



U M A M I

At the intersection of feminism, science fiction, and disco, **MOTHERNISM** aims to locate the mother-shaped hole in contemporary art discourse, therefore:

MOTHERNISM is not solely an ethical or political position, but also an aesthetic position.

MOTHERNISM aims to make mothers and mothering visible, audible, and palpable, outside but particularly inside of the visual arts.

MOTHERNISM aims to examine and challenge the perceived schism between the maternal and the artistic.

MOTHERNISTS strive for the highest degree of excellency, bearing in mind that the parameters of "quality" are not universal, but local.

MOTHERNISM is co-laboring with the forces.

MOTHERNISM is an orgy of organization.

MOTHERNISM is re-studio, re-modern, re-constructivist, and re-feminist.

MOTHERNISTS play in the expanded field between criticality and generosity.

MOTHERNISM begins to breathe while being drawn out.

All mothers being equal, not all mothers are alike nor are all **MOTHERNISTS** alike.

MOTHERNISTS get their daily food groups covered: eye candy, soul food, **UMAMI**.

UNITED

MOTHERNIST

ARTIST

MANIFEST

ILLUMINISMS



Dear,

You should never preach what you practice. You should strive for a more enlightened, better, brighter you. Just remember, when offered enlightenment, to ask yourself first: "Who is enlightened, by what, and why?"

You probably are a better, brighter me already. You are younger for sure. More symmetrical perhaps. In this day and age, people are surgically altered to look more like you and less like me.

When this is practiced in other parts of the world, we like to call it "female circumcision," or even "genital mutilation," but when it happens here, we call it *the Barbie*.¹

I cannot tell you what to do, but remember it's true: symmetry is valuable, but pleasure is valuable too—ooooh—ooooooooh:

We're learning to live
With somebody's depression
And I don't want to live
With somebody's depression
But we'll get by I suppose
It's a very modern world
but nobody's perfect
It's a moving world...²

I'm wearing purple underpants these days—as if I can only connect to the cosmos through my root chakra, like a giant Kundalini Cobra up my butt, like Cicciolina last time I saw her.³

¹ Dr. Red Alinsod, a Laguna Beach-based urogynecologist who invented the Barbie surgery, which amputates the entire icky Labia Minora, explains:

This results in a 'clamshell' aesthetic: a smooth genital area, the outer labia appearing 'sealed' together with no labia minora protrusion. Alinsod tells me he invented the Barbie in 2005. 'I had been doing more conservative labiaplasties before then,' he says. 'But I kept getting patients who wanted almost all of it off. They would come in and say, I want a 'Barbie.' So I developed a procedure that would give them this comfortable, athletic, petite look, safely.'

Katie J. M. Baker, "Unhappy With Your Gross Vagina? Why Not Try 'The Barbie,'" *Jezebel*, 18 January, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/5977025/unhappy-with-your-gross-vagina-why-not-try-the-barbie> (accessed 2 April, 2014).

² David Bowie, "Fantastic Voyage," *Lodger* (RCA, 1979).

³ I googled *Cicciolina* + *Cobra* to see if I could actually find this image, but ended up via a bizarre shot of Brigitte Nielsen's cleavage on a Spanish speaking site dedicated to *Great tits of the 80's*... so I'm sorry: if you live by the web, you die by the web—something to keep in mind!

What is a girl, what is a group of girls? Proust at least has shown us once and for all that their individuation, collective or singular, proceeds not by subjectivity, but by haecceity, pure haecceity. 'Fugitive beings.' They are pure relations of speed and slowness and nothing else. A girl is late on account of her speed: she did too many things, crossed too many spaces in relation to the relative time of the person waiting for her. Thus her apparent slowness is transformed into the breakneck speed of our waiting.⁴

In a sense this could be the mantra for these letters to you—circling around, trying to locate the mother in the girl and the girl in the mother, sussing out questions of haecceity, subjectivity, time, and space: like mother of pearl onto a grain of sand, the girl channels the woman and the woman the girl, until they collapse into one continuous, luminous, layered being.⁵

My own maternal heritage is not very well documented and vanishes quickly in the mist of hearsay: my mother was an occupational therapist and mother of three. Her mother, my grandmother—a petite sweetheart and *baby-woman*—was a sometimes-alcoholic, occasionally suicidal housewife and mother of five. Her own mother, who had more mouths to feed, sent her away to work as a farm hand by age eight and at age eighteen she came to work in my grandfather's grocery store. After he broke his leg, she impressed him by taking charge in the store and they married the following spring. They lost two of their five children to cancer.

Their oldest, likened for her beauty to her namesake Liz Taylor, was a whiz with a sewing machine. She died at thirty-three after a short sick bed and left behind a four-year-old daughter. Number two, less pretty and a spinster, died when she was fifty. She left behind an enormous pile of hand knitted towels in rainbow hues, and a stack of fauna compendia from which she would copy the Latin names of birds and animals in her scrawling handwriting. She was born with both mental and physical handicaps, which were possibly caused by my grandmother skinning a hare while she was pregnant, and possibly not.

I imagine my grandmother, as I am sure she herself oftentimes did, skinning that hare in her kitchen.

(The same kitchen we would later bake cookies for Christmas, where her every embrace would envelop us in a medicinal smell, like cough syrup. A sweetness with a punch thrown in. It mingled

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 271.

⁵ This opalescence will attract the eyes of so many people, because nothing attracts the eye like other people!

with the smell of the cookies we baked, the cigarettes she smoked, and the dishes in the sink.)

And I imagine her again months later when—the hare long gone—her baby, my aunt, was born upstairs in the bedroom like her four siblings. My grandmother could see immediately that there was something wrong: those long thin floppy arms, like cucumbers, that high-pitched shrill screaming, but oh, that lovely jet-black hair! She named her Ida after her own mother.

Everybody was kind of relieved when Aunt Ida died. She was still living with my grandparents who were getting really old by then, and nobody wanted to think about what would happen when they couldn't take care of her anymore, since she was unable to take care of herself.

Only my grandparents were devastated, as both children left behind an evenly empty void in their lives.

I guess in looking for the *girl-in-the-mother* and the *mother-in-the-girl* I am also looking for these women—a maternal heritage—in them, in myself, and in you. Their lives span about a hundred years, that saw such big changes in the lives of women, it feels like it may as well have been light years in a sci-fi epic. Today we are faced with so many choices they didn't have a century ago, we can almost forget there is a legacy that made possible these choices we now can, and should, take for granted.

That legacy, from our feminist foremothers and heroines, will tell you that you can be whatever you choose to be—but don't you ever forget that one woman's feminist is another woman's misogynist: although I was a Madonna fan for many years, I have never forgiven her for "Papa Don't Preach." Little did I know in those weeks when that pop-hit topped the radio charts, the fruit of my loins was more the shape and size of a gummy-bear and of the same translucency, than anything resembling a "baby." A gummy-bear with a heartbeat.⁶

I *still* think it's a bullshit song, though perhaps I took it too personally at the time, and that's about all that I will say about that.

(No, I will also say that although I will always defend your right to choose, politically, I hope that you will never need to exercise it, personally.)

You will find enough feminists out there who will tell you that *you* do not qualify as feminist, whereas the misogynists out there will usually tell you that *they* don't qualify as misogynists; meanwhile both will tell you that they really only have *your* best interests at heart!

⁶ Madonna, "Papa Don't Preach," *True Blue* (Warner Bros, 1986).

Oftentimes, when I feel like a disqualified feminist, it helps to recall my relief upon learning that Virginia Woolf was so solidly upper class that she and her husband—with whom she spent a lifelong and poly-platonic relationship—could practically pay for their publishing business out of pocket, while being persistently attacked by her contemporaries (suffragettes and critics alike), as well as literary historians later on, for not knowing the first thing about “real” (read: working class) women’s lives.⁷

Or, how disillusioned divorcees were disappointed to discover that Anaïs Nin was still married and supported by her husband, while taking several lovers and writing her five volume coast to coast American odyssey and *fictional* erotic bildungsroman about her sexual and artistic coming of age.⁸

Or, that Suzanne Brøgger married and settled down in the Danish countryside, where she brought up her daughter Luzia, whom she loved to bits and wrote a children’s book; becoming, as they say, altogether *boring*, instead of practicing and preaching free sex and to hell with the bourgeoisie and their cannibal monogamy.⁹

Or, that Simone de Beauvoir—rebel, provocateur and one of the greatest intellectuals of the 20th century—moved from her parents’ house into a hotel (with a chamber maid) and directly from there moved in with Sartre. He is often described as a big baby, whom she spent her adult life mothering—despite her fierce attacks on motherhood as the destiny of women. She would also share many of her female partners with him—in fact bringing home one budding butt after the other—while condemning housewives for prostituting themselves.¹⁰

Don’t ho’ me, if you don’t know me, Simone, but seriously:

With every Goddess a letdown
Every Idol a bring down
It gets you down
But the search for perfection
Your own predilection
Goes on and on and on and on¹¹

These four women, like all the others who inhabit these letters, whose lifetimes span the same century as my foremothers, also divulge a lineage of sorts, their literary DNA entwined with my own as I write. They are my idols not in spite of their obvious

⁷ Rumor.

⁸ Gossip.

⁹ Hearsay.

¹⁰ I heard it through the grapevine.

¹¹ Roxy Music, “Mother of Pearl.”

flaws, but because of them—including being accused of whoring—or conversely, accusing others.

And after all, if all our heroes are whores, maybe whoring is heroic?¹²

Whoring; not only in the narrowest sense of the word, as in prostitution, but more broadly—doing whatever you need to do, in order to do whatever you need to do.

Maybe this Cornucopian Principle, the ideal of immensity and endless availability, is the mother lode, the gift that keeps on giving, the good breast that just gets better?

Like Lady Gaga in her meat dress, all the eyes of all her little monsters feasting on her.

Like Janis Joplin singing:

Come on, come on, coooooooooome on and take it, take
another little piece of my heart now, baby!¹³

Or, Billie Holiday raising her bet with:

All of me
Why not take all of me?¹⁴

Or, like Selma in Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark* who sacrifices her eyesight (and ultimately her life) so that her child can see.¹⁵

Selma is a compelling figure, but not a new one.

Von Trier could well have gotten his inspiration from Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Story of a Mother*, in which a mother follows her baby in order to steal it back from Death:

Then she came to a great lake, on which there were neither ship nor boat. The lake was not frozen enough to carry her, nor sufficiently open to allow her to wade through, and yet she must cross it if she was to find her

¹² I wonder if the whores of Babylon were multilingual? Maybe translating is the oldest profession in the world?

¹³ Big Brother and the Holding Company, “Piece of My Heart,” *Cheap Thrills* (Columbia, 1968).

¹⁴ Billie Holiday, “All of Me,” *All of Me* (International Music, 1941).

¹⁵ Björk—who famously hated working with Lars von Trier—said afterwards that she believed she was cast for Selma’s part after von Trier watched a video in which she attacked a paparazzi photographer trying to take pictures of her son in an airport. Her songs often reflect her own experience of maternal bliss, like this one:

One breath away from mother Oceania
Your nimble feet make prints in my sands
You have done good for yourselves
Since you left my wet embrace
And crawled ashore
Every boy, is a snake is a lily
Every pearl is a lynx, is a girl

Björk, “Oceania,” *Medulla* (One Little Indian, 2004).

child. Then she laid herself down to drink the lake; and that was impossible for anyone to do. But the sorrowing mother thought that perhaps a miracle might be wrought.

'No, that can never succeed,' said the Lake. 'Let us rather see how we can agree. I'm fond of collecting pearls, and your eyes are the two clearest I have ever seen: if you will weep them out into me I will carry you over into the great greenhouse, where Death lives and cultivates flowers and trees; each of them a human life.'

'Oh, what I would not give to get my child!' said the afflicted mother; and she wept yet more, and her eyes fell into the depths of the lake, and became two costly pearls.¹⁶

This is my favorite of his fairy tales, and the saddest. I cry my eyes out every time I read it, so I read it over and over.

(Like Suzanne Brøgger once said: "Crying is good. It's like an orgasm, just in the other end.")¹⁷

The self sacrificing mother is a contested figure and has often been interpreted as a misogynist ideal, but she is so powerful also, because she turns the power structures suppressing her, not upside down, but inside out, through the self-sacrifice which in turn becomes the ultimate liberation, a re-birth!

At the end of the story our mother finds her-self in Death's greenhouse, full of potted plants, each of them representing a human life. By the grace of her all-enduring love she managed to outrun him and greets him on his return:

'Give me back my child!' said the mother; and she implored and wept. All at once she grasped two pretty flowers with her two hands and called to Death, 'I'll tear off all your flowers, for I am in despair.'

'Do not touch them,' said Death. 'You say you are so unhappy; and now you would want to make another mother just as unhappy!'

'Another mother?' said the poor woman; and she let the flowers go.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of a Mother" (1848), in *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairytales* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 398.

¹⁷ I read this quote so long ago, I actually don't remember where I read it... but I know that I read it! It's become the kind of knowledge I carry with me, and use to console myself (or you), when unraveling.

Much like the rumor and hearsay I mentioned earlier in the footnotes to this letter, this kind of wisdom layers itself into the narratives we compose about the world around us, and insert ourselves into, hoping to make sense of it all, some day later. This is not traditionally academic or analytical. Nor is it anti-academic or anti-analytical. It is born out of the kind of necessity that is the mother of invention. (See also footnote 3, in the Introduction.)

¹⁸ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of a Mother," 400.

Death, in return, has a surprise. He gives back her eyes that he fished out of the lake—now even clearer than before—and asks her to look into a nearby well.

Oh Mother of Pearl

Submarine lover in a shrinking world¹⁹

Staring into the depths of the well, she sees the fate of the two flowers: one who lives a full and happy life, spreading joy and happiness in the world, while the other unhappily spreads misery and woe.

'Which of them is the flower of misfortune and which is the blessed one?' she asked.

'That I may not tell you,' answered Death, 'but this much you shall hear, that one of these two flowers is that of your child. It was the fate of your child that you saw—the future of your own child'²⁰

The well of destiny, the philosopher's stone, the code-breaker, the DNA: which will tell us if we are children of coincidence or faith? Of haecceity or subjectivity?

Are we so different today than this mother, with our prenatal screening, our prying eye that scrutinizes any fold or flap, in order to predict the future of our unborn?

My mother's generation was handed (or took into their own hands) the speculum, and with it gained a new sense of ownership over their own bodies—that in time led to both a sexual revolution and, with a little help from "the pill," the disconnect between sexual pleasure and reproduction. Along with other events (like the case of Roe vs. Wade) this sense of ownership also paved the way for legal abortion, under the motto "My Body, My Choice."

My generation was handed (or not quite handed and that is the catch) the ultrasound probe.

That diagnostic instrument has become a household commodity in any and all—i.e. not just high risk—pregnancies; the first ultrasound is a rite-of-passage for the expectant parent(s) and the embryonic portraits passed around to friends and family.

Although it may seem innocuous, this "window to the womb" is by no means neutral. As Dutch philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek points out in his book about the moral agency of the things that surround us:

¹⁹ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."

²⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of a Mother," 401.

This technology is not simply a functional means to make visible an unborn child in the womb. It actively helps to shape the way the unborn is humanely experienced.²¹

Ultrasound imaging represents the unborn through a series of interpretative steps, each shaping how the unborn is perceived, for example:

First of all, the image on the screen has a specific size, and even though this representation suggests a higher degree of realism, its size does not coincide with the size of the unborn in the womb. A fetus eleven weeks old measures about 8.5 cm and weighs 30 grams, but its representation on the screen makes it appear to have the size of a newborn baby [...] A number of techniques are used to construct a realistic image of the unborn. Further, a sonogram depicts the unborn independently from the body of its mother.²²

This last point is important, as it redefines not only the status of the fetus, but also the status of the mother. First—because that’s what everybody wants to do when having a sonogram—let’s take a look at the baby:

Ultrasound imaging constitutes the fetus as an *individual person*; it is made present as a separate living being rather than forming a unity with its mother, in whose body it is growing. Obstetric ultrasound thus contributes to the coming about of what has been called ‘fetal personhood’ [...] This experience of fetal personhood is enhanced by the possibility of seeing the gender of the unborn; by its ability to reveal the genitals, ultrasound genders the unborn. The expectant parents, as a result, can begin to call the unborn by its name.²³

Moreover, if you have a name you are *somebody*, and if you are somebody, you live *somewhere*:

Another effect of this separation of mother and unborn is that the mother is increasingly seen as the environment in which the unborn is living, rather than

²¹ Peter-Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 17.

²² Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, 24–25.

²³ Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, 25.

forming a unity with it. And when the fetus is constituted as a vulnerable subject, its environment may potentially be harmful. This opens the way for using ultrasound screening as a form of surveillance, monitoring the lifestyle and habits of expecting women in order to enhance the safety of the unborn.²⁴

Accordingly, the ultrasound probe becomes an instrument that effectively hands the (pregnant) female body back to professionals—in this case the medics and the lawmakers—after all, as lay(wo)men we are in no position to interpret these images ourselves.

Furthermore, although there is no medical indication for an ultrasound examination in preparation to a first trimester abortion, several US states require it.²⁵

It must be noted that these are not diagnostic ultrasounds, performed to screen for congenital defects that are rarely detectable before twelve weeks gestation, but rather ultrasounds performed solely to establish the “personhood” of the fetus, in a heartbeat.²⁶

In the case of a wanted pregnancy however, the ultrasound serves as a *diagnostic* tool, designed to single out fetuses at risk of, for example, Down’s syndrome (via neck fold measurements) or spina bifida. This type of prenatal screening frames the unborn as a possible future patient, an interpretive action that is (also) not without moral consequences:

In translating the unborn into a possible patient, ultrasound makes pregnancy into a medical condition that needs to be monitored and requires professional healthcare. Moreover, ultrasound translates ‘congenital defects’ into preventable forms of suffering. [...] It inevitably becomes a matter of choice now: the choice not to have an ultrasound scan made is also a choice, a very deliberate one in a society in which the norm is to have these scans done, based on the predominant assumption that *not* scanning for

²⁴ Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, 24–25.

²⁵ Guttmacher Institute, “State Policies in Brief, Requirements for Ultrasound as of March 1st, 2014,” *Guttmacher Institute*, https://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/spibs/spib_RFU.pdf (accessed 28 March, 2014).

According to this brief from the Guttmacher Institute, twelve states require that an abortion provider perform an ultrasound on each woman seeking an abortion, while in nine states providers must offer the women the opportunity to see images made as preparation for the abortion and another five states require the provider to offer the woman a voluntary ultrasound before the abortion procedure.

²⁶ In other words, an act of surveillance by the state to protect the safety of the unborn, against the pregnant woman’s will; to add to the invasiveness of this procedure, most ultrasounds in the first trimester are performed via the vagina, as the fetus is too small to give “good pictures” via the abdominal wall.

disease is irresponsible, because you deliberately run the risk of having a disabled or sick child, causing suffering both for the child and for yourself and your family.²⁷

When you were about ten weeks inside of me, the doctor couldn't find your head on that scan. She found your heart, but what good is a heart with no head?

I didn't know where to turn. I didn't turn to God. I abandoned the idea of an interventionist God, because what kind of heartless God would put a headless baby inside of me, and then haggle about it through prayer?

I turned to my dad who advised me not to seek knowledge I was not prepared to use, which turned out to be good fatherly advice, so I'm passing this on to you.

And then I turned to you and I asked you; I begged and I pleaded with you, to grow your own head. I wept and implored. I promised I would be the best mother I could ever be, the only mother you would ever need, if you would only grow a head.

Which you did, and how! When I came back the following week to the hospital they told me the images were normal.

I could not believe it. I could not believe it, until many sonogram images and months later I saw it with my own eyes; that in fact your newborn head was not only normal, it was perfect! With your own perfect eyes in it!

Perfectly normal, what else?

Of course during my pregnancy, and some times after, I felt bad for "you," for having considered not to let "you" live, believing "you" had no head and therefor no life outside the womb anyway. (I have since convinced myself...no, it would be more accurate to say that I have since learned, that "you" without "your" head is not the same you I know and love.) But while I didn't feel alright, making that call, I felt like everything would be alright as long as I could only keep you inside of me—but then what?

I am probably neither the first nor the last mother to wish, despite morning sickness, elephant limbs, and deathlike fatigue, to stay pregnant forever. To never have to deliver on the promise of delivery.

The untanglement of the mother-and-child union happens gradually and suddenly, leaving both with an imprint and perhaps a longing, back to this halfway home, where one becomes two? And believe you me; the "Quickening"—the feeling of another life inside you diverging from this point of viability—is a larger-than-life experience.

²⁷ Peter-Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology*, 17.

If your *sexual persona*, your womanhood, is layered upon you like mother of pearl, motherhood in turn is layered on you from the inside as it hollows out the shiny phallic object of the female body and turns it into a vessel, a grail, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

(Which is not to be confused with destiny!)

This layering should be taken figuratively, while at the same time quite literally. New scientific research suggests what we perhaps already knew instinctively:

Women can also gain genomes from their children. After a baby is born, it may leave some fetal cells behind in its mother's body, where they can travel to different organs and be absorbed into those tissues [...] It's pretty likely that any woman who has been pregnant is a chimera.²⁸

In this way our DNA, like a pearl, a philosopher's stone, or a lyric rolling on your tongue, operates in layers, through metamorphosis, becoming a mantra, trickling intravenously into our limbic system, connecting the person you are becoming to the person I was. And what we look for in this connective tissue is not perfection, but transformation.

It's a lot of information, I know, so much I wanted to tell you, because:

You are my Favorita
And a place in your heart dear
Makes me feel more real²⁹

That real feeling of containing and carrying somebody, of the whole oceanic interiority that entails, is a position of hope, but also a position of fear; because something, or somebody, (more precisely that you, you were yet to become and I was yet to know) could be lost, I just had to believe in it, but anyway:

Even Zarathustra
Another-time-loser
Could believe in you³⁰

And even so, you can't just take it from me—there is so much I have left out. Like Paula Modersohn-Becker's self portraits,

²⁸ Carl Zimmer, "DNA Double Take," *The New York Times*, 16 September, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/science/dna-double-take.html> (accessed 3 April, 2014).

²⁹ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."

³⁰ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."

Buñuel's *An Andalusian Dog*, or Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter*—go see with your own eyes!

Just remember: Seeing is not believing, but it is a practice.³¹

Oh mother of pearl
I wouldn't change you
for the whole world ³²

Amen to that!
Love,
Mom

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outro

³¹ Amelia Charter, note to author, Chicago, March, 2013.

³² Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."



outro

On the Mo(u)ning of Margaret Thatcher's passing.

Dear Reader,

I remember a poster, popular at the time when I was in my pre-teens and living so close to the Iron Curtain we could see it from our house. In a parody of the movie poster from *Gone with the Wind*, Ronald Reagan carries Margaret Thatcher away from a nuclear mushroom cloud blazing behind them. It reads:

She promised to follow him to the end of the world,
He promised to organize it!

It scared the living daylights out of me.

You can argue what came first, the spunk or the egg, but Reagan and Thatcher were made in the boardroom for each other, and they made it clear to the world in no uncertain terms that they would take this new romance to the bunker if needed.

Of course many tried to break them up. In 1982 a crackly tape recording surfaced of a hostile phone call between Thatcher and Reagan. The reason for their fall-out reportedly being the controversial sinking of the Argentine battleship *Belgrano*, which was torpedoed by British nuclear subs as it was sailing away from the Falkland Islands, killing 323 people.¹

In the recording Reagan accuses Thatcher of being too aggressive and urges her: "Control yourself!"

The tape, delivered anonymously to the office of Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, was soon found to be a hoax. Only problem was that nobody knew who had produced the spliced recording of Thatcher and Reagan's voices. A top secret note from the British Foreign Office read:

There is no information to indicate that any subversive group or individual in this country was involved in making this tape.²

¹ Thatcher was later interrogated about the *Belgrano* incident on the BBC live television program *Nationwide*, by a schoolteacher(!)—an insult that caused Thatcher's husband, Denis, to latch out at the producer of the show that his wife had been 'stitched up by bloody BBC poofs and Trots.'

BBC News "TV's top 10 tantrums," *BBC UK*, 31 August, 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1518975.stm (accessed 30 March, 2014).

² Nico Hines, "The British Punk Band That Fooled Reagan, Thatcher and the CIA," *The Daily Beast*, 4 January, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/04/the-british-punk-band-that-fooled-reagan-thatcher-and-the-cia.html> (accessed 28 March, 2014)

Argentine intelligence was suspected, among others, before it was decided that: "This type of activity fits the pattern of fabrications circulated by the Soviet KGB."³

The tape did the rounds for another year or so, before it was discovered to be the brainchild of a little known British anarcho punk band, with a back catalogue of titles like *Penis Envy* and *Christ the Album*. Crass.

If Punk is dad, who will pull this kind of prank, or dress you in a *Ramones* romper and take you out to paint the town black every other weekend, Disco is your eternal mother, into whose pulsating bosom you can always return when he sends you pogoing. Unfortunately they cannot be in the same room with each other.

I thought Thatcher was no dancer. Not true, in fact I've found several photos of her and Reagan waltzing over the world stage, but still—no disco dancer! In fact, I am fairly sure that in Thatcher's universe, disco doesn't even exist. Not even a minuscule degree.

Yet she was instrumental and definitive to my muse and protagonist Queen Leeba. Thatcher became Leeba's antagonist.

In so many ways, 1979 was Queen Leeba's year. It was the Year of the Child. It was the year of Disco Demolition. And it was the year Thatcher was elected into office.

Of course it is just one year of many, but when I think of it now, the transition from the '70s and '80s evokes a shift in the Western paradigm, commencing a retrograde movement away from some of the possibilities and conversations that had been started in the '60s and continued in the '70s—conversations that entertained *The Limits To Growth*, for example, and the redistribution of wealth.⁴

Pretty soon these conversations were to be muffled by ridicule with slogans such as "Greed is Good!" and "The nine most dangerous words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help!'" and the way was paved for Thatcherism and Reaganomics.

As the caption underneath the poster predicted, Reagan and Thatcher's wild romance is *Now Playing World wide*, which is the reason why we are now given all kinds of stuff for free. Not because, as it used to be, the society is you, but because the product is you. Which is great, right? Because we all want free stuff...except the free stuff we get now is not the stuff we need, like education, health care, and affordable housing. No, that

³ Hines, "The British Punk Band That Fooled Reagan, Thatcher and the CIA."

⁴ *The Limits to Growth* is a 1972 book using computer simulations to predict the effect of exponential economic and population growth in a world with finite natural resources. Its first edition bears the subtitle: 'A report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind.'

Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, William W. Berens and Jørgen Randers, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books 1972).

A PDF of the book can be found here: <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf> (accessed 6 April, 2014).

stuff is really expensive, because it is actually valuable. So what we get instead, for example, is Facebook—*always free and always will be!*

And what we get instead of feminism is the advice to *Lean In*, to take it like a man, to succumb to the prestige of 60+ hour workweeks, with five-hour nights and all-day-care for our kids, to compete and break the glass ceiling. This pseudo-feminism has by now all but cornered the popular imagination of what feminism should be about.⁵

It defines success solely in masculine terms of competing within the existing game, while ignoring that feminism was originally a game changer—aiming at changing the rules, toward equality and (gasp!) solidarity between men and women. What we need according to this breed of "Iron Lady Feminists," are more businesswomen, more mompreneurs, more female CEOs and politicians, more world leaders like Hillary Clinton and Margaret Thatcher.

In Leeba's universe, Margaret Thatcher is the "Hannibal the Cannibal" of feminism, butchering the feminist body, and skinning it to sew herself a power suit.

She would probably have loved that idea.

New Statesman's editor Paul Johnson quoted Thatcher as saying:

The feminists hate me, don't they? And I don't blame them. For I hate feminism. It is poison.⁶

And yet, undeniably, she owed her political career to preceding generations of feminists, just as she made the road to equality and solidarity undeniably harder to travel for any and all subsequent generations (feminists and non-feminists alike).

She basically road-blocked it, or, to borrow her lingo, privatized its infrastructure.

As Russell Brand, ever the voice of reason, remarked in his eulogy for her:

It always struck me as peculiar [...] when the Spice Girls briefly championed Thatcher as an early example of girl power. I don't see that. She is an anomaly; a product of the freak-onomy of her time. Barack Obama, interestingly, said in his statement that she had 'broken the glass ceiling for other women.'

⁵ Except maybe that other popular notion that feminism is about hating men, because yeah really, feminism is really all about men! Really??!?!? —Oh, please!

⁶ Jessica Elgot, "Margaret Thatcher Dead: Was the Iron Lady a Feminist?" *Huffington Post UK*, 8 April, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/04/08/margaret-thatcher-feminist_n_3036864.html (accessed 28 March, 2014).

Only in the sense that all the women beneath her were blinded by falling shards. She is an icon of individualism, not of feminism.⁷

In keeping with the individualist credo “anything you can do, I can do better!” Thatcher famously hardly ever slept. She got by on catnaps here and there, in boardrooms and taxis for instance, staying up all night, plotting and scheming her new world order.

It makes complete sense to me: I am at my most vitriolic and mean spirited when sleep deprived.

(Although you can wake me up for breastfeeding any time!)

My husband does not understand my passionate resentment toward this woman. Unlike him, I didn’t grow up in Britain, where her election was welcomed by his primary school peers with a bemused, “Blimey, now we have a female prime minister! Jolly Good!” before moving along in the lunch queue singing:

In the gravy, where we can sail the seven peas...

That was before she snatched their milk, of course... and then she snatched so much more than that.

I know it’s pathetic, and I know you are going to ask: “Do you have to?” Yes, I have to—because this actually describes the feeling most accurately, and perhaps also underscores that sometimes the pathetic is the perfect antidote to apathy—I have to, have to, have to quote the most pathetic (and therefore one of the greatest) British bands, Pink Floyd. At their most pathetic, on that most pathetic album of theirs, *The Final Cut*, Roger Waters wails:

Should we shout
Should we scream
What happened to the post war dream?
-Oh, Maggie, Maggie, what did we do?⁸

Maggie should know! She snatched the postwar dream by laying the foundation for a Europe in which the welfare state and the worker’s unions—with their credo of eight hours work, eight hours rest and eight hours freedom, of giving what you can and getting what you need, instead of just giving as good as you get—were dismantled and ridiculed.

Instead, groups of people on the periphery of the work market—the immigrants, the unemployed, and most recently, the art-

⁷ Russell Brand, “I Always Felt Sorry for her Children,” *The Guardian*, 9 April, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/09/russell-brand-margaret-thatcher> (accessed 30 March, 2014).

⁸ Pink Floyd, “The Post War Dream,” *The Final Cut* (Harvest, 1983).

ists—are singled out and pitted against each other in the name of competition and privatization. Friends of mine who took to the streets in protest of severe budget cuts to the cultural sector of the Netherlands, reported back with shocking accounts: not only of police brutality (which was expected), but also of verbal abuse from spectators of the demonstration. From their front row seats at sidewalk cafés along the route through the pedestrian precinct of the respectable city of The Hague, these *nette burgers* (meaning “good citizens”) merrily booed the protesters calling them *Links Tuig!* (Leftist Scum!)

Although, I suspect, Thatcher couldn’t care less about Dutch artists, her legacy lives on in the pervasive impulse to ridicule and bully anyone who stands up for their livelihood, or points to the responsibility of the state to protect its weaker members.

