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www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



Ulrike Meinhof’s Brain

(On Motherhood)

Geraldine Tedder

The representation of the figure of the mother has, until womxn have more recently taken up the task, been rather limited. This essay explores the persistence of a complex node of thoughts and images linked to this particular body and, closely (and literally) related to it, the entity of the family. It looks at works by Lea Lublin, Mary Kelly, Juliette Blightman, Catherine Opie and Ree Morton, among others, as well as at two – very different – books: Shulamith Firestone’s radical feminist manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), which calls for the abolishment of the child-bearing mother, and with her the nuclear family; and Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), a personal account of becoming a mother in a queer family. All of these works challenge steadfast taboos surrounding the figure of the mother, and ask, each from a particular standpoint: Can the maternal subject be radical?



" Mon fils ", Salon de mai (Parijs), 1968.

More than two decades ago, it was found that Ulrike Meinhof's brain had been removed for research purposes – without the permission of her family which had been kept in the dark about the plot. The state authorities responsible hoped to find a neurological explanation as to why Meinhof turned to terrorism. Examinations indeed revealed Meinhof to have had brain damage that might have resulted in pathological behavior. This, the research suggested, should have been taken into account at her hearing – had this been clear, she could have been certified as criminally insane. In a similar manner, an interview with Meinhof in her apartment with her children in 1969 portrayed her as deeply depressed, concluding with the observation that, «a couple of days later, Meinhof left her children.» In both cases, there is an underlying incredulity that Meinhof could have been capable of doing what she did – the acts of terrorism and leaving her children – for any other reason than that she was «sick in the mind.» Mental health disorders, abandoning one's children and acts of terrorism are all undeniably difficult subjects, but the pathologizing rhetoric applied here points in another direction. The attempt to try to link Meinhof's actions to biological causes is, I would argue, not only effective in playing down a radical stance, but also makes those actions seem all the more impossible by reminding us of Meinhof's place as a mother – linking her to the modern Medea, the irredeemable, tragic «hysterical foremother» who, apparently, was not self-less, who did not care, who knew not that her devotion should lie with her children. In her text *Charlotte Corday's Skull / Ulrike Meinhof's Brain: Gender, Matter and Meaning – A Postmortem* (2017), from which this essay takes its title, Hannah Proctor writes: «These bits of matter were thus interpreted in ways that emphasized abnormality, pathology and deviance, bolstering existing normative assumptions about gender, active political engagement and violence. … gender rendered the act irrational, and hence precluded it from being considered properly political.» Meinhof is both de-politicized by showing her to have been irrational (and thus «feminized» in the sense of being associated with the long history of hysteria) and de-feminized based on her violent behavior, a behavior deemed unthinkable of a mother. Such gendering (or, in this case, essentializing) of a subject is a strategy effective enough to kill two birds with one stone: crazy radical / unfit mother. What I am trying to get at, in this rather exaggerated manner, is that when we investigate the mother, the capability to outrage undoubtedly still exists because the impossibly unambiguous image of love and care associated with the figure remains so strong. Motherhood continues to serve as a «sanctuary for the sacred» in our collective imagination, as Julia Kristeva writes in *Motherhood Today* (2005) – an image that can be limiting, even restricting, yet also filled with potential.





In 1966, Mimi Smith made *Maternity Dress*, one of a series of sculptures in the form of clothing that reflect on her experiences as a young woman facing restrictive idealized representations of femininity amplified by popular culture. Other pieces included the plastic *Wedding Gown* installation, the see-through *Bikini*, the too-thin *Model Dress*, and the *Steel Wool Peignoir* which, she writes, «combined the reality of my life with the romance of what I thought it would be.» In 1968, during her second pregnancy, Smith made *Knit Baby*, a knit-your-own-baby kit, later adding the embroidered words «The Baby is Dead» to address the difficult and often hushed subject of miscarriages.

