Zoe Gingell](#) of [Cardiff MADE Gallery](#) and the [Mothersuckers Project](#), the artist, mother, curator [Eve Dent](#) of the Mothersuckers Project, and [Emily Underwood-Lee](#), [Research Fellow at the University of South Wales](#). [Deidre M. Donoghue](#) gave the conference keynote. The conference was supported by the [Arts Council of Wales](#) and the [Faculty of Creative Industries at the University of South Wales](#). The conference title was inspired by Deidre M. Donoghue's discussion of the maternal as an attitude of being in the world.¹ In what follows, the conference organisers discuss how this attitude of the maternal has been manifested in their own art and research practices and how the conference came into being as well as some of the key questions that were raised at the conference. The conversational form is designed to mirror the maternal experience of coming to understanding in relation to the other.

Points of Departure

EMILY: So shall we start by perhaps everybody talking a little bit about what their initial motivation for the conference was?

ZOE: We wanted to present the work that Eve and I had been doing over the last ten years really, the research that began with our own practice, as the Mothersuckers project and through that process we've become aware of other artists that are working within the family unit or making work about their experience as parents. We've been researching that for a long time.

EVE: The conference is a way of showing what we've been working on and bringing together some of the artists.

¹ <https://www.mothersvoices.org/about>

ZOE: Within that process we've become aware of many artists working in a similar way and in many different ways to ourselves. We'd made connections with a number of artists groups or organisations and been invited by you Emily and Lena [Šimić] to come to attend some of the Performance and the Maternal events you had organised and that was a real eye opener for me personally.² We suddenly found we weren't working on our own as an organisation, that there are a number of other groups looking at a similar area of practice.

EMILY: It was the same for me. I've been working with Lena and we've been trying to understand our own practices and our lived experiences as mothers and all the other identifications that you have as a mother, and the way that you bring those identifications to your work, for a number of years now through our separate practices and through our joint research. Finding that space for community and for extended thought about what the maternal means is really important. Where does your interest in the maternal come from?

EVE: From being pregnant and having a child. From the physical changes of being a mother influencing what I felt about the work I wanted to make and the impact it had on me as an artist and from wanting to use that material or that experience to express something. It was very powerful and beautiful. Then meeting Zoe and finding that we, as artists and mothers, had this exciting common ground, wanting to work with these experiences and express them.

ZOE: Which we did over a number of conversations over quite a long time, just talking about our own experiences. Then we became very interested in our own ideas around our changing bodies as an initial starting point. And that has been forming our own notions of what being a mother was.

EVE: Our thinking about the physical process has expanded out through this work and through the artist's work that we've have been connected with and the people we have met.

² <https://performanceandthematernal.com/>

EMILY: So your art process has been expanded out through the process of thinking about the maternal?

EVE: Yeah, absolutely, yeah, I think we started from a very physical perspective, the pregnant body and breast feeding.

ZOE: ‘Breast Cups’ became quite a political piece negotiating a very private and emotional connection to your child through the milk and the feeding and the nurturing and presented in a very public scenario.³ It went from being in a corridor in a theatre, a public space, to being in a square in France, a public square. It was very much about the facilitating body as almost being part of the furniture but also being shocking. We were playing on that politeness - what’s private, what’s public.

EVE: Generally, our experience as a mother is really hidden.

ZOE: And it’s so shocking

EVE: It’s actually really shocking.

ZOE: We were shocked that it was so shocking and people were coming up to us and saying “hey that’s radical”. We know people who are making work but never show it, the work’s hidden. And we felt that there were other people out there who we needed to find and talk to and feel that mutual support.

EVE: And we have a desire to show maternal work. For that to be seen.

ZOE: And so the conference is about wanting to bring that work into the public domain. Wanting to facilitate work to come into the public domain that considers the maternal and that makes the maternal body visible. Through our work around the maternal, we realised that the scope of art making around these issues extended to fathers and to parents and that there is a lot of really interesting work being made by families as groups and so we wanted our research to be more inclusive and so we began to call it the parental body.

