Instigating Regional Collaboration: Using a Mother/Artist Model to Facilitate Creative Practice, Engagement and Exchange

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Biography

Linda Clark is an emerging installation artist exhibiting nationally and internationally. Her work has been included in key exhibitions such as *Antipods: Magical Creatures with Backward Feet* at University of Saskatchewan, Canada, and *Down the Rabbit Hole* at the Queensland College of Art. She has recently engaged in curatorial projects such as *Mother* at USQ Artworx. In 2015, Clark won the Queensland Regional Art Awards Gray Puksand Digital Award, was awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship. Clark is beginning a practice led research project within the Doctor of Creative Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. Her research project investigates whether a practice-led research methodology titled 'The Mother/Artist Model' can be used within a collaborative network of mother/artists to facilitate practice, engagement and exchange, to overcome regionalism.

Abstract

Mother/artists experience unique challenges in creative practice, including constraints of time and space, taboos surrounding motherhood as visual arts subject matter, separation from creative critical inquiry, and navigating changing identities of mother and child (Chernick 2003, Australia Council 2014, Liss 2009). While there is some degree of critical inquiry in regional Australia, models for practice-led research that can be applied within regional cultural networks of artists, are not as prominent. There is untapped potential for a new methodology and approach to practice that actually positions motherhood as the nexus of practice, rather than a 'problem' that needs to be navigated. As a strategic solution to these challenges, in this paper I detail my development of a visual arts research methodology titled the 'Mother/Artist Model', and how the model can be used within a collaborative network of mother/artists to facilitate practice, engagement and exchange. I argue that the interrelationship between mother and child can be used in the Mother/Artist Model to give agency to mother and child identities, as well as to provide a transformative practice-led methodology through this very engagement. The ideas explored here will

consider the question: To what extent is the Mother/Artist Model useful in transforming regional cultural communities as a nexus for collaborative art practices?

Keywords: methodology, collaborative, motherhood, practice-led, art, feminism

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Introduction

Artists who are mothers are conditioned to negotiate and adapt, both in everyday life and creative research and practice. This process of adaptation is employed in the mother/artist's continual struggle to meet the demands of her art and her family, as well of those of the dominant culture (Chernick 2003, 25: Power 2015, 6). The need for adaptation is heightened for Mother/Artists in regional areas. Mother/Artists situated in regional settings are often separated from the collaborative exchange of ideas and exposure to contemporary visual art which are more readily available in metropolitan centres (Australia Council 2014, 80). However, regional Mother/Artists are often found to apply innovative and creative strategies to overcome isolation such as utilising co-working spaces and workshop programs (Regional Arts Australia 2015). Regionality for Mother/Artists can also involve a feeling of existing on the periphery of art and society. This is due to past ideologies where a woman's capacity to give birth and nurture assigned her automatically, within a patriarchal society, to be defined socially and culturally as a domestic being, as less valuable than a man, as 'other' (Battersby 1989, 157). As a strategic solution to these challenges, I will explore whether a visual arts research model I have developed titled the 'Mother/Artist Model' (Clark 2014, 14) can be used in a collaborative exchange with regional mother/artists to address issues of isolation and facilitate practice, engagement and exchange with one another. The central focus of the Mother/Artist Model is the interrelationship between mother and child. This re-contextualisation of the relationship values both the role of mother and artist and also provides a sense of agency to the child who is an active contributor to this process. A successful Mother/Artist Model can result in a transformative practice-led approach which values and extends on this relationship, by shifting the role from private to public. The Mother/Artist Model was developed within the very process of adapting practice to ensure its viability. Through the model, artwork can be created which draws upon and values the unique relationship between mothers and children. Through using the model to connect with other mother/artists, vital networks are created which are established through the common experience of mothering and in the

process, isolation is reduced. This paper will explore the question: *To what extent is the Mother/Artist Model useful in transforming regional cultural communities by enhancing collaborative art practices?*

Context

The Mother/Artist Model was developed from my own experience of juggling both my mother and artist roles whilst endeavouring to maintain my art practice. Reflecting on this tension, I began to formulate the Mother/Artist Model. This approach to practice positions mothering as the nexus of practice, rather than as an adjunct element in the practice of women who value and draw upon their experiences as mothers and artists. Previously, I had actively resisted exploring my identity as a Mother/Artist within my practice, caught up in patriarchal structures of the past where female artists separated their identity of artist and mother. Traditionally it was considered taboo to explore motherhood as subject matter, for fear of it being considered as 'trivial' (Liss 2009, xvi). The process of balancing parenting alongside a career is in itself demanding, for men as well as women. Becoming a parent also produces a change within an artist's own personal identity in the very process of undertaking the dual roles of parent, and artist, however as Liss (2009, xvii) contends, this is particularly problematic for women. In exploring this topic I found Mother/Artists were responding and adapting to this tension by formulating strategies that were responsive to current changes in discourse which encourage an integration of the private (home) and public (professional) sphere (Loveless 2012, 4). This is evident in greater latitude to work from home, supported by increased internet access and use by women in metropolitan and regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

