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## MAMAPHONIC

*Balancing  
Motherhood  
and  
Other  
Creative  
Acts*

**EDITED BY**  
BEE LAVENDER  
and MAIA ROSSINI

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# MAMAPHONIC



# DON'T FORGET THE LUNCHES . . .

MONICA BOCK & ZOFIA BURR

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WELL BEFORE I had actually given birth, my first major body of artwork—as a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—was about birth. Thinking about family in the context of the debate over abortion, I produced a series of mixed-media objects that became an installation for my 1990 MFA exhibition. The centerpiece of the installation, a round oak table set with four miniature place settings, was called *The Uterus and its Appurtenances from Behind*. With language and anatomical imagery lifted from my mother's anatomy texts, the piece was built on memories of her struggle between work and family. Doll plates laid with miniature cast sterling internal organs suggested the personal toll behind decorous housekeeping, as well as the reality of life consumed in life. The piece came out of knowing that, like my mother, my need for my own work was coupled with a desire to birth and raise children, that I would soon be negotiating the same treacherous territory between intimacy and autonomy that she had, and that I would be equally torn and driven.

Three years later, I gave birth to my daughter at home, and shortly thereafter, made a small piece called *Shadow Wrestling*, using two bars of glycerin soap resting on end face-to-face on a reliquary stand encasing a small vile of my own blood. Originally based on a Theresa of Avila quote about “wrestling with the shadow of death,” the piece marked my first use of glycerin as a reference to flesh and its vulnerability, and offered itself as a contemplation of the impermanence that's felt specifically when looking at



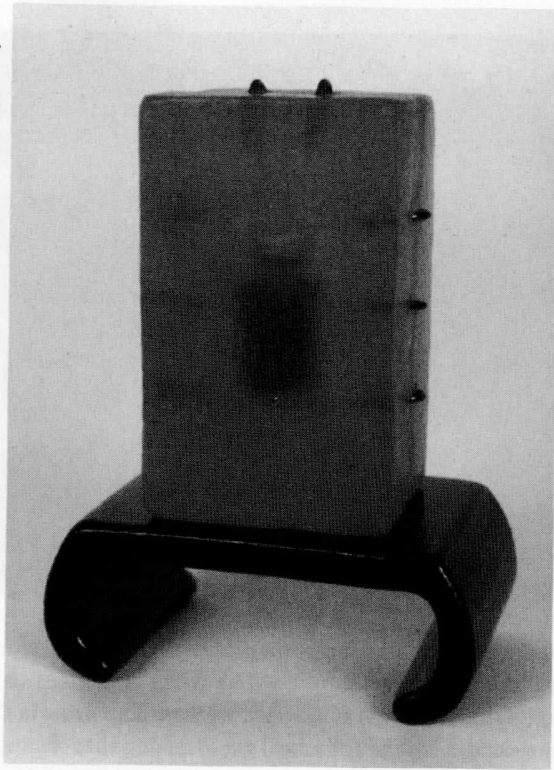
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one's children. In part, my understanding of the piece was shaped well after it was made by a poem written for it by my friend Zofia Burr, a writer and professor of English at George Mason University. We met in 1995, when we were both living in Chicago. I was pregnant with my second child, and Zofia and I got to talking about home birth. At that time, Zofia was recently married and becoming increasingly aware of the complexity of her long-standing decision not to have children.

So we started a conversation that gradually turned into an artistic collaboration—about family, work, gender, the body, productivity, nurturing. It's essentially a conversation about taking possession of the terms of our existence, as women, as daughters, as artists, as married bisexuals, as mothers and as not-mothers, and we are both mothers and not-mothers in relation to the needs of other people in our lives. Lately our collaboration has focused on how the roles of mother and of not-mother are part of the same impossible set of expectations confronting women who choose to be defined both by work and nurturing. In regard to “the maternal body,” no woman gets to define herself completely outside the terms of good mother/ bad mother—the terms of what it means to take on, tamper with, or reject the role of the mother as cultural institution.