Owen Jones preemptively wrote in *The Independent*, a year before her death:

Thatcher is reviled by some not just because she crushed the left, the Labour movement and the post-war social democratic settlement. It is because she did it with such enthusiasm, and showed no regret for the terrible human cost [...] Perhaps if a Labour government had reduced the prosperous middle-classes of the Home Counties to mass unemployment and poverty, and stockbrokers desperate to save their livelihoods had been chased by police on horseback through the City of London, they would understand the bitterness.[...] But while Thatcher-hate is understandable, it is futile. Celebrating the prospect of her death has become an admittedly macabre substitute for the failure to defeat Thatcherism.⁹

Part of my renewed resentment toward Thatcher was my own bitterness, after seeing friends and colleagues, fellow artists, being bullied into compliance by members of her following, from the wave of neo-liberal government, that washed over Europe since the turn of the millennium.

While that might be futile, an incentive for this book was the unwillingness to accept the neo-liberalist status quo as the end of history.

At the same time, it bothered me that my younger friends did not want to identify with the feminist movement, because in their vocabulary, the term *Feminist* had become attached to the term *Killjoy*.

So, I labeled myself the *Feminist Killjoy* and went on to preach the joys of Feminism.

⁹ Owen Jones, “Not All Socialists Want To Dance On Margaret Thatcher’s Grave, I Want Her To Go On And On,” *The Independent*, 16 September, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/not-all-socialists-want-to-dance-on-margaret-thatchers-grave-i-want-her-to-go-on-and-on-8143089.html> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

And Motherhood. And Art. And Disco.

To this end I have been revisiting, reexamining, repurposing, and recycling some of the legacy handed to us from the 2nd wave of feminism from the '70s, and thrown on the landfill of history by *Lean In Feminists*.

There is enlightenment to be found on that tip; although some of this legacy seems quaint and dated now, there is some really good and useful stuff there. As an antidote to the toxic spill of our *laissez-faire* economy, there is also a whole lot of love.

Which makes it clear, perhaps, why Thatcher hated feminism so much. As Russell Brand dryly notes:

When I awoke today on LA time my phone was full of impertinent digital eulogies. It'd be disingenuous to omit that there were a fair number of ding-dong-style celebratory messages amidst the pensive reflections on the end of an era. Interestingly, one mate of mine, a proper leftie, in his heyday all Red Wedge and right-on punch-ups, was melancholy. 'I thought I'd be overjoyed, but really it's just...another one bites the dust...' This demonstrates, I suppose, that if you opposed Thatcher's ideas it was likely because of their lack of compassion, which is really just a word for love. If love is something you cherish, it is hard to glean much joy from death, even in one's enemies.¹⁰

Even so, I couldn't but feel a brief elation when I learned of her death. A hope emerged: now that she is gone, perhaps her legacy could rust in peace right along with her.

So I made her a banner and I hung it above my Motherism tent: a protest-chic *mise-en-scène*—a Femi-Futuristic camp for Queen Leeba and her Mothernists to inhabit. Here, the different parts of the project came together as an audio-visual installation.

The mother-ship of the project, a nomadic tent structure, serves as library, chill room, and gathering point. It contains a selection of Leeba's books along with a soundtrack in the form of recordings of her letters—the letters that were later reworked for this book. Inside the tent, visitors are invited to listen to the audio, to read the books, to think, to talk or to just hang out and eat marshmallows (because we are bad enough Mothers, you can totally eat marshmallows inside our tent!).

The ambience of the space is heavily influenced by the visual language of the futuristic interior design of the '60s and '70s, in particular that of Verner Panton and Poul Gernes. These two

¹⁰ Russell Brand, "I Always Felt Sorry for her Children."

influential Danish designers and artists are united in a radical approach to color theory as well as a design philosophy characterized by a social conscience with respect for the ordinary individual, and its right to inhabit a meaningful, stimulating and nurturing, environment. In this so-called *Snoezelen Room*, knowledge transfer is propagated through cross-pollination and exchange—creating a synergy between cerebral and embodied cognition, between "being in it" and "thinking of it."¹¹

When the installation was open—both at Co-Prosperity Sphere in Chicago and at the Poor Farm in Wisconsin—I was really happy that people took this invitation to make themselves at home and took the time, both to listen to the audio, but also to each other. Unfortunately, no-one was breastfeeding in the tent yet, but it is my dream that some time in the (not too distant) future, when we get to stake out in the museum, someone will!

Inside and above the tent hang protest-chic banners, sporting Mothernist slogans and symbols, combining the formal language of Hilma af Klint and Kenneth Noland with a disco vibe. They can be worn as scarves and waved like flags, allowing the bearer to protest by day and be chic by night, underscoring that the compromises that you (need to) make as a mother, to accommodate and unite the different spheres of your life, are not signs of weakness but of strength.

Do what you have to do to do what you have to do.

Protest is a position of hope. It hopes to some day make itself redundant. I hope that some day we won't need to point out the legacy of feminism anymore because it has made itself redundant, or self-explanatory.

But, until that day, I have tried to repurpose it for myself and for you, dear reader.

This repurposing took shape as these letters, open letters from a fictional mother to a fictional daughter, sister and mother. But also from myself to my own daughter, or perhaps more accurately, from the girl I was to the woman she will become.

To that girl, the girl I was, 1979 is also a seminal year, as it more or less marks the beginning of my self-identification, at age 10, as an artist and a feminist.

The world I, we, inhabit now, is markedly different from that ten-year-old girl's vision of her own future, so I set out to revision it. To do that, I had to dig up and revise a lot of that good shit on the garbage belt of history, among it what I imagined

¹¹ A "Snoezelen Room" is a soothing environment filled with sensory and intellectual stimulation in which the visitor can enter a liminal state of cognitive and aesthetic exploration. The Dutch term *snoezelen* is constructed from two verbs: *snuffelen*, meaning to explore, and *doezelen*, meaning to doze off. The term was invented to describe soothing yet stimulating environments, developed for non-verbal therapeutic treatment of people with severe autism and of demented elderly.

"What is Snoezelen," Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, http://www.hollandbloorview.ca/programsandservices/communityprograms/snoezelen/what_is_snoezelen.php (accessed 28 March, 2014).

to be that girl's legacy of feminism –the one we got handed down from our (fore)mothers.

Digging in, I also dug up a lot of stuff I didn't expect, a lot of stuff I didn't agree with and a lot of stuff that I found contradictory, which as it turned out was a great relief.

As I tried to figure out the relationship between the different aspects of my life and this legacy, defining myself as a feminist-academic-artist-mother increasingly felt like playing a complicated game of rock-paper-scissors-boob. I didn't find sufficient space for mothering within the academic feminist discourse I wanted to partake in, just like I had felt discouraged when wanting to include it in my art practice and I felt increasingly provoked at this demand to "check my motherhood at the door." So much so that instead of "covering" that part of my life, I opted to "come out" as a mother, artistically and academically.

One way of reading this book could be as documenting my "coming out" and my attempt to stake out new territory—within this "mother-shaped hole" in art discourse.

This "staking out" should be interpreted quite literally; instead of making work "about mothering" I decided to make a piece that operated "something like a Mama": the installation I described above. I employed my fictive Alma Mater Queen Leeba, as a kind of psychic companion, who would lend me the strength to be fierce, voluptuous, and hysterical.

Together we set out to conquer and inhabit this *terra incognita*, to mine the mother lode, with intent to examine the central hypothesis: If the proverbial Mother is perhaps a persona non grata in the art world, because her nurturing nature is at odds with the hyperbolic ideal of the singular artistic genius.

In its totality *Mothernism* offers a practice-based approach to theoretical research, operating in an organic way more like a sourdough than an archive.

One morning, as I was unloading the *Mothernism* tent in my now empty studio, I had a little cry. I was eating a heart shaped *Mom's Heart* special Mother's Day edition from Dunkin' Donuts, while reading on my cell phone the digital edition of *The New York Times*, about the collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh.¹²

¹² CELEBRATE MOM IN SWEET WAYS AT DUNKIN' DONUTS THIS MAY:

Dunkin' Donuts also has a Mom's Heart Donut, a heart-shaped donut filled with Bavarian Kreme, topped with strawberry icing and festive heart-shaped sprinkles. The Mom's Heart Donut is available at participating Dunkin' Donuts restaurants nationwide for a limited time.

Dunkin Donuts, "Celebrate Mom in Sweet Ways at Dunkin' Donuts this May," *Dunkin' Donuts*, 2 May, 2012, <http://news.dunkindonuts.com/Press-Releases/CELEBRATE-MOM-IN-SWEET-WAYS-AT-DUNKIN-DONUTS-THIS-MAY-ec.aspx> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

Motherly love, so sweet and yet so raw: you see, a *Mom's Heart* is not only covered in pink glazing and heart shaped sprinkles it is also filled to the brim with the sweetest custard you have ever tasted. While this saccharine goo overflowed and spilled into every cavity of every tastebud I never knew I had and filled it to the brim with some obscene bliss, another mother cried out in another part of the world, holding up the pictures of her two children who had been working in the garment factories on the fourth and the fifth floor of what was now just a giant pile of rubble. She was calling out to them, to the sky and to the world at large and to the void in front of her: "Today, I'm here! But you haven't come back!"¹³

I am here! I am here and you are not! Why are you not here?

In the beautifully raw spring morning light, spilling into my now empty studio (empty but for a ton of stuff), that was too much to bear, and I had to have a little cry.

It was a cry of exhaustion, I guess. The exhaustion of a project nearing its completion, combined with the realization that it can never be completed. The closer I get to the Mother, the closer to infinity.

It's like the world is too large these days for motherly love, and yet too small. Like there is no space for this type of attachment in the digital age.

And in the mental time/space collapse of the here/now and the there/now, it felt so exhaustingly incomprehensible that her kids had to die, *there*, while I could sit *here* and have my donut and eat it too, after dropping my kids off at school where they will hopefully know what to do if an armed lunatic enters the building after the terrifying unannounced lockdown drill they had to endure last week, and me briefly entertaining the question, as I waved goodbye to them, if the security guard was armed, and if it would make me feel safer either way.

The sudden realization that these are the kind of incomprehensible bullshit questions we have to entertain these days, every day—because there is no outside to the vernacular of capitalism—had me in tears. My interest in The Mother stems in part from a defiance to give in to this vernacular, to challenge it. Because, even when you try to squeeze her into a donut, even if the mother lets you do that, she is uncontainable—she runneth over. Her self-sacrifice is a transgression, it breaks the primordial taboo of capitalism, because in capitalism, there is no greater love than what you feel for you, and your infinite individual needs.

¹³ Jim Yardley, "Tears and Rage as Hopes Fade in Bangladesh," *The New York Times*, 29 April, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/29/world/asia/owner-of-collapsed-building-arrested-in-bangladesh.html> (accessed 30 March, 2014).

So, I set out to locate the the Mother-shaped hole in contemporary art and discourse. And I realized that the hole *is* the donut, it is the essence of the donut. To paraphrase an old feminist slogan: we don't need another bite of the donut, we need a whole new recipe.

Which is funny because when I started putting this thing together light years ago, it started with a tune stuck in my head.

I was Donna Summer singing what have been dubbed *the worst lyrics in the history of music*:

Someone left the cake out in the rain
I don't think that I can take it
'Cause it took so long to make it
And I'll never find that recipe again¹⁴

And I thought: what the fuck happened to feminism? And I realized that, to me, feminism had become that cake left out in the rain. It could have been, should have been, the most nutritious and delicious thing, but there it was: all wet and soggy and ruined and *ridiculous*.

So I looked at it and thought: "If I am to hand this cake down to the next generation, my son's and daughter's generation, what does it need? If I were to bake it again, to change the recipe, what does it need?" And I thought: "It needs a beat, a heart beat and a disco beat."

It needs a future, a future feminism and it needs a space. It needs a space, a liminal space, like a tent, so it can move and move through and be moved through.

A space for mothering and a space in the art world for mothering, because without mothers there will be no next generation of feminists or anybody else.

And without art there will be no future anymore and we will all just be living in the past.

Love,
Lise

P.S. If you mix red, white and blue, it makes lavender.



¹⁴ Donna Summer, "MacArthur Park," *On the Radio—Greatest Hits* (Casablanca, 1979).

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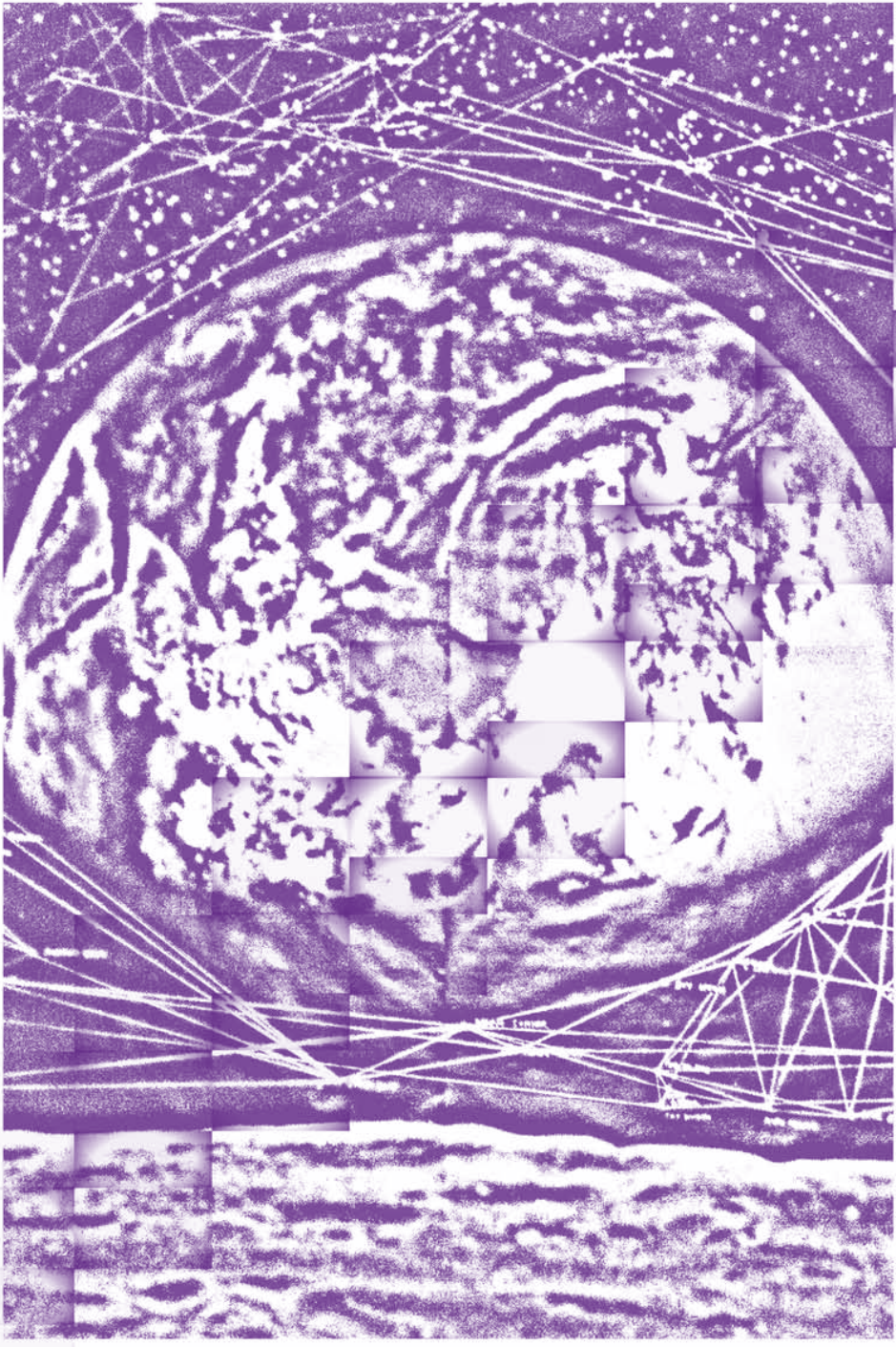
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Lise Haller Baggesen (1969) left her native Denmark for the Netherlands in 1992 to study painting at the AKI, Academy of Art and Industrial Design in Enschede, and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. In 2008 she relocated to Chicago with her family, and completed her MA in Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute in 2013. Over time, her work evolved from a traditional painting practice toward a hybrid practice including curating, writing, and multimedia installation work.

