

# 'Performance and the Maternal' Research Project - Policy Briefing

Written by Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee, May 2022.

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*Art enables discussion about difficult and diverse mother stories.  
Maternal performance can make places and make communities*

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Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

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This document is targeted at **policymakers, funders and commissioners**, and **maternal practitioners**, which includes **birth workers, maternal health and social care practitioners, arts administrators, curators, theatre producers, mother/artists**, and **artists working around maternal themes**. The aim of this document is to demonstrate how the stories told by mother/artists in diverse maternal performance practices can help to change perceptions and shed light on the everyday experiences of mothers. The document will present a short outline about the Performance and the Maternal research project, its Methodology, Findings, and a set of Recommendations. We have also included references to other Publications that have been produced as part of the Performance and the Maternal project.

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For more information about the Performance and the Maternal project visit  
<https://performanceandthematernal.com/>.

## Key Terms

- **Performance** – any live, filmed, or online theatre, dance, performance art, music or other similar event.
- **Mothers** – those who are responsible for the daily care of children, regardless of whether those children are their biological children, other children for whom they have legally recognised responsibility, extended family, or children who have become family through other kinship structures.
- **Maternal** – the study and consideration of mothering and mothers, as well as issues surrounding reproductive rights and care.
- **Mothering** – the act of taking care of a dependent other.
- **Women** – all those who identify as women regardless of their gender assigned at birth.
- **Family** – a group of people who are linked, by legal, biological or chosen ties.
- **Art / the arts** – the creative, performing, and visual arts in the broadest sense.
- **Artists** – those working to create art in any artform in a professional capacity.
- **Policy** – proposed action, strategy, and organisational frameworks in any sector including the state.
- **Mother/artist** – those with caring responsibilities who are making art.

## About the Project

**Performance and the Maternal** seeks to better understand the condition of the maternal through a study of maternal performance. It is driven by researching both the conditions in which mother/artists make work and the contexts in which that work is received. The fundamental principle behind the work is that we can learn more about what it means to mother by listening to the carefully crafted stories of the maternal shared by artists. **This information can help us all to find community, better support women and those who mother, and improve and enhance services and policy for mothers.**

The Performance and the Maternal project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and conducted between 2019 and 2022. The research team was led by Prof Emily Underwood-Lee (University of South Wales) and Dr Lena Šimić (Edge Hill University) with research assistance from Georgina Biggs and Dr Jennifer Verson. The project advisory circle included:

- Prof Alice Entwistle – Professor of English and Modern Languages, University of South Wales, UK
- Dr Deirdre Donoghue – Artist/Researcher, Founder Director of m/other voices, Netherlands
- Dr Rachel Epp Buller – Associate Professor of Visual Arts and Design, Bethel College, USA
- Zoe Gingell – Artist, Co-Founder Mothersuckers Project, Programmer at MADE Gallery, UK
- Dyana Gravina – Founder and Creative Director, Procreate Project, UK
- Prof Vicky Karkou – Chair of Dance, Arts and Wellbeing, Edge Hill University, UK
- Dr Sara C Motta – Associate Professor, Newcastle University, Australia
- Aleksandra Nikolajev-Jones – Maternal Dance Practitioner, UK
- Prof Ruth McElroy – Professor of Creative Industries, University of South Wales, UK
- Prue Thimbleby – Arts Team Coordinator, Swansea Bay University Health Board, UK
- Prof Carolyn Wallace – Professor of Community Health and Care Services, University of South Wales, UK
- Dr Ruchika Wason Singh – Founder and Director of the Archive for Mapping Mother Artists in Asia, India

## Methodology

The research team has conducted:

- 18 in depth [interviews](#) with international mother/artists and artists working around maternal themes.
- 5 [forums](#) that explored the topics of maternal art; storytelling; climate, gender and maternal futures; migration and citizenship; and health policy and impact with 34 invited speakers and 238 participants across the five events.
- 5 small-scale (10-12 participants) in depth [discussion groups](#) with a total of 31 artists working with the maternal. The topics covered included the impact of COVID on mother/artists' working conditions, intersectionality and care, the domestic sphere, art making and policy, and diversity in maternal art. The discussion groups were conducted in collaboration with The Mothersuckers Project and Cardiff MADE Gallery.

We have analysed what was said in these various gatherings as well as undertaking surveys with attenders at the forums. Our findings have been contextualised in relation to the existing literature within maternal studies and performance studies. Alongside this, we have conducted textual analysis of contemporary performances and artworks made by mother/artists or artists concerned with maternal themes. This document gives a summary of our main research findings; for in depth analysis please see our publications list on page 8 of this document.