In hindsight, it's become significant that our conversation began with home birth. It turns out, of course, that choosing home birth was just the beginning of figuring out what kind of mother I would be in relation to my work and the dominant culture's image of family. A lot of that figuring has been done in conversation with Zofia, including the decision, almost immediately after my son was born, to pursue my current tenure-track job as professor of art at the University of Connecticut, just when I thought I wanted to relax and enjoy my newborn. As Zofia says, I blame her for my getting the job I always wanted.





Since more or less simultaneously becoming a mother and full-time professor of art, my most recent creative work has developed as a way of talking about motherhood and childhood in a climate that all but denies their relevance. Early in my tenure process, and with the example of other mothering artists in academia, I began to realize that the complexities of family life would not easily be recognized as pertinent to my ambitions for my work. But what I am largely consumed and fascinated by are the challenges my two small children present to my adult reality and to the institutional cultures that make no place for them.

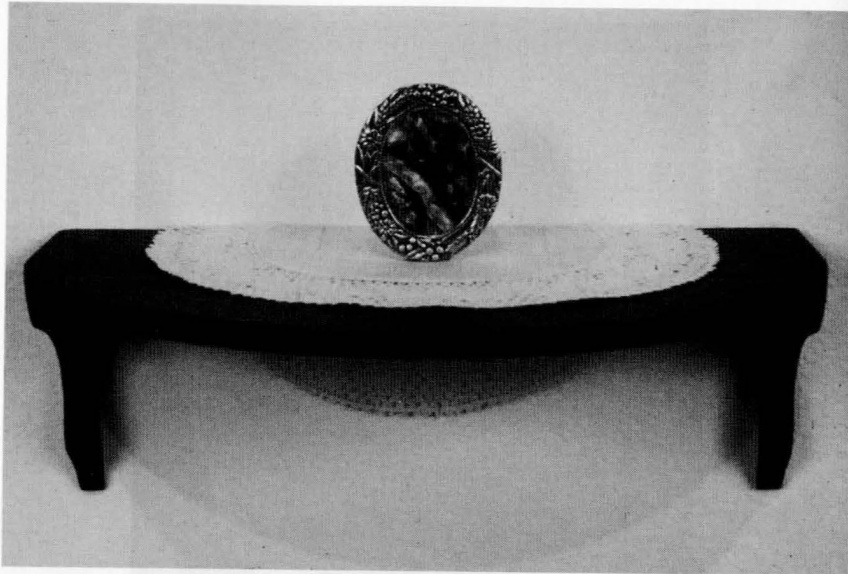
So, it became imperative to make art with and about my children, in order to make our reality known, but also to stay close to them even though half the time it's the work that preempts my actually being with them. It's an indirect kind of nurturing that can feel a lot like preoccupied neglect, as I struggle with my need for discipline when I'd rather go play, and my guilt when I'd rather not go play. Total absorption in the process of raising children (which would make me a good mother) is something I have never been able to choose. I keep choosing this kind of complex and conflicted nurturing with reflection upon nurturing, this kind of looking and public revelation of my looking, even at what may be considered un-motherly to look at (which makes me a bad mother.)

In the summer of 1998, I created a mixed-media piece called *Afterbirth (Sac Fluid Cord)*, in which three cast glycerin dustpans rest on a shelf with a glass bottle encased in each of their handles. The first bottle carries a bit of amniotic sac, the next amniotic



fluid, and the last umbilical cord—my own children's birth matter. The creation of *Afterbirth (Sac Fluid Cord)* triggered the conception of a number of objects and installations linked by the title *Afterbirth(s)* and by the concept of exposing aspects of family life, or life after birth, as it were.

*Maternal Exposure (don't forget the lunches)*, the major installation in this new body of work, has become the centerpiece of a number of solo shows including an exhibition at Mobius in Boston. The piece is inspired by the daily ritual—that I became intensely aware of when my children entered all day toddler care and pre-school—of exposing one's children and one's nurturing skills to public scrutiny. The piece consists of 418 lead sheet bags, embossed with the daily menus of school and day camp lunches I prepared for my two young children over the course of the year from January 6 to December 23, 1999. The lead bags gather in rows in one half of the exhibition space, spreading across the floor in the order the original lunches were prepared. Inserted intermittently, small lead sheet plaques replace lunch bags and announce the days when no lunches needed to be made—sick days, snow days, holidays, parties at school. As flesh-like counter-parts to the protective yet poisonous lead bags, 428 cast glycerin soap bags (equaling the number of days my children left the house for school, lunch bag in hand or not) accumulate organically on the floor in the other half of the space.



