

THE THEATER OF MOTHERHOOD

EL TEATRO DE LA MATERNIDAD

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Submitted / Recibido: 13/02/2022

Accepted / Aceptado: 25/09/2022

To cite this article / Para citar este artículo:

Scheflan Katzav, H. (2023). The theater of motherhood. *Feminismo/s*, 41, 297-323. Rethinking Motherhood in the 21st Century: New Feminist Approaches [Monographic dossier]. Maria Dolores Serrano Niza & Inmaculada Blasco Herranz (Coord.). <https://doi.org/10.14198/fem.2023.41.12>

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Abstract

The basic premise of this article is that despite the many representations of mothers in the history of art, the maternal image has almost invariably been presented in the status of object, i.e., a reflection of the value system, interests, and perspective of the patriarchal culture, and not of the mother herself. This study examines the construction of the maternal ideal in western, particularly Israeli, culture, and suggests the turning point over the past twenty years as contemporary artist-mothers (mama'artists) have undermined this ideal.

To avoid the traditional structure into which the mother has been relegated, the article adopts the matricentric perspective of Canadian scholar Andrea O'Reilly, who places the mother at the center of feminist discourse. With the understanding that the category *mother* intersects with, but is distinct from, the category *woman*, art scholarship must formulate more valid narratives.

This paper has two goals. One is to examine how matricentric research can contribute to analysis of the work of artist-mothers. The second is to identify the tools in art that enable expression of the political-maternal subjectivity. The methodology proceeds from these goals, and includes the voice of the artist, her personal story, and her perspective as she creates an imagined art world. These

were obtained by studio meetings with the artist, personal interviews, and a gender analysis of the art.

The video series under study was created between 2005 and 2015 by Mali De-Kalo, an Israeli mother-artist. The research revealed an original, thought-provoking, and ironic artistic reaction with dramatic theater-of-the-absurd elements that reflect her critique of the mechanisms of construction and replication of the social order and its expectations of the Israeli mother.

De-Kalo represents a new spirit in Israeli art—a contemporary artist in courageous defiance of the social norm that casts the mother as object; she depicts in her art a political-maternal subject who exposes and opposes patriarchal power in the social and artistic realms.

Keywords: matricentrism; maternal subjectivity; motherhood; Israeli art.

Resumen

La premisa principal de este artículo es que, más allá de las múltiples representaciones de las madres en la historia del arte, la imagen maternal ha sido casi siempre presentada como objeto, por ejemplo, como reflejo del sistema de valores, de intereses y perspectivas de la cultura patriarcal y no de las madres en sí. Este estudio analiza la construcción del ideal maternal en la cultura occidental, en particular la israelí, y sugiere la existencia de un cambio relevante a lo largo de los últimos veinte años en la medida en que las artistas-madres han cuestionado este ideal.

Para evitar la estructura tradicional en la que se ha relegado la figura de la madre, el artículo adopta la perspectiva *matricéntrica* de la estudiosa canadiense Andrea O'Reilly, que sitúa a la madre en el centro del discurso feminista. Comprendiendo que la categoría *madre* se cruza con la de *mujer* pero es distinta de esta, los estudios sobre arte han de formular narraciones más válidas.

Este artículo tiene dos objetivos. Uno es estudiar cómo la investigación *matricéntrica* puede contribuir al análisis del trabajo de las artistas-madres. El segundo es identificar las herramientas artísticas que hacen posible la expresión de la subjetividad político-maternal. La metodología procede de estos mismos fines, e incluye la voz de la artista, su historia personal y su perspectiva en tanto en cuanto ella crea un mundo de arte imaginado. La obtención de todo ello se hizo a través de encuentros con la artista en su estudio, entrevistas personales y análisis del arte desde una perspectiva de género.

La vídeo serie que se estudia fue creada entre 2005 y 2015 por Mali De-Kalo, una artista-madre israelí. La investigación reveló una reacción artística original, provocadora e irónica con elementos dramáticos del teatro del absurdo que reflejan su crítica de los mecanismos de construcción y réplica del orden social y sus expectativas sobre las madres israelíes. De-Kalo representa un nuevo espíritu en el arte israelí, una artista contemporánea que desafía valientemente la norma social que moldea a la madre

como objeto; ella representa en su arte un sujeto político-maternal que expone el poder patriarcal y se opone a él en medios sociales y artísticos.

Palabras clave: *matricentrismo*; subjetividad maternal; maternidad; arte israelí.

1. INTRODUCTION

The maternal image is one of the most prevalent in the visual arts. One might therefore expect to find an almost infinite variety of the maternal subject in the history of Western art, and yet the historical record reveals this image invariably represented as object. Historically, the maternal image in art appears primarily as the bearer of meaning for the other, not as generating meaning about the maternal subject herself. We know little of the distinctive emotional organization of the mother depicted; instead, she is constrained and obscured by the existing artistic and social symbol systems.

The absence of the maternal subject in art extends a long tradition in which the materials that make up the myths, legends, stories, and ideas derive from the pain, existential fears, and fantasies of men. These culture-defining materials transformed feminine content, including the experience of motherhood, into mere backdrop to tell the story of men.