The Mother/Artist Model employs everyday activities, ritual and stories between the mother and child. Thereby, it offers a more authentic and fluid model for art practice for Mother/Artists that encompasses the reality of daily activities and the underlying tensions that surround them. This process blurs artificial boundaries between art and life through performative research (Haseman 2006, 5). The practice is not merely engaged with the subject matter of motherhood, rather it is located in everyday ritual and complex exchanges between mother and child. Within my practice, I use the Mother/Artist Model by adopting the intertwined identities of mother, artist and researcher. The practice is embedded within my need, and my children's need to explore through making, researching and interacting. The Mother/Artist model is underpinned by an assumption of the role of 'facilitator, keeper and constructor of memory' (Clark 2014, 37). The Mother/Artist and child 'facilitate' memory by together choosing particular activities or ritual for the child. This facilitation is not for the mother to control the child's activities, rather it is to scaffold an enriched situation for

exploration and play, to enable the child to learn about their identity in a way that provides ownership of the experience for the child (Kawka 2009,47). The Mother/Artist then records or 'keeps' the ritual as both process and product of their artistic practice. This co-constructed approach values the agency of both the mother and child, enabling them to edit or 'construct' the depiction of the ritual to create a new narrative or mythology which may highlight undercurrents or tensions that exist for them both. This narrative or mythology allows for the complexities of the relationship to unfold conceptually through play to create work that interweaves daily activities in the current social and cultural context in which they are immersed.

To explain the research process of the Mother/Artist Model, within these everyday rituals or exchanges my children and I uncover questions that are responded to through creative practice. These questions may be based on traditions that are passed through families from mother to child, such as the traditional ritual of embroidery. Cultural and social questions surrounding our identity formation are also uncovered through our exchanges, such as through family stories. These exchanges enable my children to see how children gain independence from their own family to find their own way in the world.

My work *Lost/Found* (2016) (Fig #1), a video and sculptural installation, offers an example of the Mother/Artist Model in practice. This work is based on a narrative of my daughter, who leads the viewer into an unknown destination within the landscape. In this context, she interacts with and finally leaves the weights and thread in the environment as metaphorical clues for the viewer. The weights have layers of meaning, including her carrying the weight of expectation. This practice began with conversations between myself and my daughter about her concern regarding her perceived lack of cultural identity. We discussed and then adopted the 'facilitator, keeper and constructor of memory' roles. Using this framework we 'constructed' and 'facilitated' the memory through the mythological narrative, and 'kept' the memory by recording her experience. This work is also a metaphor for the liminal space through which we are constantly adapting to our changing mother and child relationship. As I learn about her emerging identity, she leads me into an unknown 'landscape' where there is tension surrounding her need for independence, and my simultaneous reluctance to let go. *Lost/Found* (2016) (Fig #3) is an example of how everyday conversations are explored within the proposed model through the creative exchange of both underlying meaning and shared narrative between mother and child.

Figure #1

Methodology

The navigation between mother, artist and child roles is a form of performative research, incorporating both autobiographical enquiry and reflective practice expressed through artworks as creative research outcomes (Haseman 2006, 5). This research method can re-define how motherhood is viewed by Mother/Artists. The Mother/Artist Model assists in this re-definition by revealing the identity and thoughts of mother and child through the process and product of artistic practice. In this way, the model and its outcomes provide the mother and child with ways of knowing how their relationship functions, therefore enabling an emotional response, connection and conversation (Flicker and Wilson 2014,7). This process leads to a re-definition of mothering not just as functional to the survival of the child, but as a site for creative exchange between the mother and child.