She has shown internationally in galleries and museums including Overgaden in Copenhagen, the Municipal Museum in the Hague, MoMu in Antwerp, Württembergischem Kunstverein in Stuttgart, CAEC in Xiamen, The Poor Farm in Manawa, Wisconsin, 6018 North, Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. *Motherism* is her first book.



MOTHER of ABSTRACTION

Dear,
 Draw a circle. Draw another circle inside it. Draw a dot in the middle. In, further in. You have a target. An egg. A pregnancy. An abstraction.

I want to tell you a story about abstraction.

But let's start with the egg.

Clarice Lispector asks: "What kind of love is as blind as an egg cell?"¹

I was basking in that maternally blind love the other day during my yoga practice, visualizing an impregnation. Like one of those movies you will watch in sex-ed class; a microscopic view zooming in on millions and millions of little tadpole spermatozooids racing toward the expectant egg cell like a venereal Survival of the Fittest, getting closer and closer, until the lucky winner gets to dive in, head first...

But that's not quite how it happens. In reality, the impregnation of an egg cell is not the work of one fit little bastard's superior tail fin. Rather, the fertilization of an egg is a collaborative project in which the egg is marinated in all that lively willing and able spunk, until by some enzymatic osmosis the membrane protecting the egg becomes porous, and she is READY!

This "marinating"—called the pre-conception attraction complex—preempts the fusion of egg and sperm cell, and is a process that can take up to several hours. The flocking sperm shed their acrosome (outside shell), prodding the membrane of the egg cell, while provoking a chemical change in her outer "coat" until it merges with the membrane of one (and only one) sperm cell allowing their DNA to mingle in one cell: the zygote.

This is not just a matter of the "passive" egg cell waiting to be fertilized by the "active" sperm, and it is therefore not correct to say that the sperm "penetrates" the egg. Instead, they melt together when ready. Incapable of differentiating between forced entry or courtship, that bilateral readiness of egg and sperm is as dumb as it is deaf and blind; still it has an inherent intelligence.

Maybe you can imagine a school of spermatozooids swarming around the egg in inherently intelligent patterns, readying the egg, which in turn ripens into an intelligent readiness?

¹ Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 11.

Think of it, by way of murmuration: how a flock of starlings, converging to fly south in the winter accumulate in bigger and bigger flocks gathering the force of millions of birds, all moving together like a single organism ebbing and flowing across the sky as if breathing. So enormous is that protean organism its weight occasionally breaks branches of trees where it rests. But when the flock moves, oh how it moves—like a shimmering black sun, an amorphous pattern with a singular intelligence. An intelligence, not of the individual bird, but of the pattern itself.²

The ingenious slime mold moves in similar, intelligent, ways: previously considered a fungus, the slime is in fact neither plant nor animal, only it behaves occasionally like both. This soil-dwelling amoeba—living most of its life as a brainless unassuming single-cell organism—will, in times of scarcity, congregate and move as a single body. A body that can grow up to several feet long, traversing huge distances, before it settles down and transforms again; this time taking the form of a blooming flower called a "fruiting body."

The fruiting body contains millions of spores in its popsicle-shaped head. When the time, temperature, and humidity, is right, the head explodes—releasing all of its spores into the atmosphere. While the cells that formed the stem die, spores are transported—by the wind, a passing insect, or an animal—to new places, where they start the process again as single cell organisms: gathering, moving, ripening, disseminating.³

In a similar way you can imagine new ideas emerge, not as singular strokes of genius, but in response to the readiness of the collective; the singular mind being ripened in the marinade of the collective, until it is good and ready to conceive of an idea. So it was that at the beginning of the 20th century, the collective mind was good and ready to conceive of abstraction.

A specific abstraction, that is—the one that has been defined by and associated with modernist painting for the last century.

Clement Greenberg, regarded by many as the ob/gyn—if not the father—of this particular abstraction, delivers with surgical precision and cuts away with any sentimentality—linking abstract painting to the scientific method and with it, the essence of Modernism:

² In Denmark, this phenomenon is called *Sort Sol* meaning "black sun" and every year bird spotters from all over the country will gather in the marshlands of Jutland to watch the murmuration. My grandfather would take me by the hand and walk me out to the edge of a slope overlooking a little fjord by their house where the birds gathered at dusk. He was not a man of many words, but I never interpreted his silence as being inarticulate. Rather, communicating a secular reverence also manifest in an interest in astronomy and the quantum theories of Niels Bohr. Yes, I was only nine or ten at the time, but I got the message!

³ Rebecca Jacobsen, "Slime Molds: No Brains, No Feet, No Problem," *Science Thursday, PBS News Hour*, 5 April, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2012/04/the-sublime-slime-mold.html> (accessed 3 April, 2014)

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence [...] At first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion's. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity [...] Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else [...] That visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience, is a notion whose only justification lies in scientific consistency [...] From the point of view of art in itself, its convergence with science happens to be a mere accident, and neither art nor science really gives or assures the other of anything more than it ever did. What their convergence does show, however, is the profound degree to which Modernist art belongs to the same specific cultural tendency as modern science, and this is of the highest significance as a historical fact.⁴

No confusing the baby with the bathwater here!

By disassociating Modernist art from religion and the spiritual realm—a realm he argues has been reduced to entertainment and (shudder) therapy (!)—and aligning visual art instead with the scientific method, Greenberg lifts abstract painting (and his own subjective preference hereof) into a purely objective realm, as pure and tentatively objective as the scientific method itself.

In his postscript from 1978, Greenberg nevertheless feels the need to rectify a basic misunderstanding:

'Pure' art was a useful illusion, but this doesn't make it any the less an illusion. Nor does the possibility of its continuing usefulness make it any the less an illusion.⁵

⁴ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), *Clement Greenberg* (undated), <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html> (accessed, April 3, 2014).

⁵ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

In spite of this disclaimer, and rather than deny a lineage of modern painting, Greenberg retraces the history of art, in order to conclude modern abstract painting a vantage point from where visual art can be observed as a self contained system—contained within its own flatness—the petri dish of modernism if you wish.

But, by disassociating visual art with anything outside of its own (flat) realm, perhaps after all, Greenberg is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The scientific method didn't spawn overnight, nor did the birth of abstraction just happen in one place and at one time. It evolved through shifts in a collective, disparate paradigm. Not all-together-now, but gradually and suddenly, simultaneously, at the nexus of modernity—in the early 20th century metropolis—but also, interestingly, at its periphery. So that when you dig down in search of the origin, the genius, the father of abstraction, you might instead find the mother: as early as 1906—several years before Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich painted what is normally regarded the pioneer works of modern abstract painting—a woman in Sweden developed a singular vision: a new—abstract—pictorial language derived from her occult practice. A practice she herself considered scientific but is considered a party game at best and hogwash at worst, by today's scientific community: Spiritualism.

Hilma af Klint was born in Sweden in 1862 to a family of Naval officers. A sensitive and prodigal child, she was susceptible to extrasensory experiences and became seriously involved with spiritualism at the age of seventeen. Otherwise, her main interests were mathematics, botany, and portrait painting, which she began studying at an early age. In 1882 she entered the Royal Academy in Stockholm and upon graduation, she was awarded a studio together with two of her female colleagues.

The studio building also housed one of Stockholm's most prestigious art galleries of the time, exhibiting contemporaries like Edvard Munch and the visionary, albeit delusive, Ernst Josephson, who was widely discussed in the spiritualist circles she frequented.

Despite this exposure, her portrait, flower, and landscape paintings—which she successfully exhibited and sold throughout her life—are skillfully and traditionally academic, showing little influence from the major breaking art movements of the time. If anything they demonstrate her keen interest in botany and the scientific classification hereof. Her personal library—apart from a Bible—consists mainly of botanical works—as well as translations of spiritualist and theosophical publications, including texts by Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner, whom she admired.

Other than her keen interest in the esoteric, there is nothing unusual about her biography—except perhaps that as a female academic and professional, she was a novelty in the provincial backwaters of Stockholm at the time. She never married or had any children. Nor did she travel outside of Sweden until late in life, due to her limited knowledge of foreign languages, and an obligation to care for her widowed and ailing mother.

But where she was unable to go in her body, her mind travelled all the further and, in 1896, together with four women artists, Hilma af Klint formed the spiritualist group The Friday Group (or The Five as they called themselves).

In tightly scheduled séances The Five received instructions from supernatural beings called The Sublime, who urged them to produce automatic drawings under their spiritual guidance.

Scared by the example of Josephson, whose work with automatic drawings caused him to become mentally ill (while admittedly creating beautifully and mystically liberated work in the process), some members of the group were hesitant to follow this approach. In one of her many notebooks, Hilma dryly remarks: “My friends have disowned my mediumistic work, because they saw more dangers than benefits in it.”⁶

Hilma however persevered and—being the most gifted or perhaps daring—became the group’s leader and main medium, receiving and interpreting messages from her (mostly male) spirit guides: Amaliel, Ananda, Gregor, and Georg.

A note in The Friday Group’s séance book for November 7th, 1906 reads:

You H [Hilma] when you are to interpret the color hearing and seeing tones: try to tune your mind into harmony and pray: ‘O Thou, give me the picture of inner clarity. Teach me to listen and receive in humility the glorious message that Thee in Thy dignity deign to send to the children of the earth...’

Amaliel draws a sketch, which H then paints. The goal is to represent a seed from which evolution develops under rain and tempest, lightning, and storm. Then heavy grey clouds are coming from above.⁷

In 1904 the sublime Amaliel gave Hilma a great task: she must devote one year exclusively to the painting of a message to mankind. She fulfilled her promise from May 1907 to April 1908, producing

⁶ Note by Hilma af Klint, quoted by Pascal Russeau in “Premonitory Abstraction—Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint” in *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm Moderna Museet and Hatje Cantz, 2013), 175.

⁷ Note by Hilma af Klint, quoted by Åke Fant in “The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Publishers and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 157.

the series *The Ten Largest* (*De tio störste*), about which she writes in her journal on September 27th, 1907:

Ten paradisaically beautiful paintings were to be executed; the paintings were to be in colors that would be educational and they would reveal my feelings to me in an economical way...It was the meaning of the leaders to give the world a glimpse of four parts in the life of man. They are called *childhood, youth, manhood, and old age*.⁸

When her idol Rudolf Steiner visited Stockholm as general secretary to the German Theosophical Society the following year, she invited him to her studio.

I have only seen one picture (dated around 1895) of Hilma af Klint in this studio. She is photographed in the long skirt and high collared shirt typical of the time, reclining in a chair. Her hand is supporting her head in a pensive pose, while her elbow rests on a nearby worktable next to a vase holding a single flower. The tulip (for that’s what it is) is contorted into a Jugendstil arabesque, growing toward the light that pours in from windows outside the picture onto her left side, illuminating half of her face, tilted ever so slightly upwards. Her (blue or gray?) eyes meet the viewer’s (mine), with a very pale gaze that appears to look through, or slightly behind me. With her mousy hair and typical Scandinavian features, including our straight brow, thin lips and cleft chin, she looks positively bland, yet positively bold—almost defiant—or am I making this up? Regardless, it speaks to her boldness that she persuaded Steiner, who was by then at the height of his fame—a touring rock star and Renaissance man of the new century—to come to her.

I am trying to imagine their studio visit: Hilma af Klint is forty-six at this point, Rudolf Steiner a year older. Did they speak the same language or did they need an interpreter? Was she hoping to meet him as an equal, or as the student does a master? Was she even secretly hoping for a romantic connection, a spiritual union, made in heaven? Did she line up all ten heavenly canvasses next to each other or did she pull them out one by one? The paintings were much larger than she was, each measuring about eleven by eight feet. Did he help her, or did he just watch? Was he sitting, standing, or walking toward the canvasses to admire them up close? Was she nervous? What was she expecting?

From what sources I found, I sense that the studio visit was not the meeting of minds that Hilma af Klint hoped it would be. She was asking advice in interpreting the message in her paintings, which

⁸ Fant, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, 157.

she herself, painfully, did not understand. They had apparently not “revealed her feelings to her in an economical way” as she had predicted in her diary. Steiner declined to analyze them for her, and expressed skepticism at her spiritualist approach, further predicting that her work will not be understood for another fifty years.

(A man walks into a woman’s studio. He looks around. He doesn’t get it. He says: “I don’t get it.” He says: “if I don’t get it, nobody will get it.” He leaves. How often has that happened in art history?)

The studio visit marked the beginning of a four-year hiatus from her work, partly induced by the worsening of her mother’s condition, but perhaps also brought on by Steiner’s rejection. About twenty years later, when upon her mother’s death af Klint travels to Steiner’s *First Gotheanum* in Dornach, Switzerland, to spend long periods studying anthroposophy and attending lectures, a five-year break in her otherwise incessant production occurs.⁹

Each meeting with Steiner seems to bring about deep bouts of self-doubt in af Klint, and a reconsidering of her whole oeuvre, yet she remains a devotee until her death. But perhaps there is more at stake than the fear of being a misguided mentee, or an unrequited admirer?

Perhaps Steiner’s skepticism touches a raw nerve in her—a fear of being “ousted,” or stripped of her credibility as a medium, and her access to a creative vein as a result? It is likely that Hilma af Klint found herself in a double bind at that point of her life and career. Both the Scandinavian art scene as well as the Rosencreuzean and Theosophist circles she frequented harbored some deeply misogynist “theories” about the mental and creative abilities of men and women.¹⁰

Accordingly, female mediums were favored in spiritualist circles, because they were considered more receptive to messages from the spiritual realm. Their perceived “inability to conceive of original

⁹ Ylva Hillström, “Biography,” in *Hilma af Klint—A Pioneer of Abstraction*, ed. Iris Müller-Westermann and Jo Widoff (Stockholm: Moderna Museet and Hatje Cantz, 2013), 278–279.

¹⁰ Those ideas resonated with dominant theories of the scientific community at the turn of the 20th century. Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* had only just been published in 1859, and although his evolutionary theory was gaining ground, the science of genetics was still in its infancy. Meanwhile, the prenatal field of epigenetics—the theory that an individual being develops by successful differentiation of an unstructured zygote—was entirely novel. Although Aristotle came close when he described how “some animals come into being from the union of the male and the female,” the theory had since been abandoned by the scientific community in favor of preformationism—the idea that the growth of living beings during pregnancy was merely an increase in the volume of parts already present in the egg (according to the ovists), or in the sperm (in the case of spermists). Since the Enlightenment, when in 1794 Dutch microbiologist Nicolaes Hartsoeker observed spermatozoa under his magnifying glass and saw tiny homunculus squirming inside, the spermists considered themselves victorious. Interestingly, in human sperm he allegedly observed a soul.

Jane Maienschein, “Epigenesis and Preformationism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epigenesis/> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

thought,” rendered them vestal vessels in which the masculine principle (spirit/intellect) would fertilize the female (matter/sensation).¹¹

(Not the first or the last time that art has sided with (pseudo) science to “prove” that the seat of female fertility, our womb, makes us unsuitable as creators, producers, or anything other than reproducers.)

The Scandinavian artistic avant-garde, spearheaded by Edvard Munch and the writer August Strindberg—who both also dabbled in spiritual practices—would wallow in visions of insatiable female vampires sucking the (creative and sexual) life force out of men.

We know af Klint must have seen Edvard Munch’s work when he exhibited some of his most groundbreaking paintings in Stockholm in 1894, *The Kiss*, *The Scream*, and an early *Frieze of Life* among them. Perhaps (knowingly or unknowingly) she was dared and challenged by the scope of this work?

If we look at the *Paintings for the Temple* she produced more than ten years later, including the series *The Ten Largest*, they certainly share a similar vision and ambition, even in terms of format. They are surprisingly sensuous, broody and even steamy: Figurative paintings depict naked bodies swirling in and around each other in a cosmic, erotic ballet. Abstract compositions throb with primordial forms reminiscent of flowers and snails and, yes, labia and uteri, and even primitive stylized renderings of cell structures merging and multiplying as though by impregnation.