This paper takes a matricentric approach (O'Reilly, 2016), placing the mother at the center of feminist discourse, relating to her as the subject, not object, of art. It has two goals: first, to examine how matricentric research can contribute to an analysis of work by artist-mothers; and second, to identify tools in art that allow for the representation of the maternal-political subject, i.e., art that refuses to conform to social norms that establish the mother as object, but rather expose and oppose the patriarchal structures of power in both the social and artistic realms.

O'Reilly identifies ten ideological assumptions in the patriarchal construction of motherhood: *Essentialization*, *Privatization*, *Individualization*, *Naturalization*, *Normalization*, *Idealization*, *Biologicalization*, *Expertization*, *Intensification*, and *Depolicialization* of motherhood (2016, p.14).

My research discusses the relationship between these western bourgeois approaches to motherhood and those rooted in Israeli culture, as presented in the work of Mali De-Kalo, a contemporary Israeli artist, whose art challenges

these structures, with particular reference to the six characteristics, as described below. The first is *Naturalization*, which assumes that maternity is natural to women and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and skill. I will show how her art, especially the pair of works *Dinnertime Stories*, challenges the premise of innate and instinctive knowledge of motherhood work. The second is *Normalization*, which limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode: the nuclear family. De-Kalo's painful work *Relaying* shows how precisely the great promise of the nuclear family for healthy and normative foundations serves as a veil to cover its shaky foundation for maternal functioning. The following three are *Idealization*, *Expertization*, and *Intensification*. These categories that set unattainable expectations of and for mothers receive a sharp critical artistic expression in de-Kalo's works, especially in *Awake at Night* and *Eight Lifts*. The last characteristic that O'Reilly points out and will be at my use is *Depolicialization*, which characterizes childrearing solely as a private and nonpolitical undertaking, with no social or political import. I will show that the entirety of De-Kalo's work presented in this study formulates a critical position that seeks to formulate motherhood as part of socio-political discourse and not as a collection of mere individual cases.

De-Kalo's work demonstrates how art can function as a site where motherhood is stripped of its sanctity and exposed in its nakedness. The aim is to show how a mother-artist critiques the social demands made of mothers, and how the dichotomous image of the mother (good versus bad) dissolves through the special performance choreography.

2. THE MATERNAL IDEAL IN BOURGEOIS, WESTERN THOUGHT

One of the social structures that has been re-examined in recent decades is the bourgeois family that emerged in Western Europe at the onset of the Enlightenment in the late 1700s. During that period, a new concept of the family was formulated—an intimate and harmonious social unit in which the individual finds happiness. The reshaping of the family met certain needs of modern bourgeois culture that came in the wake of social, cultural, political, and economic changes. The traditional extended family, based on stable and virtually unchanging economic and social

conditions and on a collectivist perception of family members and their ambitions, did not suit the liberal politics and bourgeois capitalism that called for individualism and socioeconomic mobility. The new ideal was designed to address the physical and emotional needs of all members of the family—parents and children. The capitalist business world, a much more impersonal and competitive model than the traditional business world, required a serene and secure refuge at its side, one that would absorb, ease, and soften the demands and pressures of the workplace. Awareness also changed of the public and private spheres, and the gender division between them (Davidoff & Hall, 1987). The private and female sphere—the home and the family—was intended to be a place that allowed for intimacy and warmth; it was defined and shaped as an antithesis to the outside world, which was the male, public sphere—marked by impersonal and alienated relations that governed economic and civilian life (Chadwick, 1990). This binary gendered space required functional efficiency and strived for maximum satisfaction, but it completely ignored the pressures in the home itself and the unceasing demands on the middle-class mother in the domestic sphere.

In France, the moralizing of philosopher and writer Jean Jacques Rousseau about the role and standing of women, combined with then current scientific-medical writings on the issue, shaped a distinctive sexual politics for women/mothers (Schwartz, 1984). Britain did not lag far behind: Much medical writing during the Victorian era asserted that deviance by a woman from the new social norms of the period—marriage at the appropriate age, breast-feeding, and an abundance of children—could lead to medical abnormality (Nead, 1988).

Women were intimidated into devoting themselves to the maternal vocation, and, for the hesitant, more sophisticated means were applied. In *L'amour en plus: Histoire de l'amour maternel, XVIIe-XXe siècle*, French philosopher-historian Élisabeth Badinter (1980) notes that this period saw the first explicitly articulated reference to the happiness of the woman. Her happiness, however, has boundaries of place—the home, and of role—motherhood. In other words, to achieve happiness, the woman has only to conform to the new model; she was educated to desire and strive for what was required of her within the framework of the family.

The idea that early childhood is a critical stage in the life of a human being was one of the Enlightenment discoveries and it launched a demand for change in the education of the child. The child does not understand punishment, rules, or dictates, and could be harmed by them. In the new education, the mother was expected to completely devote herself to childrearing—understanding the child's nature, need for affection and approval, natural tendency to learn by imitation, and love for play and freedom of movement.

Thus, the mother/wife enabled the existence of the new family. Rousseau's heroines, such as Julie from *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), were the model of a beautiful, devoted, and modest mother, whose happiness derived from satisfying the needs of her husband and children.