³ <https://performanceandthematernal.com/>

The Maternal as a Way of Doing

EMILY: To come back to some of the things that were raised in the conference, and that I've been looking at in my research around the maternal, we are thinking about the maternal as not biologically essentialist but as a way of doing. As Deidre Donoghue raises in her work and in her keynote at the conference, it is a way of being in the world. Or more widely, we can say that the maternal is about relating to an other. Art practice is usually made to communicate and therefore is always in relation to an other in some way; this might be the audience who is live with you or the audience that you hope will receive the work at some point.

ZOE: Yes, but also what distinguishes working within a family unit or in relation to ideas on the maternal is that that is very much within the way you make the work and changes the way you make your work. Which is what was different for me in terms of the work that I began to make as a mother, as opposed to before.

EMILY: This goes beyond simply relational aesthetics because it is about being in a relationship of care.⁴

ZOE: Deidre opens up the whole idea of the maternal and caring and nurturing as an attitude, as a kind of philosophy for not only art making but as a way of being in the world that feeds back into the art and then that feeds back out into the world. It's a cyclical thing, you don't exclude your practice as an artist from your practice of living, they are complimentary and they feed each other. It's an all nurturing relationship. It then isn't exclusive to mothers, it opens it out to fathers and partners and non biological parents - people who nurture, people who parent. That's the ultimate hope, perhaps, in what Deidre's talking about - that our lives can be expanded as communicators and makers and as people.

⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du réel.

EVE: That way of responding to another in the world should also be seen within an art context as well. That process around the aesthetic and ethics, there can be a space for that too in art and it's not often seen so much.

EMILY: That makes me think about Carolee Schneemann's work where she talked about the male "art stud club", the kind of macho male artist, and that other ways of being in the world and being an artist are excluded from the gallery. She was talking about that fifty years ago.⁵

ZOE: Which links to Deidre's references to the flâneur in her keynote.

EMILY: We're still having these debates. We can respond by making a space for community and conversation. There are loads of ways that this work could be shown, they could be shown in an exhibition but the particularities of the work we have just been doing together was that we had a conference, which is a very different way of sharing work. It's about sharing conversations about work, rather than sharing work perhaps. A conference engenders a space for community.

ZOE: It's about sharing. It's the opportunity to raise a number of ideas and discuss them from your own perspective and also in relation to hearing other points of view.

EVE: Something maybe quite particular about the conference format is the support that's part and parcel of that and that's in the art making as well; maybe that support connects people.

ZOE: We wanted to provide a context for, not only the work that we make, but for the work that we've come across that we've found other artists making and present that. The idea of a conference allowed us to give an overview. It is also quite guided, it's definitely steered - there are a number of questions and debates that we wanted to bring up and the format of a conference would allow us to ask certain questions.

⁵ Schneemann, Carolee; McPherson, Bruce R. (1979) *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*. New York: McPherson and Co.

EVE: I think because we'd found that this work isn't always seen so much or it's quite hidden or not so much in the public eye, then there's something about the support of coming together with other people that is quite essential in it being sustained and propelling forward. It just needs that sustenance

ZOE: We were trying to bring a community together, which we felt when we went to Edgehill. We were really encouraged by meeting other artists working in a similar way. It's a context.

Sticking With the Unfashionable

EMILY: You've raised the question about sustaining the work, so maybe we could talk a bit about that 'sticking with it'. Lisa Baraitser talks about sticking with the unfashionable, she talks about motherhood as unfashionable, as unpopular, and the doggedness of sticking with it and moving beyond. Sticking with all the stages of mothering.⁶ In the context we are discussing here, there's this rush of work about birth and then those people go back to making work about something else or find that their art practice and their personal life is unsustainable so leave art making completely.