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*“It encouraged me to be bolder and incorporate more performance into my activism as well as my clinical practices.” Forum Participant*

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*“Dear daughter, here is no mother. Here is mothering here is caring for others, caring for the chthonic, for the self-with-others. Care. Dear Daughter. The future is female. Now you take over.”*  
*Extract from Dear Daughter performance text by Nanna Lysholt Hansen, Artist<sup>i</sup>*

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*“Becoming a mother was also the beginning of me becoming an artist.”*  
*Tracy Breathnach Evans, Artist<sup>ii</sup>*

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## Findings

We have divided our finding into three key areas: **Mothers and Motherhood, Support and Connection**, and **Maternal Art Making**. Many observations cross between these categories – all are made in the context of maternal art making and its reception. Our overarching finding is that maternal art can teach us much about the conditions and experiences of motherhood. **Maternal art and performance are an important resource for all those whose professional roles require that they engage with and support mothers.**

### Mothers and Motherhood

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*“I look at myself and other mothers more deeply now.”*

*Forum Participant*

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- Representations of motherhood in art and culture have the power to challenge dominant constructions of “the ideal mother”.
- Ambivalence and difficulty need to be recognized as an integral part of maternal experience.
- Oftentimes, maternal art and performance can speak about difficult subjects in ways that mothers might be inhibited from doing in other contexts.
- Maternal art and performance have much to say to other domains of enquiry, including in health, social care, third sector and charity organisations that seek to support those who mother. An example of this can be found in the Maternal Journal project, where art is used to make learning and reflective resources for birth workers and new mothers, and in many health boards, where digital storytelling has been used to improve patient experience.<sup>iii</sup>
- Maternal relations and ethics can move us towards care in contexts beyond the immediate family, such as community engagement and more-than-human sensibilities. This is particularly important in the context of the climate emergency.
- Children were spoken of as enabling mothers to establish rootedness in a place. Similarly, art making and its reception were seen as a means of creating community.
- Maternal art can reveal hidden stories or make us see the everyday in a new light. It can make the domestic unfamiliar or uncanny; it can also break the confines between the private and the public, take the home into the public sphere or bring the public sphere into the home.

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*“The responsibilities that come with motherhood have vastly decreased the amount of time that I have in my life for other things. However, I feel that I'm more focussed than I have ever been on the work that I want to or need to make.” Jina Valentine, Artist<sup>iv</sup>*

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## Support and Connection

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*“I learnt that women as mothers across borders have much to share.”  
Forum Participant*

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- Mothers often feel isolated and require specific spaces and events, including community spaces. Art production, participation, and attendance at maternal events enable connections to be made with other mothers in order to build community networks.
  - Maternal solidarity, that extends into caring networks which are beyond family networks, has huge personal, social, and financial value for mothers.
  - Having children forces many women, including mother/artists, to stop working or to change their practice so it can be made around their parenting responsibilities and in their home. This is particularly exacerbated for mother/artists, who are already working in an often precarious, freelance economy.
  - Childcare, which continues to be a gendered responsibility, is critical in enabling mothers to engage with arts making and participation in the theatre and art world. The lockdowns during the COVID pandemic have opened up online spaces, which has had the unexpected benefit of allowing those with childcare responsibilities to make and access art when they are normally unable to travel to attend events.
  - The move to online necessitated by COVID has enabled connections to be made across geographic, social, and cultural boundaries. At the same time, mother/artists felt that the emotional labour, including care and childcare, caused by the pandemic was large and unaccounted for, and gendered, and was predominantly falling to mothers.
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*“There's a very particular experience of motherhood, which I know for a lot of the women has totally changed their relationship to their body, their relationship to the NHS, to their lives, to their work. And while we live in a society that is definitely patriarchal, there is always going to be a tension that needs to be expressed in a way that's very specific. Generalising about motherhood at the moment isn't as valuable to me as hearing from mothers. For me that feels like what's missing.” Alesha Chaunte, Artist<sup>v</sup>*

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## Maternal Art Making

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*“Sometimes it is easier to think that others are managing better. But probably most artists and mothers with little family support go through the same struggle trying to keep up with their practice.” Forum Participant*

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- Class, race, language, caring responsibilities, single motherhood, and childcare responsibilities are some of the many barriers to making and viewing art. The difficulty and cost of engaging with maternal art across intersectional boundaries must be acknowledged.
- Mother/artists seek community and solidarity with other mother/artists, but fear being pigeonholed or marginalised by the title ‘mother/artist’.
- As with mothers generally, maternal artists are reliant upon extended networks of support to enable them to work in the arts. Typically, these networks include other mother/artists, as well as friends and family.
- Whilst the idea of home and the domestic are culturally specific, and there are problems with the invisible labour that is carried out in domestic spaces, such a space can nevertheless function as a safe, playful, generative, and creative context for art making around maternal themes.
- There are ethical questions around making the private, the child and the home public through art making. Mother/artists are actively engaged with these questions.
- For many artists, the change to working in the home rather than a studio, which has been necessitated by COVID, has prompted innovation including new aesthetics and artistic forms. This has in turn, created new confidence in many artists in their own practice.
- Imaginative solutions to childcare are already in place for many through collective spaces that enable caring responsibilities to be shared with other mother/artists. These practices were demonstrated in, amongst other examples, the collective support of Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (MaMa), where mothers come together in a community choir to make art and also to support one another in their daily lives, and in the work of the Procreate Project, which provides affordable, child friendly studio spaces to mother/artists, who also share childcare.<sup>vi</sup>