Western European art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in France and England, changed accordingly, and the image of the happy mother played a starring role according to the pioneering research of Linda Nead (1988), who writes about artistic representations of women during the Victorian era, and Carol Duncan, who writes of this period in France. Note, for example, the work of eighteenth and nineteenth century French and English artists such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La mère bien-aimée* [the well-loved mother] (1765); Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *La bonne mère* [the good mother] (1763); Angelica Kauffman, *Cornelia, pointing to her children as her treasures* (1785); or Constance Mayer, *L'heureuse mère* [the happy mother] (1810). Duncan notes the fundamental change in the iconography of the painting during the eighteenth century—from the sensuous debauchery of the rococo period to the tender mother at the end of the century, and relates to the disparity between the ideology and the reality of motherhood at the onset of this era, and the recruitment of art to bridge the gap. The visual representations that depicted family relations, such as the warmth between the mother and child, breastfeeding, the mother's childrearing, were not common maternal practices among the upper or middle classes of the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. These practices began to spread, however, and toward the close of the nineteenth century, one finds more and more convergence of the functioning of the mother and her representation in art.

These watersheds in the history of modern Christian Europe underscore the important role played by the cultural ethos in shaping the image of the mother and perceptions of motherhood. Although Christian tradition

provided an important precedent in maternal representations via the image of the Madonna as an expression of infinite purity and maternal devotion, this image was also layered with pain, loss, and mourning. The secular bourgeois adopted the virtue and maternal devotion, but went beyond this and for the first time held out to the woman an offer of happiness, satisfaction, and a unique *raison d'être*: motherhood. In other words, the happiness of the woman could derive from only one source: her womb. This thought, fundamentally secular, moves away from the Christian ethos, which sanctifies virginity, and toward the Jewish ethos that sanctifies the principle «be fruitful and multiply» —the blessing of motherhood and the curse of barrenness.

3. THE JEWISH-ISRAELI IDEAL OF MOTHERHOOD

The family, particularly the sanctity of mothers, is a value of singular importance for broad sectors of Israeli society (Izraeli, 1992), deriving, *inter alia*, from the unique attempt to merge Jewish religious law with a democratic state. This merger is exemplified in the personal status laws of Israel—those related to family matters, especially marriage and divorce (Raday, 1995).

The critical role played by the family in Jewish religious tradition derives from the call to «be fruitful and multiply» (Genesis 1:28) —the first biblical commandment and one that signals a divine blessing. Even though this commandment legally obligates only the male to procreate (Mishnah, *Yevamot* 6:6, in Gilat, 2007), it is the Jewish woman who actually fulfills the sacred mission. The Jewish-Israeli ethos defines motherhood in terms of devotion, self-sacrifice, giving, and self-effacement (Lachover, 2018). In Proverbs (31:10-30), the ideal woman is described as an *eshet hayil*, a virtuous woman—humble, wise, God-fearing, conscientious, and guardian of the family purity. According to Jewish tradition, it is the mother's mission to raise the children and instruct them in Jewish values, and therefore her job is extolled by all, including her children, as she guards the flame of the Jewish people and its heritage.

The secular civil code of Israel, which applies to all citizens regardless of their religion, gender, or race, remains loyal to the religious directive: Parenthood is enshrined as a supreme right in Israel's Basic Law (Bombach & Shaked, 2002). Israeli policies are pro-natalist, promoting motherhood as

a woman's essential task. And yet, even though the state deeply values childbirth and reproduction, this does not translate into any significant power for the mother —political, social, or economic.

An extensive essay by art scholar Gideon Ofrat (1991) on the metamorphosis of the national-female myth in Israeli culture observes that Israeli art found the image of the mother to be a useful visual tool for expressing the national myths of the state, and remained fundamentally loyal to the maternal archetypes articulated in western art —the goddess of fertility, mother earth, the bereaved mother, and the happy mother. Each archetype was adapted to the Israeli and Jewish experience and to local sociopolitical events.

From Israeli independence in 1948 until the 1970s, motherhood was a central theme in Israeli art. However, the image of *the mother of the nation* that prevailed denied all subjective agency to her: She was presented not as a private mother, but as a collective matriarch who represents biblical figures, such as the four matriarchs, Hannah whose seven sons were killed before her eyes, and others. This is the mother who gives birth to sons, but also the one who buries them.

This special connection between secular Zionism and religious Judaism created a maternal image linked to two main concepts. One was bereavement and national revival, rooted in the trauma of the Shoah and renewal in the state of Israel as well as the political and military reality of Israel as a war-riven country. Images of keening, bereaved mothers were borrowed from the biblical tale of the sacrifice of Isaac in which Sarah, his mother, grieves over her son's intended pyre, or from Christian pieta art in which the Virgin Mary mourns her son.

The second concept links the body of the mother to the holy land (Ofrat, 1991, p. 131). These maternal images, which metaphorically associate the maternal body with the Israeli landscape, also drew from both Israeli and international culture. In Hebrew, the word *em* or «mother» is embedded in the word *le-om*, or «nation», and carries into the word *moledet*, or «homeland». Thus, the national mother foreshadows the biological mother and connects to the Great Mother archetype, alluding to the para-historical image that integrates the fertility goddess with mother-earth.

The symbolization of the mother, formulated over the first decades of Israeli independence, continued in the following decades with developments influenced by local politics.