Here are some thoughts on motherhood: on how motherhood is represented, on the duality of biology / social construction underlying those representations, and on the impossibility of that duality; on the figure of the mother as the body in and through which various feminist debates and discussions on sex and gender converge, a node of narratives around rage and care in which taboos are challenged; on how motherhood has been left no space for ambivalence and how the potential of such ambivalence has been harnessed in art. The figure of the mother appears as a political body that loops back to an emotional, personal body of love. The scope of these narratives is immense, as they bear on the understanding of family and the domestic as well as on images related to care, labor, reproduction…

In fact, two texts serve as a basis for this essay: Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015). A rather odd pairing, the texts represent

opposite sides of a spectrum of thoughts around motherhood, not only in the ideas they convey, but also in their rhetoric. Firestone's is a seminal, radical second-wave feminist text that declares the nuclear family, and the tie between woman and biological reproduction it often safeguards, to be the root of women's oppression. It is a manifesto, a call to arms, and at the same time outlines utopian ideas based on technological progress. In recent years, Helen Hester's *Xenofeminism* (2018) and Sophie Lewis' *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (2019) have taken up Firestone's mantle and put forth an updated version of her body of thoughts. Nelson's, on the other hand, is an auto-theoretical sketch combining the author's personal experiences of becoming a mother within a non-normative family structure with current debates around care, homonormativity and queer bodies. This pairing involves, first and foremost, a temporal displacement between the 1970s and today, with the concomitant differences in political debate, i.e., what norms and taboos are in place and how these authors position themselves strategically, each in their own way subversively, within them. Whereas Firestone goes up against a political environment seeking to essentialize female gender identity and a then widespread feminism fighting for equal access to a system she completely rejects, Nelson unpicks not only her personal feelings of joy in becoming a parent with her partner and the way this experience informed and shifted her notions of the queer body, but also the shame that sometimes comes with the desire for hetero-/homonormativity, which is often seen as a betrayal of the subversive queer project at large. What the two have in common is that they challenge normative and restrictive representations of motherhood and expose the institution it has become. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976)Adrienne Rich described this institution as a sly architecture, one that does not visibly embody authority or power but rather evokes fond images such as the home, making it all the more difficult to challenge, even by those who constitute it. Rich reveals how these images gloss over what has been shaped to suit certain economic and political values: «We do not think of the laws which determine how we got to these places, the penalties imposed on those of us who have tried to live our lives according to a different plan, the art which depicts us in an unnatural serenity or resignation, the medical establishment which has robbed so many women of the act of giving birth, the experts – almost all male – who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. We do not think of the Marxist intellectuals arguing as to whether we produce ‹surplus value› in a day of washing clothes, cooking food, and caring for children, or the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood.»



" Mon fils ", Salon de mai (Parijs), 1968.

In 1968, recognizing that women's issues were excluded from the May revolts in Paris, Lea Lublin presented *Mon Fils* at the 24th Salon de Mai. This performance involved the artist going about the daily activities of taking care of her son, thus bringing what is mostly private domestic labor into the public space of the museum and into visibility. While in line with contemporary demands for childcare support, it showed that even the left tended to push aside such demands, ignoring their importance. At the same time, the artist rejected the identity of the mother as fixed, complicating her representation through such an overdetermined performance. Lublin was interested in bringing together feminist activism, which might necessitate a position of «womxn,» and the relationship between gender identity and subjectivity, which attempts to deconstruct it, rather than setting them apart. Her work can be contextualized within the ever-more distinct split between Marxist feminism and the question of the existence, or non-existence, of a

feminine difference that arose from psychoanalytic feminism – equal pay AND equal representation. In her work Lublin merged actual protest with her daily childcare routine while at the same time addressing questions of representation.