Investigating motherhood in art practice also involves a critical examination of how mother/artists explore the social, economic, cultural and institutional conflicts that exist, through the lens of creative outcomes (Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer 2009, 10).[1] Current strategies employed by contemporary mother/artists interrogate the dichotomies and

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[1] This model operates within a framework of feminist subjectivity that considers notions of 'otherness', psychoanalytic theory and intersectional feminist theory. However, this paper will focus specifically on the debates surrounding motherhood in art practice.

undercurrents of motherhood from the mother's perspective. This gives agency to their experience as mothers and validates motherhood as valid subject matter. *Mum* (2016) at the Stockroom Gallery in Victoria was an exhibition by contemporary artists whose work subverted common tropes of motherhood with raw and confronting explorations of parenting and the lived female experience (Needham et al. 2016, 2). Ilona Nelson's works, including *In-Sanitarium* (2015) (Fig #2), were the result of a collaborative project where Nelson used fellow mother/artists' personal testimonies regarding motherhood, to inform her works (Nelson in Needham et al. 2016, 11.) In contrast, Erika Gofton explored her changing sense of self in relation to her *child's* changing adolescent identity in *Liminal* (2015) (Fig #3) (Gofton in Needham et al. 2016, 6). Gofton's work asserts the critical agency of both mother *and* child through investigating their relationship as nurtured by the mother/artist identity. These works reorient the focus of motherhood in art practice by exploring the complex exchange that exists between mother and child. The Mother/Artist model was developed in response to this opportunity to formulate new processes in artmaking and art practice models, and to test their value for regional arts practice.

Figure # 2

Figure # 3

Regionalism

Regionalism is experienced by artists due to a lack of mentorship, difficulties in accessing research facilities and separation from artistic centres of practice. Creative and artistic communities in Australia predominantly operate in metropolitan centres (Australia Council 2014, 80), leaving artists situated in regional settings isolated from creative communities and networks of peers. There is growing research to suggest that collaboration and connection between regional artist researchers will overcome regionalism. Art practice in regional areas is differentiated by its role in the formation and maintenance of inclusive communities (McDonald & Mason 2015, 5). Through intentional organisation of opportunities for collaboration across regions, women artists are strengthening their engagement in visual arts dialogue. One such example is the collaborative research project 'the f word' project (2012-2014), which sought to create a space for critical dialogue about historical and contemporary feminist art across geographical and conceptual divides (Phillips 2014, 7). 'The f word' project brought together regional visual artists at the Regional Feminist Art Forum at La Trobe Visual Arts Centre in 2013 (Phillips 2014, 7). As a result of the forum, two further exhibition projects were facilitated in regional Victorian venues. This is an example of how personal connection through shared research and

practice leads to collaborative relationships (Ellis & Scott-Hoy 2008). The Metro Arts Brisbane 'New Era 2016' project is a further example of a project that engages regional artists. 'New Era 2016' links a touring metropolitan artist with Queensland regional artists to share insights about arts practice, exchange, collaboration and reciprocity (Metro Arts 2016). The tour will develop into a collaborative residency program for 2017.

The 'f Word Project' and 'New Era 2016' resulted in increased dialogue surrounding feminist art and exhibition opportunities for female regional artists, as well as the opportunity to exchange insights surrounding practice. This proposed project aims to achieve similar outcomes, however it also provides a model of practice that is sustainable for the real lives of Mother/Artists. The model can be implemented through regular collaborative exchange online or through mail, therefore regional location is not a barrier to engagement. The project facilitates a model for practice that allows for critical agency of both mother/artist and child that is enriched by collaborative exchange of dialogue, process, skill, conceptual ideas, and conversations about mothering identity.

Collaborative Exchange

Reflexivity through critical reflection positions the researcher 'outside' of their practice. As arts research makes significant additional demands to practice, it is necessary to employ critical reflection within practice as research (Nelson 2013, 29). Critical reflection on the autoethonographic process within the Mother/Artist Model highlights its potential as an important model for collaborative exchange. It also reinforces why collaborative exchange is important for Mother/Artists. 'Autoethnography refers to the process as well as the product of writing about the personal and its relationship to culture' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010, 2). Using a reflexive approach, I looked back at my accounts of the 'personal' within the Mother/Artist Model, and reflected on how it relates to motherhood and mother/artists within visual art culture and collaboration. Collaboration 'enlarges understanding' as artists work together united in their shared purpose and 'transformation' (Carter, 2004). Therefore, I anticipate that if I found the Mother/Artist model useful to locate art practice within the act of mothering, the burgeoning network of mother/artists could also benefit from the methods exchanged within a collaborative network. Further, I anticipated that if I was isolated by a feeling of regionalism, that the model could be applied to a collaborative exchange, establishing a community of mother/artists to reduce regional and assumed barriers of isolation.

As the next stage in the development of the Mother/Artist research model, the formation of a collaborative community of Mother/Artists who utilise the model to instigate research

through practice, engagement and exchange, will be undertaken as a project. The collaborative exchange project will create a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger 2010). A CoP within a collaborative community of Mother/Artists can be understood as a social learning system where the artists utilise a shared understanding of motherhood through direct experience. Mother/Artists represent a living collective of resources through a history of learning how to mother, and a shared philosophy that the research practice of mother/artists is a valid enterprise (Wenger 2010, 2). This collaborative process also draws on traditions of women's oral storytelling and sharing (Deakins, Lockridge and Sterk 2012, xxii)This collaborative exchange can overcome barriers to practice that are experienced by mother/artists including time, identity and isolation.