After the 1967 war, Israeli society experienced its first significant ideological split, this in the matter of the occupied territories. Not surprisingly, the image of the mother was enlisted by artists on both sides to express this division. The nationalist camp continued to identify the land with the female appendages of the Great Mother, while the critics of occupation cast the nationalist mother as a whore. Another version of this critique arose in the 1980s with the emergence of new maternal images —as a devouring goddess, an aggressive bloodletter of her sons, or one who views her sons in coffins as national heroes. One way or another, whether the Great Mother was portrayed as an inclusive and loving mother earth, or as the bereaved mother whose entire essence is pain and trauma, or as the mother who sacrifices her children for the sake of the nation, the representations of mothers in Israeli art persisted in ignoring maternal subjectivity, and the shaping of the maternal image continued to conform to the needs and interests of its shapers.

Clearly, these representations reinforce the dichotomous perception of the woman —the positive, beloved, loyal, and moral woman versus the lethal one, who, because she owns her sexuality, has also embedded within her the powers of destruction. Interestingly, unlike most western representations in Christian religious art that forge a clear antithesis between the good, god-fearing mother and the femme fatale who is not a mother, Jewish theology reflects a dichotomous female division through the image of two mothers, Eve and Lilith. According to early tradition, it was not Eve who was Adam's first wife, but Lilith, who was born of clay earth like Adam himself (Abarbanel, 1994, p. 25). Her name in Hebrew derives from the word *layla*, meaning «night», and she is depicted as a nocturnal, demonic creature. Lilith's difficult story begins with her refusal to be subservient to her husband Adam; indeed, she rebels against him, pronounces God's secret name, and disappears into the light-filled ether of the universe. God punishes Lilith by slaying daily one hundred of her children, the sons of her copulation with demons. In revenge, Lilith engages in a never-ending search at sea for babies whom she strangles in their cradles and for men whom she seduces in their

nocturnal dreams, then tortures and kills. Lilith herself escapes death as she has separated from Adam before the original sin and his banishment from the Garden of Eden (Abarbanel, 1994, p. 26). The image of Eve, whose name in Hebrew derives from the word for «life», («the mother of all life» in Genesis 3:20), is even more complicated than Lilith as Genesis records two versions of her creation: In verse 1:27, Eve and Adam are created together in the image of God, and in verse 2:22, Eve is created after Adam from his rib. In Jewish culture, the two mothers, Eve and Lilith, are mirror images of each other—each a negative of the other.

Modern Israel embraces religious elements in its view of mothers and overlays them with a western, bourgeois construction of a woman's ambitions. Despite the profound transformation of Israeli society since the 1970s—from a socialist to a capitalist socioeconomic system, right-wing political leadership, and more power to ultra-Orthodox politicians, together with modern western influences regarding the status of women and the structure of the nuclear family—motherhood remains a core institution in Israeli society. The maternal role is still viewed as natural and basic to female existence, and the mother is expected to covet motherhood and devote herself to optimal functioning in the family framework (Rothler, 2018).

The changes undergone by Israeli society in the last quarter of the twentieth century have also affected Israeli art: After some five decades of enlisting the image of the mother to serve nationalist goals or to criticize the state, Israeli art lost interest in the maternal image. As private forces grew more powerful in the field of art, the mother with her nationalist symbols gradually faded from art discourse—the maternal issue did not suit the agendas of postmodern Israeli art. Only in the past decade has the mother won renewed attention, now primarily from mothers who are artists and seek to challenge the cultural structure of the ideal mother as well as the maternal ideal.

4. THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PERFECT-MOTHER IDEAL

The perfect mother is one who desires a large number of children, provides them with endless and unconditional love, is omnipresent in their lives, and has the emotional resources to steer them through times of distress and

crisis¹. Moreover, the needs and desires of her children always take priority over her own needs and desires. Feminist psychoanalysts have identified the notion of the *ideal mother* as having a significant formative influence in child psychology, hence in the perception of the mother, as well. In *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, for example, Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) has shown that the presentation of the mother as either good or bad evokes ambivalent feelings in the child. The child's experience of being mothered is so powerful and threatening that he must repress and deconstruct it into two different forces, which move between the myth of the omnipresent, sacrificing mother to the predatory, neglectful, and sadistic one. Dinnerstein examines the historical period when the biological mother became the child's sole caregiver (primarily since the emergence of the capitalist bourgeoisie). Such changes are not typical of Jewish culture in which the role of the biological mother has always been reserved for the care of children. For this reason, Dinnerstein's conclusions are important and significant to the Jewish maternal experience. In her view, being the sole caregiver is the reason for maternal failure: Society, which strives for an ideal mother, blames the mother for all her children's failings, while at the same time is hostile toward her exclusive authority. The over-glorification of motherhood—in the world at large, and in Jewish society in particular—makes impossible demands of the mother, inevitably labeling her *not good enough*. The moment a mother fails to meet the high standards, her value plummets, with devastating damage to her identity as a woman and mother.

The notion of ideal motherhood creates difficulties on multiple levels. On the social level, giving sole responsibility to the mother for raising the children exempts all other parties—the father, society, and government institutions. On the personal, social-psychological level, the notion of an ideal mother means delegitimizing any ambivalent feelings the mother might have toward her child, as such ambivalence marks her as *dysfunctional*. As a

1. So writes Adrienne Rich about her conversation with her eldest son who, at age twenty-one, read his mother's journals of early motherhood and commented: «You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment.» And Rich replied: «Yes I tried to explain to him, but women—above all, mothers—have been supposed to love that way» (Rich, 1986, p. 23).

result, her true self is hidden from the child, who is instead given one-sided and unambiguous messages. Thus, a worldview threatened by emotional and intellectual complexity is perpetuated, and a long tradition of psychological repression is established. Moreover, a mother who learns to hide her feelings of helplessness, frustration, fears, aggression, and resentment—which most people experience—will not know how to accept such feelings in her children.