Firestone views breaking open the nuclear family and displacing child-bearing and child-rearing as essential steps towards liberation from distinctions in the class system. How so? The premise of Firestone's work is that sex difference is a fundamentally biological difference, not – in contrast to many gender theories, most prominently those of Judith Butler – a social construction. Rather than seeking to reevaluate the social role of the mother, Firestone argues that motherhood – having a body that reproduces and often being the main caregiver in the first year(s) – has been used to confine women and therefore needs to be abolished to achieve a more equal society. Refusing to exclude gender and race from discussions around class, she maintains that identity is a class concept – in this sense, the *Dialectic* can be seen as an early intersectional work. Having handed over reproduction to technology, mothers would in the future no longer «bear this load» and caring for children would be communal, with people living in households together. Firestone thus erodes notions around ownership and property, which she recognizes as having been essential to capital-boosting, anti-communist politics in the US after World War II. What might sound like a dystopian Brave-New-World-goes-hippie vision is also an attempt to step outside purely theoretical formulations and venture to outline a utopia far removed from our current reality. To underline this argument, inadequate cures that have cemented the dependencies that make up the role of the mother are discussed throughout the book: Romanticism is one such accepted mechanism that attempts to quell discontent while maintaining the status quo. It brings with it the exaggeration and idealization of certain manners and an understanding of what is «natural,» that is what could happen, should happen.



Possibly one of the best-known works on motherhood is Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79). After the birth of her son, Kelly began documenting the mother-child relationship in objects such as stained liners, folded vests, child's markings, diaries, and feeding charts, turning these items into, and at the same time exposing them as, fetishes. A conceptual feminist work, it highlights the importance of the absence of imagery of the maternal body and focuses on the intersubjectivity between mother and child: «The documentations of specific moments such as weaning from the breast, learning to speak, and entering a nursery demonstrate the reciprocity of the process of socialization, that is, the intersubjective discourse through which not only the child but also the mother is constituted as subject.» In *Post-Partum Document* Kelly destabilizes a unified image of the mother and, she herself writes, «…counters the assumption that child-care is based on the woman's natural and instinctive understanding of the role of mothering.»

Perhaps not surprisingly (the text was written half a century ago, after all), the *Dialectic* often falls flat to the point of becoming redundant, especially in today's context, in its argument

that reproduction is the root of women's oppression. Firestone is challenging a dialectic, but sticks to it too. There are many limitations to her argument and her discussions are limited to a specific context. Transgender pregnancy, matriarchal cultures and sex positivity are just a few perspectives that would show Firestone up in no time (see Lewis here on BNL [b-n-l/low-tech-grassroots-ectogenesis/] who argues *with* Firestone for just such inclusivity, expanding terms such as Firestone's «women» to «womenx» and «mothers» to «gestators»). Also, the techno-utopian ideas in the book, which have turned out to be not quite as revolutionary as hoped, need an update. Now that IVF, abortion and contraceptive methods such as the pill are more widely available, what was argued to be «natural» has in actual fact been eroded (nod to Preciado). But – and this is where Firestone still has an impact – family structures have not really changed that much. The force the nuclear family continues to have as a rule, be it legally, emotionally or economically, and the isolation, oppression and exclusion this force brings with it for many inside (still often mothers) and outside of its structure is rigidly in place. Firestone's world is electrifying in that everyone would be a caregiver, womxn would be free from all psychological and economical dependencies, and care would flow freely to all children. This same excitement can also quickly turn sour, however, for while it is surely thrilling to think of a world where the institution of motherhood no longer exists, I also find it strange to assume that the subjectivity of the mother is not complex but constructed and can therefore be eradicated completely. There are at times victimizing tendencies in Firestone in all that she sees as imposed on the mother: It's a bold yet rather patronizing move to claim to have discovered the underlying truth in a person's actions, and like many feminist texts attempting to unpick the «oppressed» psyche of womxn, Firestone's comes with its own hierarchies of those with apparent clairvoyance and those without. Firestone's mother is quite unheard and unambiguous, and I find it necessary not to read the text too literally, to think of it almost as sci-fi and in terms of what perceptions it is trying to shift: Not only equal pay or equal representation for womxn – that is, mothers – but the reconnection of public and private life as we know it, in which genital, and gender difference would no longer matter at all.