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*Maternal Exposure (don't forget the lunches)* also represents the second collaboration in which Zofia and I have explored the conjunction of text, object, and space. It was for a 1998 installation called *Humours* that I first consciously set in motion a feedback loop in which I make or propose to make something and Zofia writes in response. For *Humours*, Zofia's poem was stamped letter by letter into the lead-sheathed architecture of the piece. For *Maternal Exposure*, Zofia wrote in response to phone conversations and a studio-visit with me while I was making the piece. As her own mother became seriously ill soon after we began, it was a particularly fraught moment that yielded poems exploring some of the more treacherous and costly meanings of maternal nurturing. For exhibition, Zofia pencils the series of poems (or poem fragments) in her own hand on the walls of the gallery surrounding the lunch bags on the floor, and "speaks" the text by way of a CD recording that plays intermittently into the space:

#### DEDICATION

This is for the bad mother in me I love  
wanting to be kept. For  
the Bad mother I love—wanting

(My mother said)

If you plan to run away, let me know and I'll pack you a lunch,  
if you want to run away, let me know and I'll pack your bag.  
Just be sure  
to send us a postcard.

Just be sure to let me know.

The lunch bag is loaded. With coming from home that is her  
carried into the world. That you are returning to. Regarded.  
And what is spoken in the lunch packed and eaten,  
rejected or thrown away, every day a mother is supposed  
to allow the time to keep nothing of.

Nothing of what you are  
returning  
to loved.

Nothing of what you are returning.

A mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her  
Gift. no return returned. Mother made—made mother—  
no more days off from the world.  
Designed against time.

To be saved Someone is of you on you  
with you you are for.  
Warned.

A mother is supposed to allow the time  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her gift

She was nurturing, and violent. She wanted.

The lunch bag is loaded. With coming from her.

During Summer '00, the lunch bags were exhibited as *Don't forget the lunches* at Real Art Ways in Hartford, CT. In this version, the lunch bags are accompanied by a new video piece called *Sibling Dance (I won't let you go)*. Silently projected large and askew in the corner behind the mass of lunch bags, the piece is a five-minute repeating narrative of two children together, dancing on the verge of conflict, and separately in the throws of tantrums. When the video is exhibited in isolation, the panting breath of a woman in labor and the cries of children in fury structure the rapid pace of the inter-cut images. At the end, the voice of the mother ("I won't let you go") and the cries of the newborn repeat in the dark. The video was created with the collaborative assistance of Steven Harper, video artist, and colleague at the University of Connecticut, who offered these thoughts when the video was completed:

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When I watched the tapes that [Monica] had been making of Tristan and Thea in their home, I was uncomfortable. I was shocked to see children shove and jerk each other to the point of tears and then, minutes later, embrace and continue to dance as though no harm or shame had been done. I was surprised at her willingness to record and display these events, in such an unattended, unadorned, and therefore, seemingly, unapologetic manner . . . The discomfort I felt as I continued to watch met a notion that I shouldn't be watching. Each response hinted to the taboos surrounding the disclosure of these charged but mundane, significant but transient, familial interactions.

Another recent installation in this body of maternal work, *Afterbirths: King and Queen (Because Your Mother Said So)* is based on two charcoal drawings, one of a king and the other a queen, that my daughter furtively made on a pillar in the student exhibition pit in my department. For the installation, I traced the images in charcoal from slides of the original drawings projected large on a wall. As the original drawings were no more than three inches high, these images monumentalize evidence of a child's mark in the adult world. In front of the images is built a castle of glycerin-cast children's blocks. In each of a number of the castle's foundation blocks is embedded a lead-cast letter, with the blocks arranged to spell out the phrase "Because Your Mother Said So."