In contemporary times, when a significant proportion of mothers are salaried employees and devoted to their out-of-home careers, a new concept has emerged, the modern sister of the mothering ideal: *intensive mothering*. According to sociologist Sharon Hays (1996), this ideology demands that the mother devote vast amounts of time, energy, and money to childrearing, though working outside the home cuts into mothering time. This conflict between a career driven by efficiency, self-interest, and maximizing profits versus intensive mothering, which demands tireless commitment to the children, is clearly evident in Israeli society, where mothers are expected to hold down a job outside the home (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999).

In the context of discussion about the perfect mothering ideology, the artwork of Mali De-Kalo is relevant in its ironic, absurdist, and theatrical critique of the expectations of the social order with its mechanisms of construction and replication.

5. THE THEATER OF MOTHERHOOD

The messages of ideal motherhood have permeated the arts—both high and popular—and our culture is replete with its fictional representations. These not only reflect messages about the ideal, but are used to transmit and reproduce them, as well. Indeed, one might say that the history of representations of mothers is also the history of misrepresentations of good, ideal, pure motherhood. Most female artists (mothers or not) have gone along with this representation, and it is only in recent years that one finds art that exposes what I call the *theater of motherhood*: the theatrical aspects built into maternal functioning. Theater is a medium that contains an inherent disparity between reality and fiction, between the original and its presentation. In contrast, motherhood is perceived as an authentic and, some would say,

instinctive experience—one accorded the truth value of the original—an indisputable emotional and physical truth. Over the years, the prevailing assumption has been that this truth can coexist in harmony with the social expectations of mothers and their expectations of themselves. In recent years, however, some art has tackled the question of how social and personal maternal fantasy can be reconciled with the reality of motherhood, i.e., with the mother's daily activity within and outside the home.

What I call the *Theater of Motherhood*, the American feminist author Susan Maushart calls the *Mask of Motherhood*. In her book she explains it as «an assemblage of fronts [...] that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience. Like all social masks, the mask of motherhood is an invaluable means for organizing and domesticating the more rapacious aspects of the realities we confront. Yet the personal and political price we pay for this control has far exceeded the value of its social dividends» (Maushart, 2000, p. 2). Despite the changing reality of motherhood today, mostly to the better and more candid, the mask still exist, even if compared to what was the situation in the past. Moreover, it is a useful coping mechanism, and therefore replicates itself. The danger is that the make-believe can become so convincing that we fool even ourselves. Maushart explains that «Ultimately, we no longer make a life –we fake a life», and concludes while asking: «how many of us will admit, or are even aware, that we are faking motherhood?» (2000, p. 6).

6. MALI DE-KALO

Mali De-Kahlo is a multidisciplinary Israeli artist who has been creating large-scale video installations for the past two decades. Their focus is on different ways of looking at family territory in general, and at motherhood in particular, by using techniques that involve both genres of fiction-drama and documentary. Her video installations cast light on the theatrical aspect of the outward appearances that the mother maintains, at great effort, consciously and unconsciously, in order to survive within a system of conflicting forces and interests. The mother plays a role in the great performance of her life. Maternal happiness, endless maternal love, pure and unequivocal love, maternal tenderness, maternal instinct—comparatively new, idealistic

bourgeois notions that have seemingly become *natural* and self-evident in our world—are revealed in De-Kalo's works as misrepresentations, as scenes in some other play (possibly in the grotesque genre or a melodrama), whose plot can only be understood if one looks carefully between the lines, at the spaces, at the moments when the actress forgets or has over-memorized her lines. In all her work, there is a subtle moment in which the maternal act flies out of control, shatters norms, and perturbs the viewers.

As noted, discomfiting viewers through overt demonstrations of motherhood has become common in art only in recent years. In the past, viewers who enjoyed idealized representations of motherhood—like a sweet to soothe the troubled psyche—must now come face-to-face with disconcerting works. The 2019 series *Shit Moms* by Iranian-American artist Tala Madani, which interprets the expression «shit mother» literally, is a case in point. The paintings depict female figures made of a filthy-looking, brown substance, which disgusts the viewer due to the association with feces. The incongruity between the intimate and tender presentation of the mother-child relationship (in keeping with the western iconography of the Madonna and the infant Jesus) and the repugnant color/substance underscores the dissonance between the exalted maternal ideal and the accusatory regime that induces guilt and frustration among mothers.

As in any theatrical performance, the viewer's experience is a major part of the signification in De-Kalo's work. The mothers who *perform* in her works elicit an emotional response in the viewer, evoking feelings of distress, partial identification, repulsion, or understanding—depending on the viewer's gender and situation. In her early video works—the two films entitled *Dinnertime Stories* (2009, 2012) and *Awake at Night* (2010)—the artist turns the camera lens inward, toward her own family and home. In two subsequent series—*The Eight Lifts* (2013) and *Relaying* (2015)—women outside the intimate circle of the artist's family are depicted. In both instances, the intimate and the public, the viewer is led to the realization of the potential for things to go wrong in motherhood. In De-Kalo's works, the maternal dichotomy is a formula bound for failure: Our expectation of the maternal representation is undercut, as aggression, exaggeration, pain, and anguish manage to undermine the foundations of the Big Show—motherhood.