For somebody with the declared intention of living “vestal and ascetic in the service of the Lord,” her paintings erupt with a titillating energy, although the challenge of representing the male physiology at times seems to have baffled the sexual novice.¹²

Perhaps unconsciously, her paintings express a longing to merge with the sublime in both a spiritual and carnal way, as though by the very act of painting, af Klint explores an eroticized inner universe.

As interpreted by Pascal Rousseau:

The winged uterus, a symbol of terrestrial desire sublimated as celestial passion, is an emblem of the spiritualization of the flesh, but also an image antidote to the possible hysterization of the passion for the supernatural.¹³

¹¹ Pascal Rousseau, “Premonitory Abstraction—Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint” in *Hilma af Klint—A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm Moderna Museet and Hatje Cantz, 2013), 163.

¹² “Vestal and ascetic in the service of the Lord” (Author’s translation) is the inscription on the painting *Primordial Chaos*, No. 9, *Group I, The Wu/Rose Series (1906–1907)*, Cat. 26, in *Hilma af Klint—A Pioneer of Abstraction* (Stockholm Moderna Museet and Hatje Cantz, 2013), 25.

¹³ Pascal Rousseau, “Premonitory Abstraction—Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint,” 169–170.

Meanwhile, on a couch in Austria, this libidinous inner female territory was being colonized and named: *hysteria*.

Psychotherapy, as a new science, wanted to establish itself squarely within the scientific method and within the canon of medical history. Consequently, at the turn of the century the Spiritualist community was attacked from more sides:

Medicine and, and in particular experimental psychology, which fought against invasion by 'psychic studies' seized on this uncertainty and diagnosed the supernatural powers of 'mediums' as indicative of a form of psychiatric disorder. The correlation was soon made between madness and spiritism as Henry Maudsley argued that the abnormal powers of certain mediumistic subjects were related to a disorder in the functioning of the brain, which was immediately associated with hysterical symptoms (recalling the powerful determinism given by the etymology hysteria/uterus).¹⁴

What's a woman to do?

Hilma af Klint continued to work under spiritual guidance for the rest of her life, producing a massive body of work that remained in her studio and was never exhibited during her lifetime.

After her death in 1944, her estate—including her 125 notebooks on her occult and artistic practices—was entrusted to her nephew with the explicit stipulation that her output of more than one thousand occult paintings must not be shown publicly until twenty years after her death, as the world was not yet ready for her message.¹⁵

The first time a selection of these works were presented to a larger audience was at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, as part of the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art, Abstract Painting, 1890–1985*. The main ambition of the grand survey was to demonstrate that:

the genesis and development of abstract art were inextricably linked to spiritual ideas current in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁶

By the mid-'80s abstraction had long since "come of age," inserting itself into the mainstream and disassociating itself (with the help of Clement Greenberg, among others) from any mysticism aside from the male mystique of artistic genius. Not the kind of

¹⁴ Rousseau, "Premonitory Abstraction—Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint," 169.

¹⁵ Ylva Hillström, "Biography," 279.

¹⁶ Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Publishers and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 17.

genius to seek impregnation by the sublime, it had freed itself from references to anything outside of itself...it had become self referential, really.¹⁷

But before then, back in Hilma af Klint's studio, abstraction was not a goal in itself—not really a goal at all—but a means: a means of connecting with the other and the outside. The outside of the realm of the singular human mind, perhaps?

As Wassily Kandinsky described it a few years later, with a fitting metaphor:

The great epoch of the Spiritual which is already beginning, or, in embryonic form, began already yesterday...provides and will provide the soil of in which a kind of monumental work must come to fruition.¹⁸

I am reminded of another studio visit, which has since acquired mystical status within the canon of abstract expressionism and art history of the 20th century; in 1953, Clement Greenberg brought two of his closest friends, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, with him to visit Helen Frankenthaler and to admire her monumental *Mountains and the Sea*. Upon her return from Nova Scotia in 1952, the twenty-three year old Frankenthaler had secured a seven by ten foot piece of raw unprimed cotton duck canvas to her studio floor and created a painting fresh from the memories, which were by her own account "embedded not only in her mind but in her wrists as well."¹⁹

By pouring thinly diluted oil paints straight onto the canvas, the color, like the memory, embedded itself within the canvas, like dyed cloth, creating the illusion—the fluidity, lightness and translucency—of a giant watercolor. The scale and the method of the painting overtly references Jackson Pollock—who supremely ruled Greenberg's (and with it New York's art-) world at the time—but is devoid of his

¹⁷ Originally an apocryphal story, it has since been canonized by art history: under the code name "Long Leash," the CIA employed its press division, the Propaganda Assets Inventory, to sponsor the popularization of Abstract Expressionism (among other American art forms, such as Bebop Jazz and the writers of the Beat Generation), through highly secretive organized chains of sponsorships, spin-doctoring and publicity. As the errand of the CIA was not primarily that of art criticism, but rather defeating the Russian/Chinese power axis and its associated communist ideology, Abstract Expressionism was therefore promoted as a beacon of unique improvisational individualism, that could only thrive in the "free world." Not only was Abstract Expressionism a triumph of the singular genius over the collective, it was also touted as America's first self-generated art movement and as such became a poster-child of its inborn, democratic success.

Frances Stonor Saunders, "Modern art was CIA 'weapon,'" *The Independent*, 22 October, 1995, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578898.html> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

¹⁸ Wassily Kandinsky's words from 1910–11 are quoted in Earl A. Power's foreword to *The Spiritual in Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Publishers and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 11.

¹⁹ Michael McNay, "Helen Frankenthaler Obituary," *The Guardian*, 28 December, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/dec/28/helen-frankenthaler> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

angsty search for the sublime. Instead she self-assuredly trusts this “sublime” to already rest within her own memory—and her body itself.

Frankenthaler never really makes the cut in Greenberg’s sovereignly masculine canon—a fact that is perhaps attributable to a romantic interest gone sour—regardless, the meeting leaves an unshakeable impression on both Noland and Louis, who was later quoted saying that Frankenthaler’s painting was “the bridge between Pollock and what is possible.”²⁰

In fact, what we are witnessing here in Frankenthaler’s studio is the seminal moment of color field painting as both Noland and Louis adopt her technique, and from it each create new bodies of work.

(Two men who want to paint like a woman, how often has *that* happened in art history?)

Although both Hilma af Klint and Helen Frankenthaler would probably rather not be labeled as “female” painters—not to mention “feminist” painters—I see similarities in the approach they take to their medium, and the way they both invade macho territory via the back door. Like Joan of Arc before them, to acquire the fire of a “devil may care” attitude, it helps to adopt a “the devil made me do it” defense—whether the “devil” manifests itself in the form of “guardian angels,” “spirit guides,” or “embedded memories.”

Although this idea of being “chosen” or “guided” could be interpreted as self-indulgent, or even narcissistic, it is not the kind of narcissism we know (and love); around the same time Hilma af Klint was painting under “sublime” guidance, her contemporary Lou Andreas-Salomé, emerged as one of the first female psychoanalysts. As a close friend and colleague of Sigmund Freud, she developed a theory of narcissism in parallel with him, while diverging in crucial ways. According to Carolee Schneemann:

When [Andreas-Salomé] worked with Freud she created a theory of narcissism that doesn’t have to do with self-involvement or self display. Her theory has to do with losing the self in its identification with what it perceives. So it’s a very painterly theory of narcissism. A narcissism that’s not a narcissist, but a process of deeply identifying with perceptual forms. For me, that’s a very painterly kind of narcissism, but it’s not the one that’s bantered about regarding certain kinds of woman’s activisms that are explicitly erotic or physical.²¹

²⁰ McNay, “Helen Frankenthaler Obituary.”

²¹ Priscilla Frank, “Carolee Schneemann, Feminist Performance Pioneer, Talks ‘Olympia,’ Deodorant And Selfies,” *Huffington Post*, December 11, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/11/carolee-schneemann_n_4415261.html (accessed 28 March, 2014).

Can we perhaps characterize af Klint’s and Frankenthaler’s involvement with the “sublime” as similar to this painterly narcissism—a process of deeply identifying with perceptual forms?

In her essay, “The Art and Healing Oeuvre,” in which she compares the work of Hilma af Klint to the work of Emma Kunz and Agnes Martin, Bracha Ettinger links this “unselfish, painterly narcissism” to an investment in the archaic m/other, as prerequisite for artistic creation:

The investment in the archaic m/other as self-object is narcissistic but this is a ‘neither pathological nor obnoxious’ narcissistic investment, necessary for the development of psychic life and for artistic creativity. Thus, the libidinal investment is, from the beginning, a contact with the other and the outside...²²

By answering this siren’s call from the other and the outside, resonating within, both Hilma af Klint and Helen Frankenthaler access an abstraction that is not simply masturbatory and self referential, but pouring through them from elsewhere, *connecting with an intelligence, not of the singular mind, but of the pattern itself.*

Perhaps this “elsewhere” accessed is the psychological space Bracha Ettinger calls *The Matrixial Borderspace*, a shared (pre-natal) space in which I and non-I co-emerge. In this (feminized) space, the creative impulse is not originating from you, but flowing through you, resonating with, and connecting you to—your first (prenatal) encounter, with the other and the outside—your m/other’s voice.

According to Ettinger:

The womb and the prenatal phase are the references to the real to which the imaginary Matrix corresponds. But as a concept, the Matrix is no more—but no less—related to the womb than the Phallus is related to the penis. That is, Matrix is a symbolic concept.²³

More so, because:

The Matrix is not the opposite of the Phallus; it is rather a supplementary perspective. It grants a different meaning. It draws a different field of desire.²⁴

²² Bracha Ettinger, “The art-and-healing Oeuvre: Metamorphic Relinquishment of the Soul-Spirit to the Spirit of the Cosmos,” in *3 Times Abstraction; New Methods of Drawing by Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin*, ed. Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher (New York: The Drawing Center, 2005).

²³ Bracha Ettinger, “Woman-Other-Thing: A Matrixial Touch” in *Matrix-Borderlines*, ed. David Elliott and Pamela Ferris (Oxford: MOMA Oxford, 1993), 12.

²⁴ Bracha Ettinger, “The Matrixial Borderspace” (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1.

This different field of desire, manifests as a melting with, a bleeding of the territorial boundaries between the inside and the outside, the subject and the object, the I and the non-I, which in fact, as Ettinger describes it, co-emerge, come into existence, simultaneously as an investment in the archaic m/other.

This contact with the other and the outside, is perhaps also what Melanie Klein grants us (re)access to in her essay “Envy and Gratitude,” by reminding us that we once roamed a *different field of desire*. In her description of the infant’s relation to the good breast we see a (similar) reversal—or overlapping—of interior and exterior space:

The good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego, and the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself.²⁵

This “mother inside himself” is a source of nourishment deeper than the purely physical:

We find in the analysis of our patients that the breast in its good aspect is the prototype of maternal goodness, inexhaustible patience and generosity as *well as creativity*.²⁶

The good breast is thus the gift that keeps on giving. Once you have accessed its reparative cornucopia your creativity allows self repair, but can also trigger the fear of loss:

If the identification with a good and life giving internalized object can be maintained this becomes an impetus towards creativeness. Though superficially this may manifest itself as a coveting of the prestige, wealth and power which others have attained, its actual aim is creativeness. The capacity to give and preserve life is felt as the greatest gift and therefore creativeness becomes the deepest source of envy.²⁷

I can readily imagine creativeness to be a deeper source of envy, both to Hilma af Klint in her day as well as Frankenthaler in hers, as female painters were rarely (if at all) granted access

²⁵ Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 179.

²⁶ Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963*, 180.

²⁷ Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963*, 202.

to the creative canon—but even today the idea of creativity, is (still!) linked to a specific masculine mystique—a certain “phallic sublimation.”

Of course if you say envy, you have to say penis, thus again evoking the link between phallus and creativity, but I think these three female psychoanalysts, Salomé, Klein, and Ettinger are out in a bigger errand here, namely reversing the gender of the creative impulse.

Or, perhaps not exactly reversing it, but blurring, and expanding it. Perhaps what we are looking at here via the works of these two female pioneers of abstract painting—contrary to what Greenberg will have us believe, or for that matter what Freud and Lacan will have us believe (with their Phallic object separated from the fabric of the world via the Phallic gaze)—is not a self contained system confined to and defined by the thing itself, but linked with the no-Thing behind it; the no-Thing with which it co-emerges: *the pattern itself*.

Now I realize this can be a little hard to get your head around. Getting your head around the Phallus—which is really just a penis with an overinflated ego—of course is easy! (It can even be enjoyable, if consensual and to your taste!) But getting your head around the Matrix—the non-Phallus—that’s hard...

But say Freud is right that penis envy indeed exists, and Melanie Klein is right that envy and gratitude are intrinsically linked, penis gratitude could also exist—not as the “opposite” of penis envy—but as a different, endlessly abstract field of desire?

The bridge between yourself and what is possible, perhaps?

Like the realization when looking at ourselves in the mirror, that there is no distance between us and the mirror, that we are our reflection, mirror and all: like butterflies dreaming of philosophers, like abstraction dreaming of painters, like patterns dream of birds, like bathwater dreams of babies. Lovingly.

So remember it’s true: *there is no greater love than what I feel for you*.²⁸

It’s just that I can’t wrap it up and give it to you, it is not a gift. It is maybe a pulse, or a current. Or, maybe it is like breathing?

Try this simple breathing exercise: Lay down next to a sleeping person you love, gently without touching or disturbing. (It can be a lover, a friend, a child, or even a parent.) Place your face close to theirs, gently without touching or disturbing. Slow your breathing in sync with theirs, but opposite, so you inhale on their exhale and vice versa, and you let your lungs and nostrils be filled with their sleepy breath.

²⁸ “There Is No Greater Love Than What I Feel For You,” traditional Jazz Standard.

Heinz Kohut links this light-weight example to the principle of creativity:

The creative individual, whether in art or science, is less psychologically separated from [its] surroundings than the noncreative one; the 'I-you' barrier is not as clearly defined.[...]The intensity of the creative persons' awareness of the relevant aspects of [its] surroundings is akin to the detailed self-perceptions of the schizoid and the childlike.[...]The indistinctness of 'internal' and 'external' is familiar to all of us in our relation to the surrounding air, which, as we take it in and expel it, we experience as part of ourselves [...] a close psychological proximity exists between the coming to life of dust and the creative transformation of a narcissistically experienced material into a work of art.²⁹

So, we have a breath, becoming art, so we have a song. It's like music. It's everything, yet it's really no-Thing. Do you get it, this no-Thingness? I don't "get it," but I get it when I hear Donna Summer, that archaic m/other singing "I Feel Love"...that barely there couplet, that is really just an excuse, the lead that is more like a backing vocal, sentient but egoless, multiplying and merging and then...the chorus that just ebbs and flows, libidinous, oceanic, throbbing, endlessly, inwardly, a maelstroem of interiority: *Ooooooooooooh, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feeeeeeeel loooooooooove...*³⁰

And she makes it so palpable, that that's all we can really do with love.

Feel it.