In the Fall of '99 I created a Faculty Show of *Afterbirth* pieces at the University of Connecticut's Benton Museum. *Afterbirths: Domestic Provocation*, was performed again as part of a Spring '00 solo exhibition at ArtWorks! in New Bedford, MA. The piece is an on going project based on my children's habit of "defacing" walls in our home. In the first manifestation of this project at the Benton, my children drew on the gallery walls with cast-lead sticks kept on a small salt cast shelf. Their work trespassed into the space below my "legitimate" artwork on the walls, with unexpected sensitivity to the scale and

articulation of the architecture. Like *King and Queen*, the project deals with children's challenge to adult authority, but also with their creative expression as "art" in it's own right, questioning the distinction between child's play and adult work.

In the Benton Installation, *Domestic Provocation* was enacted underneath two works of mine, hanging diagonally across the gallery from each other. In *Afterbirth: Three Years Postpartum*, a cast salt frame with sheet-lead matting holds a 16x20 print of an image under glass. In *Afterbirth: Postpartum Miniature*, a tiny print of the same image displayed in a gold-plated silver frame rests on a doily on a small shelf. The image is of my son's placenta, kept frozen since his birth in 1995. Both "portraits" reflects my effort to preserve the experience of labor and the memory of new birth, but they also call attention to this phenomenal organ.

Interestingly, more than the actual birth material included in for example *Afterbirth (Sac Fluid Cord)*, this photograph of placenta and the word "afterbirth" itself have elicited discomfort, disgust, and even outrage from some viewers. One father of an art student, who visited the Fall '99 Faculty Exhibition, was appalled after reading the title of the work and realizing the image wasn't just a picture of a piece of meat. Without seeing this image at all, the board of directors at ArtWorks! objected to the artistic director's proposed show of the maternal work, until she promised to separate the words "after" and "birth" in my titles, to avoid the literal reference and emphasize the metaphor. I preferred to drop the "afterbirth" prefix rather than have the titles manipulated.

*Postpartum Miniature* showed at ArtWorks!, but the director couldn't risk *Three Years Postpartum* in her particular community. Aesthetically composed as this photograph is, I understand the image pushes sanitized notions of birth. For me, it represents my son, but it also represents my ownership of the pregnancy and birth process. I own this placenta because of my children's home births. Perhaps because of the apparent persistence and ease of disseminating textual and photographic evocations of the body, or because of the sheer power of naming, the word and the image in combination are taken as more dangerous than the vulnerable material itself. I keep wondering how much of this is squeamishness, and how much is fear of the empowerment the image represents.

I was recently invited to speak in a colleague's class on women in the arts, and took the opportunity to show most of the work I've discussed here. While many reactions from students were quite positive, later a few of students in the class's online message board expressed a great deal of discomfort with the work, questioning not only the images I chose but my mothering as well. In a recent *New York Times* review of the lunch bag installation, an older male critic praised the work as a remarkable testament to a mother's devotion, but criticized the politicizing wall label in which the lead was described as a metaphor for maternal ambivalence. I've heard, too, that the question of conflict between a woman's work and her family is no longer an issue, that women no longer need to choose one or the other—so why investigate further?

What I know, and what the mothers who respond so positively to these installations know, is that the conflict is inseparable from the choice. Every minute of everyday a mother makes an emotionally fraught choice between autonomy and intimacy, and every adult who reacts to this work carries stories of their own about those choices. What dis-

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turbs is the fact that I look at my children with enough detachment to make art about us; what disquiets is the critical reflection on mothering by the mother herself. And it's a risk of a certain kind to bring ambivalence forward as the condition of ones work.

# ON MOTHERING AND WRITING

RACHEL HALL

It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved.

—*Simone de Beauvoir*

Because young humans remain dependent upon nurture for a much longer period than other mammals, and because of the division of labor long established in human groups, where women not only bear and suckle but are assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman.

—*Adrienne Rich*

I AM pregnant at the same time as Madonna and Helen Hunt's character, Jamie, on *Mad About You*. This season, it seems that pregnancy, motherhood, and infants are cool. And noteworthy, too: Several weeks after my daughter is born, the White House holds a press conference on speech development in infants. A panel of experts says that parents should sing and talk to even the youngest of infants because verbal stimulation is crucial to thinking and language skills. A photograph in the local paper captures Bill Clinton, his eyes cast down, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. Mothers are instructed to talk and sing to their infants because "it lays a foundation for the child's life, and in turn, our