Fig. 1. Mali De-Kalo, *Finkielkraut*, 2009, from *Dinnertime stories*, single-channel video, 6 min 11 sec.

Dinnertime Stories is the title of two video works that link a mother's act of bedtime reading to her children with her role as constitutive of the children's personal narrative and self-identity. The artist ostensibly follows the demands of the intense motherhood according to which she has to spend *quality time* with the children, which include, among other things, the time of reading them a story.

In both works, the artist sits with her daughter in the kitchen at dinner-time and reads texts to her about French philosophers. In the earlier work (Fig. 1), De-Kalo reads to her five-year-old daughter an article from the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* about Alain Finkielkraut's views on the riots of French citizens of North African descent that took place in Paris in 2005. She reads the article in a tone usually reserved for a children's story, but the young daughter, who does not understand the *story*, plays with an umbrella out of



Fig. 2. Mali De-Kalo, *Baudrillard*, 2012, from *Dinnertime stories*, single-channel video, 5 min 9 sec.

boredom, occasionally nodding to please her mother. In the second video (Fig. 2), produced seven years later, De-Kalo reads a text to her daughter from Jean Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism*. This time, the preteen is withdrawn into her own world, no longer even pretending to humor her mother, who is clinging to the old interaction between them—and finally gets up and leaves the dinner table, effectively bringing the video to an end. Both works present a bizarre scene that exposes the flaws in the paradigm of the good mother reading a story to her eagerly attentive child. The pretense of two souls coming together in the intimate moments of story-time falls apart into two contradictory wills—an experience familiar to every mother who reads stories to her children. Each of the characters is in a different place and has very different needs: The mother, who seeks to express the issues that interest her, ignores the contrasting wishes of her bored daughter, who is not

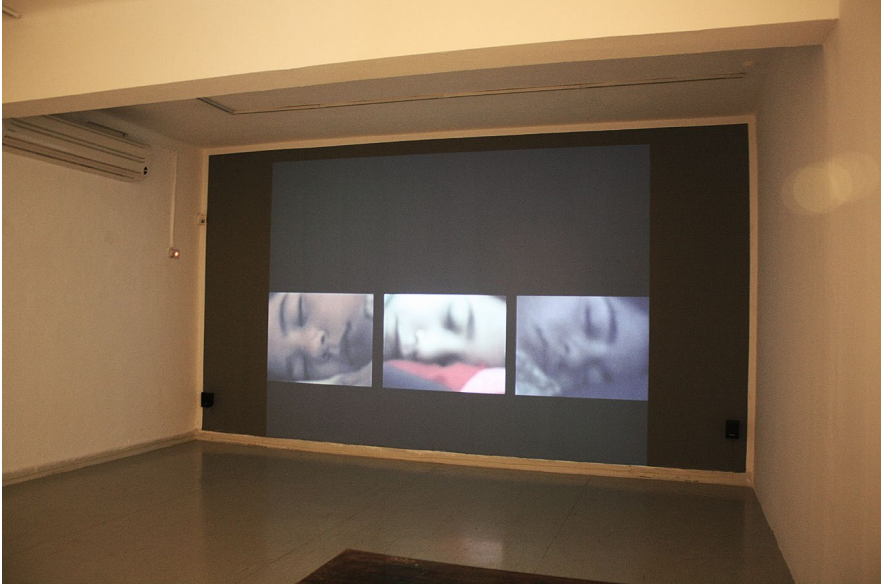


Fig. 3. Mali De-Kalo, *Awake at Night*, 2010, single-channel video, 9 min 41 sec, installation view.

at all interested in the maternal story, demonstrating that even on the *good* side of motherhood, there are conflicting needs, inattention, indifference, self-interest, and moments of dissatisfaction.

Similarly, in the video installation *Awake at Night* (Fig. 3), the mother and children are depicted in two different realms of existence, highlighting the disparity between them. De-Kalo filmed her three children during their night's sleep. She attached the camera to her chest, and so its movements, rising and falling with her breathing, attest to her presence in the work itself. As we witness her breathing, we hear the breathing of the sleeping children. She herself is not seen in the video, but is present throughout the unique recording. We, the viewers, breathe with her as we gaze at the children and take part in her task of supervising and protecting, which is so familiar to us as parents and children. In her Book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Sara Ruddick argues that the first duty of mothers is to protect and preserve their children (1989, p. 80). There is no doubt that mothers in areas

of military conflict are affected by the security situation and their level of anxiety about the well-being of their children is increased. This is also the case in Israel, where maintaining the safety of young children becomes a top-priority task for both parents, which increases with their adolescence towards the time of their enlistment to the mandatory army service (Scheflan Katzav, 2018). However, the sheer length of the film, and the knowledge that De-Kalo continued filming the entire night, shifts us from the safe, comfort zone of normative maternal concern to an extreme of maternal anxiety and over-protection, and an understanding of the ambiguous role of the gaze in this relationship.