Love,

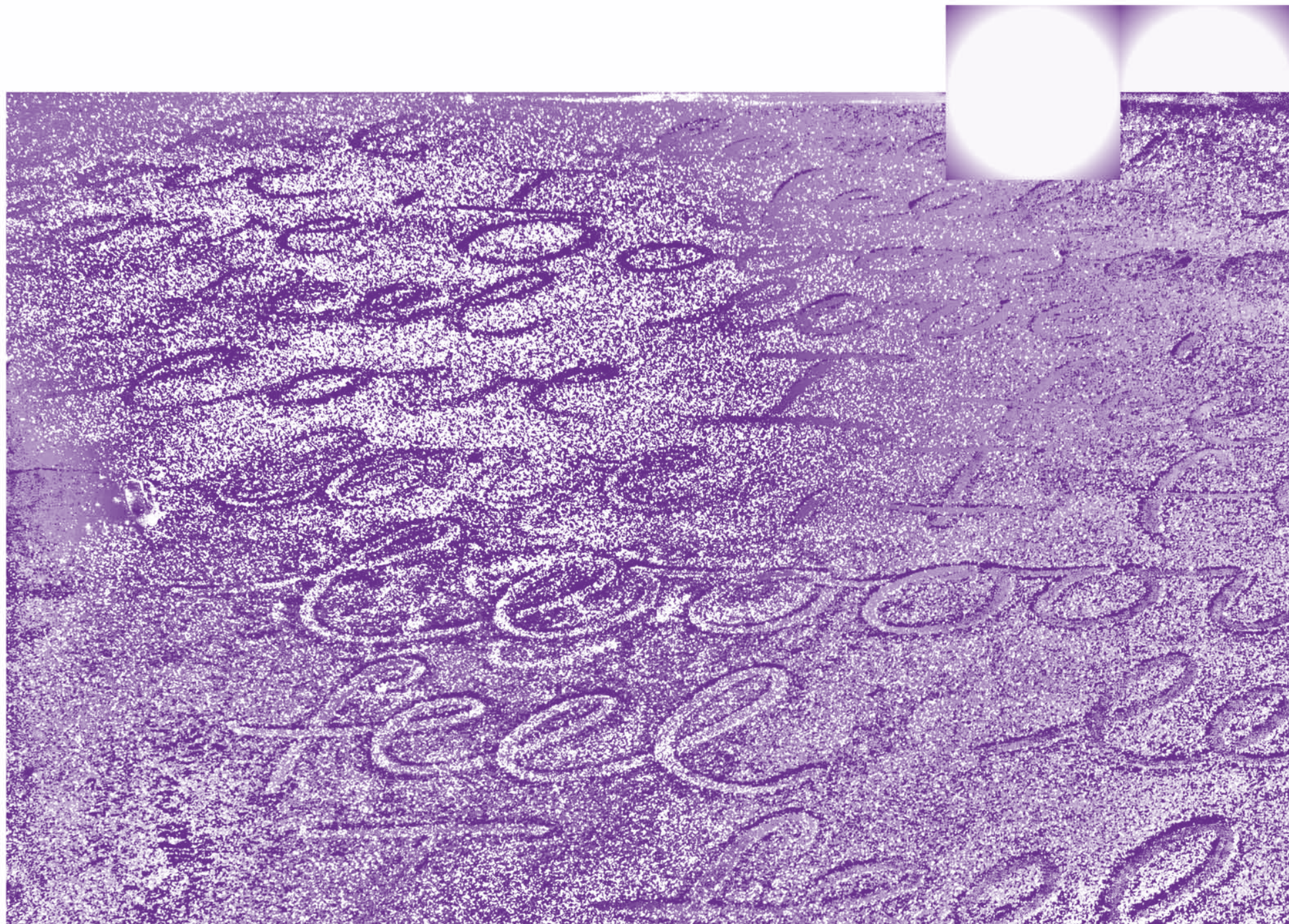
Mom

²⁹ Heinz Kohut, *The Search for the Self*, Vol. 1 (New York: International University Press, 1978), 427, 447-448.

³⁰ Donna Summer, "I Feel Love," *I Remember Yesterday* (Casablanca Records: 1977). The song was originally released as a 7" and 12" single. According to David Bowie, then in the middle of recording his Berlin Trilogy with Brian Eno, its impact on the genre's direction was recognized early on:

One day in Berlin...Eno came running in and said, 'I have heard the sound of the future.'...he puts on 'I Feel Love,' by Donna Summer...He said, 'This is it, look no further. This single is going to change the sound of club music for the next fifteen years.' Which was more or less right.

(From David Bowie and Kurt Loder, *Sound and Vision*, CD Liner notes, 1989)



Dear,
Like a pearl, a philosopher's stone, or an everlasting Gobstop-
per rolling on your tongue, a great lyric operates in layers,
through metamorphosis, becoming a mantra, trickling intravenously
into your limbic system, entwining with your DNA and connect-
ing the person you are becoming to the person you were.¹

Consider this:

When I was a very small boy
Very small boys talked to me
Now that we've grown up together
They're afraid of what they see²

So, when I was a very small boy, I walked like a boy and I talk-
ed like a boy, and my hair was cropped like a very small boy's.
Although I was aware I was born a girl, and both very small boys
and girls would talk to me as such, I was sure one day I would
grow up and marry a woman.

At first I wanted to marry my babysitter, but she was too old,
and she was not interested anyway. I knew this because she had
a boyfriend I respected; he took me to the ER one time I put a
berry up my nostril.

But then, when I was six, we moved to a new town where I met
this new girl. *Oh girl, girl, girl.* I introduced myself on her
doorstep on the night her family moved into the apartment un-
derneath ours. I cracked a few jokes and made her laugh—baring
a still intact row of pearly baby teeth and very pointed fangs,
which she quickly covered with a slender hand. From then on, our
two young hearts would beat as one, and our great young minds
think alike.

She and I decided that we would get married. Unfortunately at
the particular time and place we grew up in, same sex marriage

¹ The everlasting Gobstopper, which first appeared in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, is manufactured in Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory to accommodate children who are given very little pocket money. In real life however, the candy that was produced by Nestlé who later franchised the Willy Wonka name, will only last forever by virtue of you giving up on finishing it, which is likely to happen.

Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)(New York: Puffin Books, 1998).

² New Order, "True Faith," single (Factory Records, 1987).

was not yet permitted. While my friend told me this would be a
problem, she had also thought of a solution:

She was a believer. Although I wouldn't call her pious, she
had a very strong faith for a six-year-old; she told me that if
I would only let her pray for me, God would turn me into a boy.

We locked ourselves into her bathroom; I sat on the toilet
and watched her kneel by the bathtub with her brown eyes closed
in intense focus, muttering under her breath, so absorbed in the
magical thinking of play and prayer. I knew intuitively then what
I know wistfully now, that only in play can we be really serious...
and then I panicked!

I realized that if I had left our upstairs apartment that
morning as a girl, only to return that evening as a boy, even
if I walked the same and talked the same and looked the same, I
wouldn't feel the same because I wouldn't *be* the same, and so my
mother would not recognize me. She would turn me away.

This premonition had me practically in tears. Choking up, I
asked my friend, Could I think about it? But, she said, she had
already asked God!

She said she needed me to understand that this kind of request
was a big deal! God was very busy, so she could *maybe* still turn
it around, but it was not like I could keep going back and forth
over this forever, wasting God's and everybody's time—so could
I please just make up my mind?

Divine intervention
Always my intention
So I take my time
I've been looking for something
I've always wanted
But was never mine
But now I've seen that something
Just out of reach—glowing—
Very Holy Grail
Oh mother of pearl
I wouldn't trade you for another world³

Since I could neither orphan myself at such a young age, nor aban-
don my parents, I had to tell her that the deal was off, and I
decided to be a girl right then and there.

Maybe she was way ahead of me? Maybe she sat there thinking
to herself, as I procrastinated:

³ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl," *Stranded* (Polydor Records, 1973).

What is a girl, what is a group of girls? Proust at least has shown us once and for all that their individuation, collective or singular, proceeds not by subjectivity, but by haecceity, pure haecceity. 'Fugitive beings.' They are pure relations of speed and slowness and nothing else. A girl is late on account of her speed: she did too many things, crossed too many spaces in relation to the relative time of the person waiting for her. Thus her apparent slowness is transformed into the breakneck speed of our waiting.⁴

In a sense this could be the mantra for these letters to you—circling around, trying to locate the mother in the girl and the girl in the mother, sussing out questions of haecceity, subjectivity, time, and space: like mother of pearl onto a grain of sand, the girl channels the woman and the woman the girl, until they collapse into one continuous, luminous, layered being.⁵

My own maternal heritage is not very well documented and vanishes quickly in the mist of hearsay: my mother was an occupational therapist and mother of three. Her mother, my grandmother—a petite sweetheart and *baby-woman*—was a sometimes-alcoholic, occasionally suicidal housewife and mother of five. Her own mother, who had more mouths to feed, sent her away to work as a farm hand by age eight and at age eighteen she came to work in my grandfather's grocery store. After he broke his leg, she impressed him by taking charge in the store and they married the following spring. They lost two of their five children to cancer.

Their oldest, likened for her beauty to her namesake Liz Taylor, was a whiz with a sewing machine. She died at thirty-three after a short sick bed and left behind a four-year-old daughter. Number two, less pretty and a spinster, died when she was fifty. She left behind an enormous pile of hand knitted towels in rainbow hues, and a stack of fauna compendia from which she would copy the Latin names of birds and animals in her scrawling handwriting. She was born with both mental and physical handicaps, which were possibly caused by my grandmother skinning a hare while she was pregnant, and possibly not.

I imagine my grandmother, as I am sure she herself oftentimes did, skinning that hare in her kitchen.

(The same kitchen we would later bake cookies for Christmas, where her every embrace would envelop us in a medicinal smell, like cough syrup. A sweetness with a punch thrown in. It mingled

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 271.

⁵ This opalescence will attract the eyes of so many people, because nothing attracts the eye like other people!

with the smell of the cookies we baked, the cigarettes she smoked, and the dishes in the sink.)

And I imagine her again months later when—the hare long gone—her baby, my aunt, was born upstairs in the bedroom like her four siblings. My grandmother could see immediately that there was something wrong: those long thin floppy arms, like cucumbers, that high-pitched shrill screaming, but oh, that lovely jet-black hair! She named her Ida after her own mother.

Everybody was kind of relieved when Aunt Ida died. She was still living with my grandparents who were getting really old by then, and nobody wanted to think about what would happen when they couldn't take care of her anymore, since she was unable to take care of herself.

Only my grandparents were devastated, as both children left behind an evenly empty void in their lives.

I guess in looking for the *girl-in-the-mother* and the *mother-in-the-girl* I am also looking for these women—a maternal heritage—in them, in myself, and in you. Their lives span about a hundred years, that saw such big changes in the lives of women, it feels like it may as well have been light years in a sci-fi epic. Today we are faced with so many choices they didn't have a century ago, we can almost forget there is a legacy that made possible these choices we now can, and should, take for granted.

That legacy, from our feminist foremothers and heroines, will tell you that you can be whatever you choose to be—but don't you ever forget that one woman's feminist is another woman's misogynist: although I was a Madonna fan for many years, I have never forgiven her for "Papa Don't Preach." Little did I know in those weeks when that pop-hit topped the radio charts, the fruit of my loins was more the shape and size of a gummy-bear and of the same translucency, than anything resembling a "baby." A gummy-bear with a heartbeat.⁶

I *still* think it's a bullshit song, though perhaps I took it too personally at the time, and that's about all that I will say about that.

(No, I will also say that although I will always defend your right to choose, politically, I hope that you will never need to exercise it, personally.)

You will find enough feminists out there who will tell you that *you* do not qualify as feminist, whereas the misogynists out there will usually tell you that *they* don't qualify as misogynists; meanwhile both will tell you that they really only have *your* best interests at heart!

⁶ Madonna, "Papa Don't Preach," *True Blue* (Warner Bros, 1986).

Oftentimes, when I feel like a disqualified feminist, it helps to recall my relief upon learning that Virginia Woolf was so solidly upper class that she and her husband—with whom she spent a lifelong and poly-platonic relationship—could practically pay for their publishing business out of pocket, while being persistently attacked by her contemporaries (suffragettes and critics alike), as well as literary historians later on, for not knowing the first thing about “real” (read: working class) women’s lives.⁷

Or, how disillusioned divorcees were disappointed to discover that Anaïs Nin was still married and supported by her husband, while taking several lovers and writing her five volume coast to coast American odyssey and *fictional* erotic bildungsroman about her sexual and artistic coming of age.⁸

Or, that Suzanne Brøgger married and settled down in the Danish countryside, where she brought up her daughter Luzia, whom she loved to bits and wrote a children’s book; becoming, as they say, altogether *boring*, instead of practicing and preaching free sex and to hell with the bourgeoisie and their cannibal monogamy.⁹

Or, that Simone de Beauvoir—rebel, provocateur and one of the greatest intellectuals of the 20th century—moved from her parents’ house into a hotel (with a chamber maid) and directly from there moved in with Sartre. He is often described as a big baby, whom she spent her adult life mothering—despite her fierce attacks on motherhood as the destiny of women. She would also share many of her female partners with him—in fact bringing home one budding butt after the other—while condemning housewives for prostituting themselves.¹⁰

Don’t ho’ me, if you don’t know me, Simone, but seriously:

With every Goddess a letdown
Every Idol a bring down
It gets you down
But the search for perfection
Your own predilection
Goes on and on and on and on¹¹

These four women, like all the others who inhabit these letters, whose lifetimes span the same century as my foremothers, also divulge a lineage of sorts, their literary DNA entwined with my own as I write. They are my idols not in spite of their obvious

⁷ Rumor.

⁸ Gossip.

⁹ Hearsay.

¹⁰ I heard it through the grapevine.

¹¹ Roxy Music, “Mother of Pearl.”

flaws, but because of them—including being accused of whoring—or conversely, accusing others.

And after all, if all our heroes are whores, maybe whoring is heroic?¹²

Whoring; not only in the narrowest sense of the word, as in prostitution, but more broadly—doing whatever you need to do, in order to do whatever you need to do.

Maybe this Cornucopian Principle, the ideal of immensity and endless availability, is the mother lode, the gift that keeps on giving, the good breast that just gets better?

Like Lady Gaga in her meat dress, all the eyes of all her little monsters feasting on her.

Like Janis Joplin singing:

Come on, come on, coooooooooome on and take it, take
another little piece of my heart now, baby!¹³

Or, Billie Holiday raising her bet with:

All of me
Why not take all of me?¹⁴

Or, like Selma in Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark* who sacrifices her eyesight (and ultimately her life) so that her child can see.¹⁵

Selma is a compelling figure, but not a new one.

Von Trier could well have gotten his inspiration from Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Story of a Mother*, in which a mother follows her baby in order to steal it back from Death:

Then she came to a great lake, on which there were neither ship nor boat. The lake was not frozen enough to carry her, nor sufficiently open to allow her to wade through, and yet she must cross it if she was to find her

¹² I wonder if the whores of Babylon were multilingual? Maybe translating is the oldest profession in the world?

¹³ Big Brother and the Holding Company, “Piece of My Heart,” *Cheap Thrills* (Columbia, 1968).

¹⁴ Billie Holiday, “All of Me,” *All of Me* (International Music, 1941).

¹⁵ Björk—who famously hated working with Lars von Trier—said afterwards that she believed she was cast for Selma’s part after von Trier watched a video in which she attacked a paparazzi photographer trying to take pictures of her son in an airport. Her songs often reflect her own experience of maternal bliss, like this one:

One breath away from mother Oceania
Your nimble feet make prints in my sands
You have done good for yourselves
Since you left my wet embrace
And crawled ashore
Every boy, is a snake is a lily
Every pearl is a lynx, is a girl

Björk, “Oceania,” *Medulla* (One Little Indian, 2004).

child. Then she laid herself down to drink the lake; and that was impossible for anyone to do. But the sorrowing mother thought that perhaps a miracle might be wrought.

'No, that can never succeed,' said the Lake. 'Let us rather see how we can agree. I'm fond of collecting pearls, and your eyes are the two clearest I have ever seen: if you will weep them out into me I will carry you over into the great greenhouse, where Death lives and cultivates flowers and trees; each of them a human life.'

'Oh, what I would not give to get my child!' said the afflicted mother; and she wept yet more, and her eyes fell into the depths of the lake, and became two costly pearls.¹⁶

This is my favorite of his fairy tales, and the saddest. I cry my eyes out every time I read it, so I read it over and over.

(Like Suzanne Brøgger once said: "Crying is good. It's like an orgasm, just in the other end.")¹⁷

The self sacrificing mother is a contested figure and has often been interpreted as a misogynist ideal, but she is so powerful also, because she turns the power structures suppressing her, not upside down, but inside out, through the self-sacrifice which in turn becomes the ultimate liberation, a re-birth!