Tracey Emin's appliqué blanket *I Do Not Expect* (2002) addresses motherhood in two ways: Emin approaches the subject of potentially becoming a mother, which she openly spoke of as being a constant issue, as well as her relationship to her own mother, which was «close but complicated.» Like most of Emin's work, this piece is autobiographical and conveys the artist as a marker for rebelliousness, while at the same time making it clear that her thoughts and feelings are

in fact quite common. The comforting material and sweet hues of the blanket are dampened by the text reading «I do not expect to be a mother. But I do expect to die alone.» The tone is ambivalent – intimate, harrowing and ironic as well as absolutely direct.

Maggie Nelson's point of departure in *The Argonauts* is the very moment in time Firestone points to after the possibilities of technology have fundamentally shifted our understanding of reproduction. This shift does not, as Firestone had hoped, involve the abolishment of the family and, with it, the role of the mother, but an expanded understanding of family transcending the dialectic of sex. As a mother in a queer family – her partner Harry Dodge is transgender – Nelson's issue is with pregnancy and monogamy being renounced by certain queer movements. She sees such accusations of homonormativity as a simplification of the radicality this shift has actually brought about, a shift that she perceives as taking place on a microlevel, «in-between». Nelson writes from her own personal experience of being a mother and attempts to lay out the messy complexities that make up the everyday of one person's life in dependency with another's. Her phenomenological approach focuses less on gender roles and more on questions around care: she celebrates maternal devotion and rebuts the notion that it is a diminishment of freedom while still challenging the canonization of the mother. As she puts it: «I do spend some time with elements of what you might call biological maternity because I'm interested in how to keep both those things in the bowl so that you don't have to obliterate the capacities of a body to give birth or breast-feed or what not etc. in order to talk about the capacities for a non-gendered space.»



Catherine Opie's work *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (1993) is one example of a classical representation of motherhood that becomes transgressive (Maggie Nelson draws on this example in her book). The image of Opie breastfeeding her child, with the markings of the word «Pervert» from her time as an S/M practitioner still faintly visible, can be read as a complicating of the often-homogenized domestic sphere. The work is part of a series of self-portraits – in one of them, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993), she turns her back to the camera, showing a childlike image of a house, a cloud and two stick figures wearing skirts carved into its skin as a seemingly unattainable ideal.

Nelson's style is poetic, her position embodied, and she attempts to avoid restrictive either-ors, acknowledging that there are different conditions of livability – ones that depend upon the binary and ones where the binary is nothing but restrictive – that need to be described specifically if they are not to become too disconnected (something Nelson sees as often happening in academia). Her occupation with the figure of the mother is also always an