ZOE: I think the importance of hosting and putting on conferences and symposiums like this is that you can bring the academic and the practice making together in the same room. Feeling that the work that you make is part of a long game in terms of it being written about or thought about or put into some kind of perspective, can sustain a feeling that it's important work at whatever level. I make work because I need to make work but then finding other people that can comment upon it or see it within a broader perspective gives it credibility beyond your own doubt. Especially as this work is maybe not shown in a more *fashionable* way. But seeing the number of organisations that are out there now, much more than when we got together ten years ago, it is perhaps becoming quite fashionable.

⁶ Baraitser, Lisa. (2017) *Enduring Time*. London: Bloomsbury.

EVE: It's a mixture. It's kind of unfashionable in a big galleries but there are subterranean groups of people getting together to show work independently and host things.

ZOE: There's real energy about it. It's activist, it's proactive, it has to be. That helps to sustain it. You feel that you're still on the front, the cutting edge.

EMILY: All of us have been mothers a long time. All three of us have done this for a while and our children aren't babies. There's something about the work and the artists that were able to come together into that space of the conference that I felt was really valuable because we were able to talk to people who are engaging with a variety of ways, stages and points on the maternal journey.

EVE: Definitely that was really, really lovely, that spectrum of experience and just how that had changed, how the maternal relationship just changes into that or just becomes different depending on what's going on. It becomes the life journey I suppose, rather than just a point in time and it's still just as inspiring and exciting as ever. It's just different.

ZOE: It is about a journey, it is about a life, it is about life and it's like story telling in a way.

EVE: I do think there's less work being made about experience in relation to the maternal as a subject or the process of mothering, there is very much less work being made about being an aging mother. Your physicality recedes in many ways and I think that's a really interesting area that's not really represented in the majority of the work that I've come across or we've come across so far.

ZOE: I'm very connected to a sense of time through motherhood and it's terrifying. It's very much in my mind at the moment that I'm moving towards that.

Thinking Ahead and Into The Future

EMILY: It comes back to the point that Deidre made in her keynote about being with her mother and her mother saying, the consequence of being a mother is that you have to think twenty years ahead for every decision you make. I'm feeling it right now, I'm feeling it in relation to the kids who are wanting to take action on climate change. My kids are thinking in terms of future in a way that I don't think I did at their age but that I did start to do when mothering. Really selfishly, I have become more invested in the future when it's my own genetic offspring who are going to suffer - but I wonder if that's changing. I wonder if there's something in the activism that's going on at the moment that's involving children who are thinking about the future, without having the prompt of their own progeny.

ZOE: Becoming eco mothers.

EVE: Eco caring warriors.

EMILY: Which takes us again back into this idea of mothering as a way of taking care, rather than as a way of producing children.

ZOE: I really like this word lifeline. A lifeline is a perspective that travels through time, and the linear doesn't need to be flat, the linear could be a circle, it's still a line. So it's a cycle and a line.

EVE: Through your connection with your children, it makes it very strong because then you see yourself in relation to your mother or your grandmother or you see yourself as a mother. First you're a child, then you're a mother and then you're a grandmother, or maybe you're not a grandmother, but that's you in a cycle.

Maternal Multiplicities

EMILY: One of the questions that we haven't talked about is how to think about this work without pigeonholing it. What do we mean by maternal art? Do we mean work made by mothers? Do we mean work made about mothering? Do we mean work that's made with an ethos of care and thinking beyond ourselves? What are we talking about when we talk about the maternal art?

EVE: We talk about all of those things.