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*“I took my children inside my work from my belly to my arms, I took them to my performances, to meet the dearest of people who forged my force, to the places that liberated their mother. I want them to know their mother is free and they are too.” Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Artist<sup>vii</sup>*

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## Recommendations

- The social, cultural, economic, and political structures that should support mother/artists need to be examined and addressed carefully to understand how these structures reinforce the gendered allocation of mother work.
- Mother/artists need solidarity with others in order to change the situation in which they are working and caring. New models of care giving and community making are required.
- New systems and structures for work need to be envisioned for mothers. These might include: flexible working, a four-day working week, working from home, working more locally, or working as part of a collective or community. These structures will not only support mother/artists, but will benefit anyone with caring responsibilities.
- Mother/artists need narratives, funding systems, structures, and spaces that are generative, productive, and inclusive. For example, welcoming children into the arts spaces, being able to include childcare as part of funding applications, having extra support and time to write applications.
- A review of arts funding and the impact of current funding and curatorial practices on mother/artists needs to be undertaken.
- There ought to be a public acknowledgment of the diversity of maternal stories, and the importance of various, including difficult and ambivalent, mother stories being heard and recognised. Art, and in particular live performance as an artform, offers a powerful route towards such diverse maternal storytelling.
- Mothers from all classes, races, embodiments, abilities, and backgrounds must be supported if we want to engage with a diversity of maternal stories and maternal art.
- Artists and curators must ensure that they examine their own privilege in making and showing art and challenge themselves to extend that privilege to those that might be excluded.
- Mother/artists and curators need long-term, sustainable support which takes into account housing and childcare as well as long term and sustainable arts funding. A good example is Universal Basic Income for Artists as rolled out as a pilot in Ireland.
- The importance of community building and in person encounters can be powerfully highlighted through performance practice. We need more exhibitions, more theatre festivals, more art gatherings, that celebrate the diversity of maternal stories, both exclusively centred around maternal themes and also in more general arts programming.
- Similarly, attending arts events can build community and generate understanding; as such, the arts and performance should be taken to those places where mothers, and those who support mothers, are. This might mean maternal art in hospitals, community centres, adult education centres, childcare centres, GP practices, baby groups, and so on.
- It is important to use affirmative terms such as childfree rather than childless, as well as the term 'mothering' as a practice, emphasising the work and action that comes through daily experience.

## Publications

To read in depth analysis of our findings please see our other project publications:

### Academic Publications

- Šimić, L. and Underwood-Lee, E. (eds) (forthcoming – under contract, scheduled for publication 2022) *Mothering Performance: Maternal Action*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Šimić, L. and Underwood-Lee, E. (2021) *Maternal Performance: Feminist Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Šimić, L. and Underwood-Lee, E. (2019) 'Returning to Ourselves: Medea/Mothers' Clothes and Patience one decade on' in Marchevska, E. and Walkerdine, V. (eds) *Maternal in Creative Work: Intergenerational Discussions on Motherhood and Art*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Epp Buller, R., Šimić, L. and Underwood-Lee, E. (2019) 'The Body in Letters: Once Again, Through Time and Space' in Epp Buller, R. and Reeve, C. *Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design, and Maternity*. Bradford (CA): Demeter.
- Biggs, G., Šimić, L. and Underwood-Lee, E. (2021) 'ENGAGE: Conversations conceived across performance studies and the maternal'.

### Interviews

See <https://performanceandthematernal.com/mother-artist-interviews/> for interviews with:

[Aleasha Chaunte](#), [Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones](#), [Amanda Coogan](#), [Elena Marchevska](#), [Jennifer Verson](#), [Jessica Olah](#), [Jina Valentine](#), [Liz Clarke](#), [Louise Ann Wilson](#), [Lynn Lu](#), [Megan Wynne](#), [Michelle Hartney](#), [Nanna Lysholt Hansen](#), [Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro](#), [Peggy Shaw](#), [SuAndi](#), [TheBabyQuestion \(Paula Varjack, Catriona James and Luca Rutherford\)](#), and [Tracy Breathnach-Evans](#).

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<sup>i</sup> [http://nannalysholthansen.com/?page\\_id=541](http://nannalysholthansen.com/?page_id=541).

<sup>ii</sup> <https://performanceandthematernal.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/tracy-breathnach-evans-1.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> See <https://www.maternaljournal.org/> for details of the Maternal Journal project. See <https://bcuhb.nhs.wales/services/health-services1/patient-and-carer-experience-team/patient-safety-and-experience/patient-stories/> and <https://www.artsinhealth.wales/storytelling.html> for examples of storytelling in Betsi Cadwaladr and Swansea Bay Health Boards.

<sup>iv</sup> [https://performanceandthematernal.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/jina\\_valentine.pdf](https://performanceandthematernal.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/jina_valentine.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> <https://performanceandthematernal.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/aleasha-chaunte-1.pdf>.

<sup>vi</sup> See <https://migrantartistsmutualaid.org/> for more information about Migrant Artists Mutual Aid and <https://www.procreateproject.com/> for more information about the Procreate project.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://performanceandthematernal.files.wordpress.com/2020/12/nathalie-anguezomo-mba-bikoro.pdf>.