At the end of the story our mother finds her-self in Death's greenhouse, full of potted plants, each of them representing a human life. By the grace of her all-enduring love she managed to outrun him and greets him on his return:

'Give me back my child!' said the mother; and she implored and wept. All at once she grasped two pretty flowers with her two hands and called to Death, 'I'll tear off all your flowers, for I am in despair.'

'Do not touch them,' said Death. 'You say you are so unhappy; and now you would want to make another mother just as unhappy!'

'Another mother?' said the poor woman; and she let the flowers go.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of a Mother" (1848), in *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairytales* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 398.

¹⁷ I read this quote so long ago, I actually don't remember where I read it... but I know that I read it! It's become the kind of knowledge I carry with me, and use to console myself (or you), when unraveling.

Much like the rumor and hearsay I mentioned earlier in the footnotes to this letter, this kind of wisdom layers itself into the narratives we compose about the world around us, and insert ourselves into, hoping to make sense of it all, some day later. This is not traditionally academic or analytical. Nor is it anti-academic or anti-analytical. It is born out of the kind of necessity that is the mother of invention. (See also footnote 3, in the Introduction.)

¹⁸ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of a Mother," 400.

Death, in return, has a surprise. He gives back her eyes that he fished out of the lake—now even clearer than before—and asks her to look into a nearby well.

Oh Mother of Pearl

Submarine lover in a shrinking world¹⁹

Staring into the depths of the well, she sees the fate of the two flowers: one who lives a full and happy life, spreading joy and happiness in the world, while the other unhappily spreads misery and woe.

'Which of them is the flower of misfortune and which is the blessed one?' she asked.

'That I may not tell you,' answered Death, 'but this much you shall hear, that one of these two flowers is that of your child. It was the fate of your child that you saw—the future of your own child'²⁰

The well of destiny, the philosopher's stone, the code-breaker, the DNA: which will tell us if we are children of coincidence or faith? Of haecceity or subjectivity?

Are we so different today than this mother, with our prenatal screening, our prying eye that scrutinizes any fold or flap, in order to predict the future of our unborn?

My mother's generation was handed (or took into their own hands) the speculum, and with it gained a new sense of ownership over their own bodies—that in time led to both a sexual revolution and, with a little help from "the pill," the disconnect between sexual pleasure and reproduction. Along with other events (like the case of Roe vs. Wade) this sense of ownership also paved the way for legal abortion, under the motto "My Body, My Choice."

My generation was handed (or not quite handed and that is the catch) the ultrasound probe.

That diagnostic instrument has become a household commodity in any and all—i.e. not just high risk—pregnancies; the first ultrasound is a rite-of-passage for the expectant parent(s) and the embryonic portraits passed around to friends and family.

Although it may seem innocuous, this "window to the womb" is by no means neutral. As Dutch philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek points out in his book about the moral agency of the things that surround us:

¹⁹ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."

²⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of a Mother," 401.

This technology is not simply a functional means to make visible an unborn child in the womb. It actively helps to shape the way the unborn is humanely experienced.²¹

Ultrasound imaging represents the unborn through a series of interpretative steps, each shaping how the unborn is perceived, for example:

First of all, the image on the screen has a specific size, and even though this representation suggests a higher degree of realism, its size does not coincide with the size of the unborn in the womb. A fetus eleven weeks old measures about 8.5 cm and weighs 30 grams, but its representation on the screen makes it appear to have the size of a newborn baby [...] A number of techniques are used to construct a realistic image of the unborn. Further, a sonogram depicts the unborn independently from the body of its mother.²²

This last point is important, as it redefines not only the status of the fetus, but also the status of the mother. First—because that’s what everybody wants to do when having a sonogram—let’s take a look at the baby:

Ultrasound imaging constitutes the fetus as an *individual person*; it is made present as a separate living being rather than forming a unity with its mother, in whose body it is growing. Obstetric ultrasound thus contributes to the coming about of what has been called ‘fetal personhood’ [...] This experience of fetal personhood is enhanced by the possibility of seeing the gender of the unborn; by its ability to reveal the genitals, ultrasound genders the unborn. The expectant parents, as a result, can begin to call the unborn by its name.²³

Moreover, if you have a name you are *somebody*, and if you are somebody, you live *somewhere*:

Another effect of this separation of mother and unborn is that the mother is increasingly seen as the environment in which the unborn is living, rather than

²¹ Peter-Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 17.

²² Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, 24–25.

²³ Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, 25.

forming a unity with it. And when the fetus is constituted as a vulnerable subject, its environment may potentially be harmful. This opens the way for using ultrasound screening as a form of surveillance, monitoring the lifestyle and habits of expecting women in order to enhance the safety of the unborn.²⁴

Accordingly, the ultrasound probe becomes an instrument that effectively hands the (pregnant) female body back to professionals—in this case the medics and the lawmakers—after all, as lay(wo)men we are in no position to interpret these images ourselves.

Furthermore, although there is no medical indication for an ultrasound examination in preparation to a first trimester abortion, several US states require it.²⁵

It must be noted that these are not diagnostic ultrasounds, performed to screen for congenital defects that are rarely detectable before twelve weeks gestation, but rather ultrasounds performed solely to establish the “personhood” of the fetus, in a heartbeat.²⁶

In the case of a wanted pregnancy however, the ultrasound serves as a *diagnostic* tool, designed to single out fetuses at risk of, for example, Down’s syndrome (via neck fold measurements) or spina bifida. This type of prenatal screening frames the unborn as a possible future patient, an interpretive action that is (also) not without moral consequences:

In translating the unborn into a possible patient, ultrasound makes pregnancy into a medical condition that needs to be monitored and requires professional healthcare. Moreover, ultrasound translates ‘congenital defects’ into preventable forms of suffering. [...] It inevitably becomes a matter of choice now: the choice not to have an ultrasound scan made is also a choice, a very deliberate one in a society in which the norm is to have these scans done, based on the predominant assumption that *not* scanning for

²⁴ Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, 24–25.

²⁵ Guttmacher Institute, “State Policies in Brief, Requirements for Ultrasound as of March 1st, 2014,” *Guttmacher Institute*, https://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/spibs/spib_RFU.pdf (accessed 28 March, 2014).

According to this brief from the Guttmacher Institute, twelve states require that an abortion provider perform an ultrasound on each woman seeking an abortion, while in nine states providers must offer the women the opportunity to see images made as preparation for the abortion and another five states require the provider to offer the woman a voluntary ultrasound before the abortion procedure.

²⁶ In other words, an act of surveillance by the state to protect the safety of the unborn, against the pregnant woman’s will; to add to the invasiveness of this procedure, most ultrasounds in the first trimester are performed via the vagina, as the fetus is too small to give “good pictures” via the abdominal wall.

disease is irresponsible, because you deliberately run the risk of having a disabled or sick child, causing suffering both for the child and for yourself and your family.²⁷

When you were about ten weeks inside of me, the doctor couldn't find your head on that scan. She found your heart, but what good is a heart with no head?

I didn't know where to turn. I didn't turn to God. I abandoned the idea of an interventionist God, because what kind of heartless God would put a headless baby inside of me, and then haggle about it through prayer?

I turned to my dad who advised me not to seek knowledge I was not prepared to use, which turned out to be good fatherly advice, so I'm passing this on to you.

And then I turned to you and I asked you; I begged and I pleaded with you, to grow your own head. I wept and implored. I promised I would be the best mother I could ever be, the only mother you would ever need, if you would only grow a head.

Which you did, and how! When I came back the following week to the hospital they told me the images were normal.

I could not believe it. I could not believe it, until many sonogram images and months later I saw it with my own eyes; that in fact your newborn head was not only normal, it was perfect! With your own perfect eyes in it!

Perfectly normal, what else?

Of course during my pregnancy, and some times after, I felt bad for "you," for having considered not to let "you" live, believing "you" had no head and therefor no life outside the womb anyway. (I have since convinced myself...no, it would be more accurate to say that I have since learned, that "you" without "your" head is not the same you I know and love.) But while I didn't feel alright, making that call, I felt like everything would be alright as long as I could only keep you inside of me—but then what?

I am probably neither the first nor the last mother to wish, despite morning sickness, elephant limbs, and deathlike fatigue, to stay pregnant forever. To never have to deliver on the promise of delivery.

The untanglement of the mother-and-child union happens gradually and suddenly, leaving both with an imprint and perhaps a longing, back to this halfway home, where one becomes two? And believe you me; the "Quickening"—the feeling of another life inside you diverging from this point of viability—is a larger-than-life experience.

²⁷ Peter-Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology*, 17.

If your *sexual persona*, your womanhood, is layered upon you like mother of pearl, motherhood in turn is layered on you from the inside as it hollows out the shiny phallic object of the female body and turns it into a vessel, a grail, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

(Which is not to be confused with destiny!)

This layering should be taken figuratively, while at the same time quite literally. New scientific research suggests what we perhaps already knew instinctively:

Women can also gain genomes from their children. After a baby is born, it may leave some fetal cells behind in its mother's body, where they can travel to different organs and be absorbed into those tissues [...] It's pretty likely that any woman who has been pregnant is a chimera.²⁸

In this way our DNA, like a pearl, a philosopher's stone, or a lyric rolling on your tongue, operates in layers, through metamorphosis, becoming a mantra, trickling intravenously into our limbic system, connecting the person you are becoming to the person I was. And what we look for in this connective tissue is not perfection, but transformation.

It's a lot of information, I know, so much I wanted to tell you, because:

You are my Favorita
And a place in your heart dear
Makes me feel more real²⁹

That real feeling of containing and carrying somebody, of the whole oceanic interiority that entails, is a position of hope, but also a position of fear; because something, or somebody, (more precisely that you, you were yet to become and I was yet to know) could be lost, I just had to believe in it, but anyway:

Even Zarathustra
Another-time-loser
Could believe in you³⁰

And even so, you can't just take it from me—there is so much I have left out. Like Paula Modersohn-Becker's self portraits,

²⁸ Carl Zimmer, "DNA Double Take," *The New York Times*, 16 September, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/science/dna-double-take.html> (accessed 3 April, 2014).

²⁹ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."

³⁰ Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."

Buñuel's *An Andalusian Dog*, or Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter*—go see with your own eyes!

Just remember: Seeing is not believing, but it is a practice.³¹

Oh mother of pearl
I wouldn't change you
for the whole world ³²

Amen to that!
Love,
Mom

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outro

³¹ Amelia Charter, note to author, Chicago, March, 2013.

³² Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl."



outro

On the Mo(u)ning of Margaret Thatcher's passing.

Dear Reader,

I remember a poster, popular at the time when I was in my pre-teens and living so close to the Iron Curtain we could see it from our house. In a parody of the movie poster from *Gone with the Wind*, Ronald Reagan carries Margaret Thatcher away from a nuclear mushroom cloud blazing behind them. It reads:

She promised to follow him to the end of the world,
He promised to organize it!

It scared the living daylights out of me.

You can argue what came first, the spunk or the egg, but Reagan and Thatcher were made in the boardroom for each other, and they made it clear to the world in no uncertain terms that they would take this new romance to the bunker if needed.

Of course many tried to break them up. In 1982 a crackly tape recording surfaced of a hostile phone call between Thatcher and Reagan. The reason for their fall-out reportedly being the controversial sinking of the Argentine battleship *Belgrano*, which was torpedoed by British nuclear subs as it was sailing away from the Falkland Islands, killing 323 people.¹

In the recording Reagan accuses Thatcher of being too aggressive and urges her: "Control yourself!"

The tape, delivered anonymously to the office of Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, was soon found to be a hoax. Only problem was that nobody knew who had produced the spliced recording of Thatcher and Reagan's voices. A top secret note from the British Foreign Office read:

There is no information to indicate that any subversive group or individual in this country was involved in making this tape.²

¹ Thatcher was later interrogated about the *Belgrano* incident on the BBC live television program *Nationwide*, by a schoolteacher(!)—an insult that caused Thatcher's husband, Denis, to latch out at the producer of the show that his wife had been 'stitched up by bloody BBC poofs and Trots.'

BBC News "TV's top 10 tantrums," *BBC UK*, 31 August, 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1518975.stm (accessed 30 March, 2014).

² Nico Hines, "The British Punk Band That Fooled Reagan, Thatcher and the CIA," *The Daily Beast*, 4 January, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/04/the-british-punk-band-that-fooled-reagan-thatcher-and-the-cia.html> (accessed 28 March, 2014)

Argentine intelligence was suspected, among others, before it was decided that: "This type of activity fits the pattern of fabrications circulated by the Soviet KGB."³

The tape did the rounds for another year or so, before it was discovered to be the brainchild of a little known British anarcho punk band, with a back catalogue of titles like *Penis Envy* and *Christ the Album*. Crass.

If Punk is dad, who will pull this kind of prank, or dress you in a *Ramones* romper and take you out to paint the town black every other weekend, Disco is your eternal mother, into whose pulsating bosom you can always return when he sends you pogoing. Unfortunately they cannot be in the same room with each other.

I thought Thatcher was no dancer. Not true, in fact I've found several photos of her and Reagan waltzing over the world stage, but still—no disco dancer! In fact, I am fairly sure that in Thatcher's universe, disco doesn't even exist. Not even a minuscule degree.

Yet she was instrumental and definitive to my muse and protagonist Queen Leeba. Thatcher became Leeba's antagonist.

In so many ways, 1979 was Queen Leeba's year. It was the Year of the Child. It was the year of Disco Demolition. And it was the year Thatcher was elected into office.

Of course it is just one year of many, but when I think of it now, the transition from the '70s and '80s evokes a shift in the Western paradigm, commencing a retrograde movement away from some of the possibilities and conversations that had been started in the '60s and continued in the '70s—conversations that entertained *The Limits To Growth*, for example, and the redistribution of wealth.⁴

Pretty soon these conversations were to be muffled by ridicule with slogans such as "Greed is Good!" and "The nine most dangerous words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help!'" and the way was paved for Thatcherism and Reaganomics.

As the caption underneath the poster predicted, Reagan and Thatcher's wild romance is *Now Playing World wide*, which is the reason why we are now given all kinds of stuff for free. Not because, as it used to be, the society is you, but because the product is you. Which is great, right? Because we all want free stuff...except the free stuff we get now is not the stuff we need, like education, health care, and affordable housing. No, that

³ Hines, "The British Punk Band That Fooled Reagan, Thatcher and the CIA."

⁴ *The Limits to Growth* is a 1972 book using computer simulations to predict the effect of exponential economic and population growth in a world with finite natural resources. Its first edition bears the subtitle: 'A report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind.'

Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, William W. Berens and Jørgen Randers, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books 1972).

A PDF of the book can be found here: <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf> (accessed 6 April, 2014).

stuff is really expensive, because it is actually valuable. So what we get instead, for example, is Facebook—*always free and always will be!*

And what we get instead of feminism is the advice to *Lean In*, to take it like a man, to succumb to the prestige of 60+ hour workweeks, with five-hour nights and all-day-care for our kids, to compete and break the glass ceiling. This pseudo-feminism has by now all but cornered the popular imagination of what feminism should be about.⁵

It defines success solely in masculine terms of competing within the existing game, while ignoring that feminism was originally a game changer—aiming at changing the rules, toward equality and (gasp!) solidarity between men and women. What we need according to this breed of "Iron Lady Feminists," are more businesswomen, more mompreneurs, more female CEOs and politicians, more world leaders like Hillary Clinton and Margaret Thatcher.

In Leeba's universe, Margaret Thatcher is the "Hannibal the Cannibal" of feminism, butchering the feminist body, and skinning it to sew herself a power suit.

She would probably have loved that idea.

New Statesman's editor Paul Johnson quoted Thatcher as saying:

The feminists hate me, don't they? And I don't blame them. For I hate feminism. It is poison.⁶

And yet, undeniably, she owed her political career to preceding generations of feminists, just as she made the road to equality and solidarity undeniably harder to travel for any and all subsequent generations (feminists and non-feminists alike).