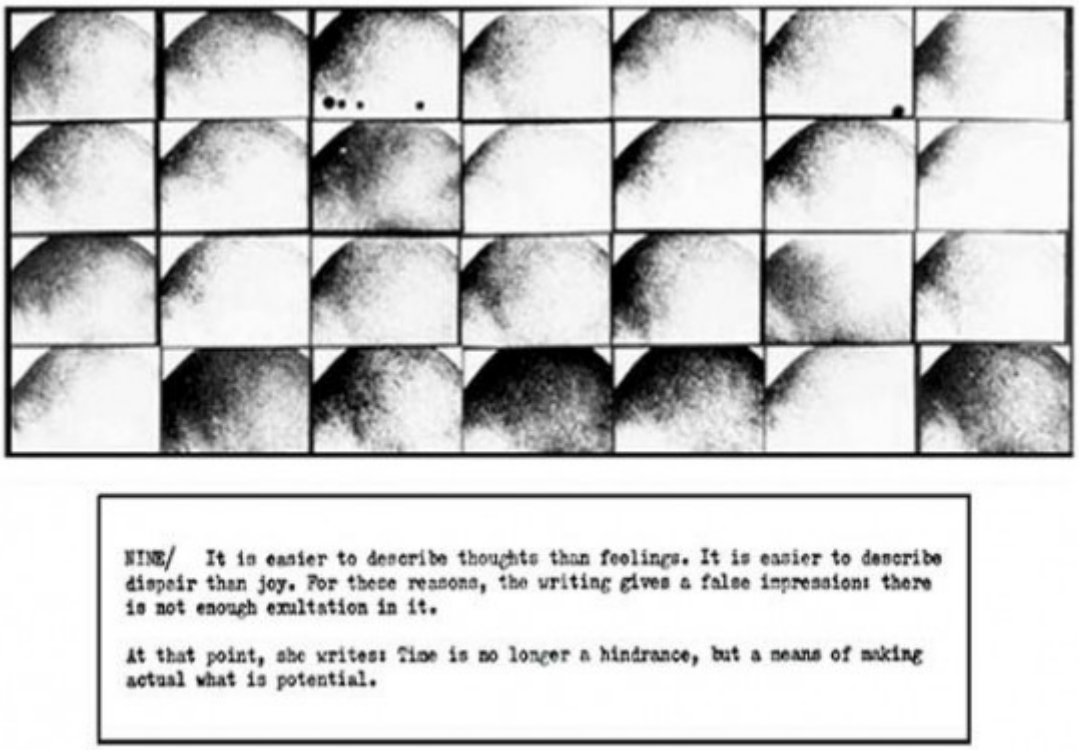
occupation with language, one that resists the allure of classifications of feeling «in place.» Revolutionary language, to her, is a fetish; she prefers to open things and then «let them fall apart". Rather than write of THE identity of the mother, Nelson thinks in moments where people align with certain things (such as taking care of another), then again not. She questions the way procreation is often equated with conformity and thus cannot, by default, be queerness, which is often equated with subversion, and asks instead if there is something queer about pregnancy, about the alienation and intimacies to which a body is subjected. Her writing is as generous as it is relativizing, and depending on where you're coming from (I've switched many a time), it can seem like a glorious piece of writing that differentiates and differentiates so everyone gets some space, or like a resignation that hasn't moved anyone except by a giant hug.



In a body of work which spans various media including drawing, photography, painting and writing, Juliette Blightman depicts and describes moments in her life, often everyday occurrences involving friends and family, often her daughter. That her work displays what is usually private is no longer odd, given social media's obvious impact on the way we distribute and consume images. In a script for a reading, Blightman writes in an Acker-esque flow of consciousness about the bodily experience of being a mother, and combines it with what is often seen as its opposite, the erotic: «… when they are born we crawl we lie we suck we stare at our Mothers hoping they can comfort us feed us hold us and you do because the feeling of doing nothing about this being is even more of a nothing but the world turns out to be difficult

to live in the ugliness the freedom the bicycles and the girls that get on them the ease the discomfort as your baby pushes its head and shoulders through your pussy the thought of sitting on that seat of the penis being thrusted into you only makes you hold your baby harder and allow it to suck some more whilst watching a woman with tassels shake her titties for a man to ejaculate on to explode whilst the milk drips from your nipple and the baby sleeps in your arms breathing softly destruction as coming into being. Then the sucking stops and you feel like a whore again but the man is nowhere to be seen ….»

Folding the laundry, a family portrait printed on the side of a mug, an unfurnished New York apartment – Nelson describes the pleasure she gets both from the domestic and from things considered out of place there. When, at a book launch, a man from the audience asks her how she could write a book about cruelty while being pregnant, she points to the apparent oxymoron of the pregnant woman who thinks. Nelson writes about anal sex – and puts the «sodomitical mother» (Susan Fraiman in her 2017 book *Extreme Domesticity*) back on the table, foregrounding the mother who knows pleasure that is non-reproductive «in an age all too happy to collapse the sodomitical mother into the MILF». She describes the omnipresence of expectations a mother encounters, such as how quickly the trace of having a baby can be erased – and counters it with a call to have the right to «our kink and our fatigue both.» If becoming a mother has often been associated with narcissism – she asks where, then, does enjoyment come in? «So far as I can tell, most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying oneself.» Nelson examines all these notions and ideals that are in different ways linked to the mother, sometimes allowing herself to get excited about experiences she theoretically rejects. «When all mythologies have been set aside, we can see that, children or no children, the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point ….»