Increasingly, mother/artists are formulating 'social learning systems' of support that are available to anyone online, thus creating further networks and reducing the potential for isolation. For example, the online organisation '*Cultural Reproducers*', is a group that supports the cultural engagement of artists who are parents by providing resources about residencies, publications, exhibitions and groups (Cultural Reproducers 2016). Another online network, '*The Mother Artist Network*', provides a space for discussion about art practice and motherhood, and a platform for creative collaboration between mothers and their children through submissions to a magazine titled 'Big Kids Magazine' (Pollitt and Blue 2016).

The collaborative exchange will be implemented with myself in the role of participant/researcher. First, Mother/Artists who have a need to participate in a collaborative exchange to overcome regionalism will be identified. I will then request that the collaborative artist assumes the role of 'facilitator, keeper and constructor' of memory. For a period of time, the artists will record in a visual, online, video and/or photographic journal the interactions performed with their child. These include all activities or exchanges with her child, any concerns or questions that they had about their children, and themes uncovered within the practice. Through online applications such as Skype, email, or in person, the researcher meets with the artist to identify a question, ritual or theme uncovered in the journal process. The findings are then collated, then an online collaborative exchange between all of the artists will be initiated to exchange commonalities. These can then inform themes which can be explored by the group. For example, the artists collaborate by discussing individual perspectives surrounding the theme of 'liminality' uncovered by practice. The collaboration continues when the artists share images, drawings or concepts that relate to the theme of 'liminality', to begin practice research. Then, the artists each individually assume the 'facilitator, keeper and constructor' role to create a new narrative or

mythology based on that theme, exploring the primary complex exchanges that occur within their own mother and child relationship. The model allows the practice to unfold through play to while interweaving daily activities with social and cultural undercurrents. The narratives will necessarily differ between artists, informed as they are by their unique experience of the mother and child relationship. The benefit of this model is that the participants collaborate from a common experience. They may also bring complementary skills such as combining theory and practice backgrounds, and/or having different genre or style expertise that enable comparative studies (Mafe & Brown 2006, 4). It should be understood however that this model is not necessarily used to produce joint artwork outcomes. Rather, the outcome is the research practice produced within the collaborative exchange, leading to increased individual artwork outcomes, and to facilitate group exhibition opportunities, in order to reduce the negative effects of regionalism on art practice.

Conclusion

Mother/Artists experience unique challenges in art practice, including constraints of time and space, taboos surrounding motherhood as visual arts subject matter, separation from creative critical enquiry, and navigating changing identities of mother and child. The Mother/Artist Model offers a strategy for art practice to overcome these challenges that actually positions motherhood as the nexus of practice, rather than as an adjunct element in the practice of women. The model utilises everyday activities, ritual and stories as embodying the interrelationship and interaction of mother and child identities. Within the model, the artist and child assume the roles of 'facilitator, keeper and constructor of memory' to interrogate the complexities and undercurrents of their relationship, uncovering questions that are answered through research. In this way, the Mother/Artist creates a new narrative that allows for the complexities of the relationship to unfold conceptually through play, to create work that interweaves daily activities with the social and cultural contexts in which they operate. Artwork is then made within this process, and is based on the new narrative uncovered within this model of practice. The model offers a more fluid and integrated strategy for mothering in art practice that is grounded in the reality of everyday life. Critical reflection on the autoethnographic experience revealed through the use of the Mother/Artist Model uncovered a need for collaborative exchange between Mother/Artists in order to overcome regional barriers. As a result, the model's potential to facilitate practice and engagement within that collaborative exchange was also uncovered. The Mother/Artist Model is an example of how Mother/Artists who share experiential knowledge of motherhood in art practice are currently formulating collaborative communities as 'social learning systems'. The model can be used by mother/artists in an online or email

collaborative exchange of ideas and processes, leading to individual narrative based artwork that premises the unique exchanges that occur within the mother/artist and child relationship.

The strength of this model is that it connects artists and enables ongoing critical engagement, exhibition participation and consistent practice. Further, the model facilitates real critical inquiry about the interrelatedness of artistic practice and Mother/Artist identity by privileging the mother/child relationship as the centre of practice. The model is transformative as it takes what a mother does and asserts it as a critical method of practice in the art world. These inquiries mend previous disconnections between mothering, arts practice and childhood by facilitating learning about changing mother and child identities, thereby giving agency to both.

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