ZOE: The conference, we called it Maternal Attitude. Maternal attitude is more encompassing of a much broader perspective. I think that's what the challenge was, we were saying it's a much broader area of working and thinking about how we make work. From my own perspective, it is very much located in the body and how that has changed through mothering and I've become excited about how that has affected the way I make work. Then I see other people make work and how being a parent affects how they make their work. It's not an exclusive thing. I'm very keen that the work that's made is not seen as an exclusive club because I really hope it isn't, we've got to make sure it isn't. We do really have to consider how we frame presenting this work. I know that there are some people who are very definitely making work as a *mother*. I know people who have or who don't have children, or who can't have children, who feel excluded from that. We were very keen to find artists who are dealing with those issues in their work and artists who are making work about not being a parent, or wanting to be a parent or not being able to parent. That is still a question that affects everyone, even if you aren't a parent yourself, you have parents. You wouldn't be here otherwise. It's about linking generations, it's about linking communities.

EMILY: The conference had two key aims, which were to think about how we make work as maternal artists and how we curate work and it's very particular focus was about the challenges of those two things.

ZOE: When we looked before at curating an exhibition around work that's been made in response to parenting we were instantly trying to make it wider than just being about the maternal and also we're now looking at curating in relation to a lifecycle or lifeline. It has to be part of a discourse around the maternal but it still has to be strong as a communication, as an actual piece of work in its own right. When we've looked at the work, we've been responding to it in terms of its power as a piece of work as well as a powerful statement in relation to a discourse. When curating, the work has to stand up for itself but it's still important to put it within the framework of this discussion in order for it to be considered a relevant subject that needs to be seen.

EVE: One of the questions at the conference was why isn't this work seen very much in collections. There's more, a lot more, discussion to be done around that. The conference was a good starting point but there's a lot more to talk about.

ZOE: We want people to have access to powerful work. The problem with having labels is that they act as barriers to audiences. I'm very aware of that but at the same time I feel very politically motivated to declare the work as a kind of cohesive body of thought, which you have to do at some level to curate. I think that was very much in our minds, that we were sort of showing a spectrum of work in the broadest sense.

EMILY: So a curatorial tactic is to embrace diversity in both the content and the method. By doing that you're making a statement that there isn't an essential maternal and that maternal is multiple and that there are multiple ways of approaching it and of thinking about it. The maternal can be a starting point for a range of conversations.

ZOE: Because it has to broaden out. When you're making your work, you're making it from your own perspective, maybe from a subjective point of view, and it doesn't mean that the work has to be general but you can see that piece of work in relation to other subjectivities.

EVE: It has to resonate as a human experience.

ZOE: As a collection.

EVE: You have a personal mother experience and then that can resonate with other people in different ways. At the end of the conference there was a conversation about wanting to rebel, from the whole mainstream establishment system of showing work or beyond the label of maternal, whatever that means.

ZOE: We have to group together as a family of artists and a show is a family of works. So as a curator I would be choosing works that are strong in themselves but belong in a family.

EMILY: Do we lose our 'cutting edge' or do we lose our maternal currency by joining the mainstream?

EVE: One of the conversations in this conference centred around whether the work that is made in relation to the maternal, as a subject, is illustrative or subjective and therefore is literal and is somehow less powerful because of that in terms of being received as art. In many ways I think the work that we've seen, through the parental body research that we presented, is that there's work that's made very directly from a position of wanting to voice experience but translated through art making into very powerful work that stands up. Just because it comes from a personal place doesn't mean that it isn't powerful. The maternal is an area that can teach a lot. The artistic community at large can be excited by this work and that's the vibe we get from artists who aren't parents making work. The response is generally really positive.

ZOE: There is a bit of fear around work that's labelled as the maternal, it's the physicality or the potential physicality of it. The oozing breasts. The messiness. Or that it would be the opposite, that it will be all gushing emotions.

EVE: There's that binary aspect about it.

EMILY: An overflowing of goodness or a leaking body, it's all exceeding itself in some way or another.

EVE: It's always had these kind of extremes and then we're trying to find a position for it, a relational position that's actually quite hard to pin down.

EMILY: And also a position that's more complex where you're not falling into some kind of cliché. This work is complex and avoids definition or conclusions but opens up questions.

EVE: And it keeps asking questions which is part of what a relationship is.

ZOE: It's a dialogue.