She basically road-blocked it, or, to borrow her lingo, privatized its infrastructure.

As Russell Brand, ever the voice of reason, remarked in his eulogy for her:

It always struck me as peculiar [...] when the Spice Girls briefly championed Thatcher as an early example of girl power. I don't see that. She is an anomaly; a product of the freak-onomy of her time. Barack Obama, interestingly, said in his statement that she had 'broken the glass ceiling for other women.'

⁵ Except maybe that other popular notion that feminism is about hating men, because yeah really, feminism is really all about men! Really??!?!? —Oh, please!

⁶ Jessica Elgot, "Margaret Thatcher Dead: Was the Iron Lady a Feminist?" *Huffington Post UK*, 8 April, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/04/08/margaret-thatcher-feminist_n_3036864.html (accessed 28 March, 2014).

Only in the sense that all the women beneath her were blinded by falling shards. She is an icon of individualism, not of feminism.⁷

In keeping with the individualist credo “anything you can do, I can do better!” Thatcher famously hardly ever slept. She got by on catnaps here and there, in boardrooms and taxis for instance, staying up all night, plotting and scheming her new world order.

It makes complete sense to me: I am at my most vitriolic and mean spirited when sleep deprived.

(Although you can wake me up for breastfeeding any time!)

My husband does not understand my passionate resentment toward this woman. Unlike him, I didn’t grow up in Britain, where her election was welcomed by his primary school peers with a bemused, “Blimey, now we have a female prime minister! Jolly Good!” before moving along in the lunch queue singing:

In the gravy, where we can sail the seven peas...

That was before she snatched their milk, of course... and then she snatched so much more than that.

I know it’s pathetic, and I know you are going to ask: “Do you have to?” Yes, I have to—because this actually describes the feeling most accurately, and perhaps also underscores that sometimes the pathetic is the perfect antidote to apathy—I have to, have to, have to quote the most pathetic (and therefore one of the greatest) British bands, Pink Floyd. At their most pathetic, on that most pathetic album of theirs, *The Final Cut*, Roger Waters wails:

Should we shout
Should we scream
What happened to the post war dream?
-Oh, Maggie, Maggie, what did we do?⁸

Maggie should know! She snatched the postwar dream by laying the foundation for a Europe in which the welfare state and the worker’s unions—with their credo of eight hours work, eight hours rest and eight hours freedom, of giving what you can and getting what you need, instead of just giving as good as you get—were dismantled and ridiculed.

Instead, groups of people on the periphery of the work market—the immigrants, the unemployed, and most recently, the art-

⁷ Russell Brand, “I Always Felt Sorry for her Children,” *The Guardian*, 9 April, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/09/russell-brand-margaret-thatcher> (accessed 30 March, 2014).

⁸ Pink Floyd, “The Post War Dream,” *The Final Cut* (Harvest, 1983).

ists—are singled out and pitted against each other in the name of competition and privatization. Friends of mine who took to the streets in protest of severe budget cuts to the cultural sector of the Netherlands, reported back with shocking accounts: not only of police brutality (which was expected), but also of verbal abuse from spectators of the demonstration. From their front row seats at sidewalk cafés along the route through the pedestrian precinct of the respectable city of The Hague, these *nette burgers* (meaning “good citizens”) merrily booed the protesters calling them *Links Tuig!* (Leftist Scum!)

Although, I suspect, Thatcher couldn’t care less about Dutch artists, her legacy lives on in the pervasive impulse to ridicule and bully anyone who stands up for their livelihood, or points to the responsibility of the state to protect its weaker members.

Owen Jones preemptively wrote in *The Independent*, a year before her death:

Thatcher is reviled by some not just because she crushed the left, the Labour movement and the post-war social democratic settlement. It is because she did it with such enthusiasm, and showed no regret for the terrible human cost [...] Perhaps if a Labour government had reduced the prosperous middle-classes of the Home Counties to mass unemployment and poverty, and stockbrokers desperate to save their livelihoods had been chased by police on horseback through the City of London, they would understand the bitterness.[...] But while Thatcher-hate is understandable, it is futile. Celebrating the prospect of her death has become an admittedly macabre substitute for the failure to defeat Thatcherism.⁹

Part of my renewed resentment toward Thatcher was my own bitterness, after seeing friends and colleagues, fellow artists, being bullied into compliance by members of her following, from the wave of neo-liberal government, that washed over Europe since the turn of the millennium.

While that might be futile, an incentive for this book was the unwillingness to accept the neo-liberalist status quo as the end of history.

At the same time, it bothered me that my younger friends did not want to identify with the feminist movement, because in their vocabulary, the term *Feminist* had become attached to the term *Killjoy*.

So, I labeled myself the *Feminist Killjoy* and went on to preach the joys of Feminism.

⁹ Owen Jones, “Not All Socialists Want To Dance On Margaret Thatcher’s Grave, I Want Her To Go On And On,” *The Independent*, 16 September, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/not-all-socialists-want-to-dance-on-margaret-thatchers-grave-i-want-her-to-go-on-and-on-8143089.html> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

And Motherhood. And Art. And Disco.

To this end I have been revisiting, reexamining, repurposing, and recycling some of the legacy handed to us from the 2nd wave of feminism from the '70s, and thrown on the landfill of history by *Lean In Feminists*.

There is enlightenment to be found on that tip; although some of this legacy seems quaint and dated now, there is some really good and useful stuff there. As an antidote to the toxic spill of our *laissez-faire* economy, there is also a whole lot of love.

Which makes it clear, perhaps, why Thatcher hated feminism so much. As Russell Brand dryly notes:

When I awoke today on LA time my phone was full of impertinent digital eulogies. It'd be disingenuous to omit that there were a fair number of ding-dong-style celebratory messages amidst the pensive reflections on the end of an era. Interestingly, one mate of mine, a proper leftie, in his heyday all Red Wedge and right-on punch-ups, was melancholy. 'I thought I'd be overjoyed, but really it's just...another one bites the dust...' This demonstrates, I suppose, that if you opposed Thatcher's ideas it was likely because of their lack of compassion, which is really just a word for love. If love is something you cherish, it is hard to glean much joy from death, even in one's enemies.¹⁰

Even so, I couldn't but feel a brief elation when I learned of her death. A hope emerged: now that she is gone, perhaps her legacy could rust in peace right along with her.

So I made her a banner and I hung it above my Motherism tent: a protest-chic *mise-en-scène*—a Femi-Futuristic camp for Queen Leeba and her Mothernists to inhabit. Here, the different parts of the project came together as an audio-visual installation.

The mother-ship of the project, a nomadic tent structure, serves as library, chill room, and gathering point. It contains a selection of Leeba's books along with a soundtrack in the form of recordings of her letters—the letters that were later reworked for this book. Inside the tent, visitors are invited to listen to the audio, to read the books, to think, to talk or to just hang out and eat marshmallows (because we are bad enough Mothers, you can totally eat marshmallows inside our tent!).

The ambience of the space is heavily influenced by the visual language of the futuristic interior design of the '60s and '70s, in particular that of Verner Panton and Poul Gernes. These two

¹⁰ Russell Brand, "I Always Felt Sorry for her Children."

influential Danish designers and artists are united in a radical approach to color theory as well as a design philosophy characterized by a social conscience with respect for the ordinary individual, and its right to inhabit a meaningful, stimulating and nurturing, environment. In this so-called *Snoezelen Room*, knowledge transfer is propagated through cross-pollination and exchange—creating a synergy between cerebral and embodied cognition, between "being in it" and "thinking of it."¹¹

When the installation was open—both at Co-Prosperity Sphere in Chicago and at the Poor Farm in Wisconsin—I was really happy that people took this invitation to make themselves at home and took the time, both to listen to the audio, but also to each other. Unfortunately, no-one was breastfeeding in the tent yet, but it is my dream that some time in the (not too distant) future, when we get to stake out in the museum, someone will!

Inside and above the tent hang protest-chic banners, sporting Mothernist slogans and symbols, combining the formal language of Hilma af Klint and Kenneth Noland with a disco vibe. They can be worn as scarves and waved like flags, allowing the bearer to protest by day and be chic by night, underscoring that the compromises that you (need to) make as a mother, to accommodate and unite the different spheres of your life, are not signs of weakness but of strength.

Do what you have to do to do what you have to do.

Protest is a position of hope. It hopes to some day make itself redundant. I hope that some day we won't need to point out the legacy of feminism anymore because it has made itself redundant, or self-explanatory.

But, until that day, I have tried to repurpose it for myself and for you, dear reader.

This repurposing took shape as these letters, open letters from a fictional mother to a fictional daughter, sister and mother. But also from myself to my own daughter, or perhaps more accurately, from the girl I was to the woman she will become.

To that girl, the girl I was, 1979 is also a seminal year, as it more or less marks the beginning of my self-identification, at age 10, as an artist and a feminist.

The world I, we, inhabit now, is markedly different from that ten-year-old girl's vision of her own future, so I set out to revision it. To do that, I had to dig up and revise a lot of that good shit on the garbage belt of history, among it what I imagined

¹¹ A "Snoezelen Room" is a soothing environment filled with sensory and intellectual stimulation in which the visitor can enter a liminal state of cognitive and aesthetic exploration. The Dutch term *snoezelen* is constructed from two verbs: *snuffelen*, meaning to explore, and *doezelen*, meaning to doze off. The term was invented to describe soothing yet stimulating environments, developed for non-verbal therapeutic treatment of people with severe autism and of demented elderly.

"What is Snoezelen," Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, http://www.hollandbloorview.ca/programsandservices/communityprograms/snoezelen/what_is_snoezelen.php (accessed 28 March, 2014).

to be that girl's legacy of feminism –the one we got handed down from our (fore)mothers.

Digging in, I also dug up a lot of stuff I didn't expect, a lot of stuff I didn't agree with and a lot of stuff that I found contradictory, which as it turned out was a great relief.

As I tried to figure out the relationship between the different aspects of my life and this legacy, defining myself as a feminist-academic-artist-mother increasingly felt like playing a complicated game of rock-paper-scissors-boob. I didn't find sufficient space for mothering within the academic feminist discourse I wanted to partake in, just like I had felt discouraged when wanting to include it in my art practice and I felt increasingly provoked at this demand to "check my motherhood at the door." So much so that instead of "covering" that part of my life, I opted to "come out" as a mother, artistically and academically.

One way of reading this book could be as documenting my "coming out" and my attempt to stake out new territory—within this "mother-shaped hole" in art discourse.

This "staking out" should be interpreted quite literally; instead of making work "about mothering" I decided to make a piece that operated "something like a Mama": the installation I described above. I employed my fictive Alma Mater Queen Leeba, as a kind of psychic companion, who would lend me the strength to be fierce, voluptuous, and hysterical.

Together we set out to conquer and inhabit this *terra incognita*, to mine the mother lode, with intent to examine the central hypothesis: If the proverbial Mother is perhaps a persona non grata in the art world, because her nurturing nature is at odds with the hyperbolic ideal of the singular artistic genius.

In its totality *Mothernism* offers a practice-based approach to theoretical research, operating in an organic way more like a sourdough than an archive.

One morning, as I was unloading the *Mothernism* tent in my now empty studio, I had a little cry. I was eating a heart shaped *Mom's Heart* special Mother's Day edition from Dunkin' Donuts, while reading on my cell phone the digital edition of *The New York Times*, about the collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh.¹²

¹² CELEBRATE MOM IN SWEET WAYS AT DUNKIN' DONUTS THIS MAY:

Dunkin' Donuts also has a Mom's Heart Donut, a heart-shaped donut filled with Bavarian Kreme, topped with strawberry icing and festive heart-shaped sprinkles. The Mom's Heart Donut is available at participating Dunkin' Donuts restaurants nationwide for a limited time.

Dunkin Donuts, "Celebrate Mom in Sweet Ways at Dunkin' Donuts this May," *Dunkin' Donuts*, 2 May, 2012, <http://news.dunkindonuts.com/Press-Releases/CELEBRATE-MOM-IN-SWEET-WAYS-AT-DUNKIN-DONUTS-THIS-MAY-ec.aspx> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

Motherly love, so sweet and yet so raw: you see, a *Mom's Heart* is not only covered in pink glazing and heart shaped sprinkles it is also filled to the brim with the sweetest custard you have ever tasted. While this saccharine goo overflowed and spilled into every cavity of every tastebud I never knew I had and filled it to the brim with some obscene bliss, another mother cried out in another part of the world, holding up the pictures of her two children who had been working in the garment factories on the fourth and the fifth floor of what was now just a giant pile of rubble. She was calling out to them, to the sky and to the world at large and to the void in front of her: "Today, I'm here! But you haven't come back!"¹³

I am here! I am here and you are not! Why are you not here?

In the beautifully raw spring morning light, spilling into my now empty studio (empty but for a ton of stuff), that was too much to bear, and I had to have a little cry.

It was a cry of exhaustion, I guess. The exhaustion of a project nearing its completion, combined with the realization that it can never be completed. The closer I get to the Mother, the closer to infinity.

It's like the world is too large these days for motherly love, and yet too small. Like there is no space for this type of attachment in the digital age.

And in the mental time/space collapse of the here/now and the there/now, it felt so exhaustingly incomprehensible that her kids had to die, *there*, while I could sit *here* and have my donut and eat it too, after dropping my kids off at school where they will hopefully know what to do if an armed lunatic enters the building after the terrifying unannounced lockdown drill they had to endure last week, and me briefly entertaining the question, as I waved goodbye to them, if the security guard was armed, and if it would make me feel safer either way.

The sudden realization that these are the kind of incomprehensible bullshit questions we have to entertain these days, every day—because there is no outside to the vernacular of capitalism—had me in tears. My interest in The Mother stems in part from a defiance to give in to this vernacular, to challenge it. Because, even when you try to squeeze her into a donut, even if the mother lets you do that, she is uncontainable—she runneth over. Her self-sacrifice is a transgression, it breaks the primordial taboo of capitalism, because in capitalism, there is no greater love than what you feel for you, and your infinite individual needs.

¹³ Jim Yardley, "Tears and Rage as Hopes Fade in Bangladesh," *The New York Times*, 29 April, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/29/world/asia/owner-of-collapsed-building-arrested-in-bangladesh.html> (accessed 30 March, 2014).

So, I set out to locate the the Mother-shaped hole in contemporary art and discourse. And I realized that the hole *is* the donut, it is the essence of the donut. To paraphrase an old feminist slogan: we don't need another bite of the donut, we need a whole new recipe.

Which is funny because when I started putting this thing together light years ago, it started with a tune stuck in my head.

I was Donna Summer singing what have been dubbed *the worst lyrics in the history of music*:

Someone left the cake out in the rain
I don't think that I can take it
'Cause it took so long to make it
And I'll never find that recipe again¹⁴

And I thought: what the fuck happened to feminism? And I realized that, to me, feminism had become that cake left out in the rain. It could have been, should have been, the most nutritious and delicious thing, but there it was: all wet and soggy and ruined and *ridiculous*.

So I looked at it and thought: "If I am to hand this cake down to the next generation, my son's and daughter's generation, what does it need? If I were to bake it again, to change the recipe, what does it need?" And I thought: "It needs a beat, a heart beat and a disco beat."

It needs a future, a future feminism and it needs a space. It needs a space, a liminal space, like a tent, so it can move and move through and be moved through.

A space for mothering and a space in the art world for mothering, because without mothers there will be no next generation of feminists or anybody else.

And without art there will be no future anymore and we will all just be living in the past.

Love,
Lise

P.S. If you mix red, white and blue, it makes lavender.



¹⁴ Donna Summer, "MacArthur Park," *On the Radio—Greatest Hits* (Casablanca, 1979).

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She has shown internationally in galleries and museums including Overgaden in Copenhagen, the Municipal Museum in the Hague, MoMu in Antwerp, Württembergischem Kunstverein in Stuttgart, CAEC in Xiamen, The Poor Farm in Manawa, Wisconsin, 6018 North, Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. *Motherism* is her first book.