Toward the end of the work, the artist's young daughter wakes up and looks with one half-open eye at her mother who is watching her. This uneasy moment, in which the two gazes meet—that of the daughter, surprised by the maternal monitoring, and that of the mother, disappointed by the child's sudden awakening—reveals the discordance between the maternal and the artistic subject. The artist must decide, immediately and instinctively, what to choose—either to continue recording, while being aware of her daughter's sense of invasion of privacy, or to stop recording. Either art or motherhood. The work probes boundaries while transgressing them. The experience of the maternal subject is perceived as transpiring between boundaries—and as such will always be either too little or too much in relation to the child. The gap between mother and child always exists, but is flexible and tends to shrink or expand, depending on the situation.

In stark contrast to the quiet of *Awake at Night*, the video installation *Eight Lifts* (Figs. 4 and 5) is noisy and aggressive. In it, De-Kalo filmed six mothers, whom she instructed to pick up their children into their arms. By speeding up the frame rate through digital post-processing, the act of picking up the child is transformed from a hug into a shaking—from maternal tenderness into a threatening and deadly act. Benevolent, laborious maternal actions carried out in the monotonous and wearying routine of daily life can traverse a wide range of emotions—from playfulness and inclusive, loving hugs to the other extreme—irritation, exhaustion, violence, robotic responses, primal urges, and loneliness. Picking up a child over and over again—an obvious, somewhat Sisyphean, motherly action—is but one example



Fig. 4. Mali De-Kalo, *Eight Lifts*, 2013, stills from video.



Fig. 5. Mali De-Kalo, *Eight Lifts*, 2013, stills from video.

of a moment that can go wrong and dissolve the dichotomous distinction between a good and bad mother.

Exposure of the dichotomy underlying our perception of mother-daughter relationships can also be found in *Sacha and Mum* (1996), an early video work by British artist Gillian Wearing. Shot in black and white, the film shows a mother and daughter (played by actresses) trapped in a bedroom in an emotional and physical conflict. Sacha, the daughter, is wearing a bra and white pants—semi-nudity that makes her more vulnerable than her mother, whose body is hidden and protected in a floral dress. Wearing choreographs the physical relationship between them: At first, the two women hug, but they soon turn to violence, with the mother pulling her daughter's hair and wrenching her head back and forth, while the daughter kneels on the ground. Thus, the two fluctuate between tenderness and aggression, which culminates when Sasha's face is covered with a towel—both a protective mask and a means of suffocation. The soundtrack, created by playing backwards the original sounds recorded during filming, is a sequence of annoying noises, crying sounds, and mumbling that is hard to make out. The discomfort of the viewer at the unfolding scene of abuse that runs counter to expectations of a mother-daughter relationship reflects the confusion often felt in family relationships in which love and hostility are difficult to separate. This ambiguous mixture of tenderness and cruelty perhaps echoes the experience of people who have been physically or psychologically abused by family members they love and trust. The close-ups of the two heightens the sense of claustrophobia created by the relationship between them, as it does not allow viewers to avoid seeing the horror unfolding before them.

Wearing is known as an artist who uses the medium of photography as an anthropological tool—not to explore a foreign culture, but to challenge what we think we know about our own culture. Like Wearing, De-Kalo directs her photographic lens at the seemingly familiar in our culture, sharpening the focus on what our culture tries to hide. Mixed Feelings in the maternal experience is the subject of Barbara Almond's book *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*. She describes contemporary motherhood as following: «Today's expectations for good mothering have become so hard to live with, the standards so draconian, that maternal ambivalence



Fig. 6. Mali De-Kalo, *Relaying*, 2015, still from video.

has increased and at the same time become more unacceptable» (2010, p. xiii). Indeed, a culture that refuses to acknowledge such feelings denies the mothers themselves recognition of conflicting feelings, and the consequences are devastating.

Eight Lifts, which conveys this intrinsic difficulty in the maternal experience of our time, also marks the moment when De-Kalo, like Wearing, began introducing actresses into her artistic work. Unlike Wearing, however, De-Kalo chooses as the performing actresses, women with whom she is well acquainted with, women from her professional and social circles.

De-Kalo repeated this two years later, when she created *Relaying* (Figs. 6,7 and 8), a complex video project that explores a deep rift in the maternal experience. *Relaying* is a large-scale, six-track video installation that tells the previously untold story of mothers whose children have severed all contact with them following disintegration of the family unit. It presents monologues by eight such mothers, which are read directly into the camera by other women, who relay a story that is not their own. Thus, as in all of De-Kalo's works, a narrative replication occurs, with a delicate and sensitive expression of the differences, similarities, and seepage between the two accounts—that of the mother and that of the recounter.



Fig. 7. Mali De-Kalo, *Relaying*, 2015, six-channel video installation, 40 min, installation views, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, New Jersey.

The work reveals the maternal sense of failure of a woman whose children have chosen to break away from her—one of the hardest feelings for a mother to have. With such a fundamental dislocation of a woman's motherhood, her personal and social identity undergoes an almost catastrophic sense of failure, irrespective of her accomplishments in the rest of her life. This is why such *failures* are well hidden and repressed by the mothers themselves.

Having their stories read aloud by other women is a way to break down the wall of silence surrounding this painful issue, bringing it to public awareness while maintaining the privacy of the women who experienced it. De-Kalo says she had a hard time reaching these mothers, as they keep their story under wraps. They bear their stigma in silence, without confiding in others their sense of failure in the mission of motherhood. Most agreed to meet with De-Kalo only when she promised to come without a camera, and

that their faces and identities would not be revealed. The interviews were recorded in audio only, and then edited as short monologues (about five minutes each) in Hebrew, Arabic, or English, which were read by women volunteers, who relayed the accounts in an act of female solidarity. Hence the name of the project: *Relaying*.

As she edited the monologues, De-Kalo recounts that she sought to keep the distinctive language and style of each mother, while preserving her anonymity. The goal was to convey to the world, clearly and distinctly, the subjective experience of a mother who is forced to live without her children. Like the mothers, the women who read out the accounts are diverse in age, marital status, religion, and ethnic origin, but they share one thing in common: They are all filmed reading the accounts in their own living room. Each reader's personal living room thus becomes the host site for another woman's personal story, and the contrast between the two—the domestic living room and the story of a home that has fallen apart—is acute. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the maternal story in De-Kalo's work—through the extreme sense of maternal failure caused by a child's severing of ties with her—makes it possible for the viewer to hear a re-reading of the story. It is a fundamentally universal story, which neutralizes the mother's sense of guilt and presents a problem that many mothers face, but usually keep secret, for fear of being seen as a bad mother.

The transition between silence and reading aloud are done in an intelligent and calculated manner. When presented in 2015 at the Mana Contemporary Center in Jersey City, New Jersey, the work was divided into two spaces. In an inner space, the women were shown reading aloud the mothers' accounts, while in the entrance foyer, the same eight women appear on a large screen, one after the other, sitting in silence, peering directly at the camera, saying nothing, as a kind of prologue to the work as a whole, their deafening silence alluding to the mother's mute feelings of shame and disgrace. Thus, viewers move from the silence of the foyer into the inner space, where the women read the accounts out loud—eight women on five large screens, each reading a different moving testimony of a mother who has lost contact with her children. The screenings are timed so that while one is reading out loud, the others are present but silent. Thus, the flip side of silence is revealed—that of listening—for without listening, there is no



Fig. 8. Mali De-Kalo, *Relaying*, 2015, six-channel video installation, 40 min, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, New Jersey, installation view room 2.

point in crying out. In this way, a kind of female solidarity is forged, which says, «I hear you, your cry is not falling on deaf ears».

Biographical crises can evoke a heightened awareness of the difficulties in the maternal experience. However, such drama is not necessary to experience a sense of maternal failure, as social expectations of the mother create an ideal of behavior and emotions that is unachievable on a daily basis. The dichotomy and totality that characterize the cultural perceptions of motherhood—the mother as the epitome of perfection or as a predatory monster—create a constant clash between reality and fantasy, and do not allow for partial success or shared responsibility. Deconstruction of the one and only model of the *good mother* into a multi-faceted maternal truth is one of the hallmarks of the past three decades, and mothers themselves are the playwrights this time.

Mothers who write their own narrative are in fact *breaking the silence*. This is the same silence that accompanies Maushart's book, as a decisive

factor in the maternal mask that has been shattered in recent years, in various forms. One of those forms is *mummy bloggers*, who construct their online maternal identities, using them in order to subvert the scripts of their families, cultures, and nations. By reflecting their realities, they make a new and important voice by which to negotiate, reconcile and resist traditional notions of mothering and maternal roles. Rogers, who has researched these blogs, finds them of immense importance, a tool by which to shatter the semblance of serenity and control that allows the maternal experience to pass unnoticed. In her study, she establishes a new category for them, one which she calls «maternal essayists» (Rogers, 2015, p. 259).

Like these mother-bloggers, Mali De-Kalo is also a storyteller. However, in contrast to the personal and sincere stories of the bloggers, she collects, compiles and weaves together multiple narratives, echoing the misrepresentation of the mothers and thus exposing real and diverse maternal experiences. Like the storytellers of prehistoric times, before the invention of writing, she alludes to the collective memory and uses diverse methods to captivate and surprise the audience. But unlike past storytellers, her rhetoric is visual, and her stories are far from amusing. Indeed, they are disturbing and evoke discomfort in the audience.

In his essay «Death of the Author», French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes presents the storyteller in ancient ethnographic societies as fulfilling a function diametrically opposed to that of the modern, individual author, who is perceived as the origin of the work and the sole authority for its interpretation (1977, pp. 142-148). Barthes buries the notion of the author, arguing that a work has no single author or source, but that its power lies precisely in the intermingling—and at times, the clash—of multiple writings, until their endless and renewed gathering by each reader. As he saw it, the integrity of a text lies not in its origins, but in its destination: the reader. De-Kalo's video pieces demonstrate the ways in which the stories are brought together, clash with each other, and are narratively arranged differently by each viewer, especially by the mothers' viewers.

De-Kalo's stories are always accompanied by *witnesses*, ostensibly to corroborate the narrative truth, but in reality, to highlight the disparity between story and fact, between meta-narrative and personal tale. And this is precisely De-Kalo's aim: to expose the meta-narrative that emerged from the

bourgeois Enlightenment, the narrative of a single truth, in its nakedness, falsehood, and immense power to abuse its believers. De-Kalo's video work launches the long process of breaking down this meta-narrative, one that begins with deconstruction of the binary gender order of patriarchal culture and its perception of femininity, particularly motherhood. A matricentric analysis of De-Kalo's work reveals the distinctive artistic tools she uses to represent the maternal-political subject, and her contribution to the story created over the last two decades of maternal discourse in art.

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