For *10 months* (1976–77), Susan Hiller took a photo of her body every day during her pregnancy, resulting in ten blocks of twenty-eight black-and-white photographs. Initially intended as documentation and not as artwork, Hiller then added subjective note-like reflections in captions below the images, such as, «It is easier to describe thoughts than feelings. It is easier to describe despair than joy. For these reasons, the

writing gives a false impression: there is not enough exultation in it. // At that point, she writes: Time is no longer a hindrance, but a means of making actual what is potential.» The cropped images of the pregnant body are reminiscent of scientific photographs as well as of minimalist artwork, giving the piece a methodical air that contradicts how images of pregnancy are often associated with sentimentality. The anxieties expressed in the text further refuse such a reading.

Speaking of feminisms can sometimes feel like a mathematical problem, a question of logical thinking of when and where to apply one variable or another for a particular result. I began writing this text about two years ago and had set it aside until I heard the podcast *True Currency: About Feminist Economics*, the outcome of an eight-month residency at Gasworks in London by the Alternative School of Economics, an artistic project run by Ruth Beale and Amy Feneck. The podcast, especially its fourth episode, *Suspended Time*, sparked in me a renewed interest in the representation of the figure of the mother in terms of how it approaches motherhood as a position that is both social structure and lived experience. By way of their own experiences as well as those of others, multiple voices speak alongside one another, yet the podcast also always acknowledges that we are not all in it together. It is also in this fourth episode that the question investigated throughout this essay – whether the maternal subject can be radical – is addressed. Ruth and Amy examine the position of the mother as one involving a relation to time that cannot, should not have to, and often does not want to fit in with «capitalist time». They regard motherhood as a potentially disruptive position by centering this specific temporality, which includes waiting, interruption and withdrawal, and revaluate what is outside of it through its lens, rather than the other way around. Instead of perceiving this temporality yielding to «capitalist time», as is still commonplace, they ask whether there is some quality to it that is important to explore as distinct from the time of capital, thus not simply falling back into a discourse around reproductive labor sustaining and maintaining highly efficient workers.



For *America's Family Prison* (2008), Regina José Galindo rented a family-sized cell from a company that provides them to private prisons in the US where they are used for temporary detention. She lived in it with her daughter and husband for 24 hours. The installed cell remains as a work of art, and a silent video work (54:49 min) and photographs document what went on inside. Galindo addresses power relations in contemporary migrations between Central America, specifically Guatemala, and the United States,

questioning the prison industrial complex and assigning viewers the role of prison wardens as they observed what was going on inside. The work is the third in which Galindo explores the subject of motherhood in connection to migration (the others being *Mirror for the little death* [2006] and *While they are still free* [2007]) and addresses issues related to social reproduction and the stark difference in the way motherhood is treated depending on who is doing the mothering.

In autumn of last year, Ruth and Amy hosted a study session focusing on topics explored in their fourth episode. In the session, we listened to excerpts of talks with mother and NHS Community Nurse Claire Summers as well as Professor of Psychosocial Theory Lisa Baraitser, who speaks of the notion of maternal time:

> «[T]here are some pitfalls as we go through a set of arguments about what we mean by maternal time, and the time of care generally, or time that can only go at the pace of the other, and that we tend to associate with female time and with a set of practices that entail enduring, unfolding time. Some of the pitfalls have to do with the ways that one would want to, if you like, honor, at some level, the history of the ways that certain forms of care time have been assigned to women, and not just to women, but especially actually to women of color and now to women in the Global South who come to the Global North through these care chains and so on. So, there's a way in which one might want to figure a form of time, related to care, in the feminine, in order to honor that history. We can't pretend that care gets shared out equally at the same time, I think we need to take great care that we don't sort of re-essentialize women's time. There is actually socially no reason why women should spend more time caring than doing other forms of labor, so-called productive labor. I have a couple of contributions I suppose to make to that. One is, I think, what I write about in my second book, «Enduring Time», and about time that comes to matter to us, and whether the time of mattering is produced through forms of repetitious labor, that can be maternal, but they can be all sorts of other forms of repetitious labor. And there's a question about whether we want to de-gender the time of mattering. But inside the discussions about social reproduction, you know, the time of the reproduction of the neoliberal worker, for example, is there a way in which one would want to separate out different forms of care? And I would suggest for strategic reasons, we do want to, actually, maintain some kind of analysis of gender in there.»

Lisa Baraitser and the Alternative School of Economics think with and through the body of the mother as defined, perhaps more than most, by an interdependency with an other or others – by a time, therefore, that is more subject to interruption, more often attuned to waiting, more often delicate to work, that is not just labor but also always something else, with all the joys and difficulties this position can entail. They combine questions around labor with the subjectivity of the mother by listening to and mapping lived experiences.



Maternal Instincts (1974) by Ree Morton is a painting, sculpture, celastic wall piece. Reminiscent of a prize won at a fair, the three ribbons represent Morton's three children, each topped with their initials and framed, or held, by two descending arms. *Beaux* (1974–75), Morton's series of wall works to which this work belongs, represents relationships, between self and other, in intertwining ribbons (and plays with the «bow» as a feminine cliché as well as «beaux,» the highly decorative architectural style). They perhaps indicate a self that is construed with others, that is interdependent, a notion that is at times contradictory to the idea of an autonomous self. Morton's work can be placed in a post-minimalist context, given the inclusion of personal narrative and the use of bold and theatrical color and imagery. Her work has a sly, sometimes even dark humor to it that counters the playful, crafty, cute aesthetic her pieces radiate at a first glance.

They ask: What is a Feminist Economics and in what way could it interrupt an economic model we have come to think of as normal to such a degree that a position against it (often positioned as outside of it) has become the only imaginable option? Where does unpaid work, underpaid work, unvalued work, work that often coincides with domestic labor, with care (or a political notion of care), take place? How is our economic system dependent upon it? And what are the affective relations to this type of work? Does it in some way navigate between

the frustration of not being financially valued, and the gratitude of being valued differently? And if so, in what way? Could this difference be the slippery, unseizable, everyday, radical moment? Finally a goal other than productivity, finally a different pace, a different scale and different priority? Back to the question of whether the maternal subject can be radical: Meinhof was denied such a position in 1969, and her contemporary Firestone would not have been surprised. Nelson would probably have answered the question in the affirmative. But what exactly does «radical» mean in each context? What form of radicality is involved when the mother breaks with this or that taboo? Nelson's approach is to focus on the macrostructures in the experience of motherhood in a queer family, seeing mothers of many and any gender already denaturalizing motherhood and pushing boundaries of what constitutes a «normal» family in a North-American context. Or, in her words, what she is working against is the systemic paradox that «the conservative anxiety about queers bringing down civilization and its institutions, e.g. marriage, is met by anxiety and despair of queers about failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down institutions». And Firestone uses the rhetoric of a manifesto, calling on a «we» to advocate automation, rejecting motherhood in new anti-capitalist models of relationships beyond the family, unapologetically refusing a positive take on given circumstances until bodily autonomy is achieved and pregnancy is valued so it is never again a burden. Both challenge the existing social order and lay out utopian ideas in order to displace maternal ideals in favor of alternative genealogies, genealogies that in turn will have to, or have already had to, disappear or change over time lest they themselves turn into a new kind of ideal.

GERALDINE TEDDER
Geraldine Tedder is a curator and writer. Most recently, she co-organised the event series *On Reception* at Fri Art, worked on an exhibition at Shoefrog in Vienna with Lorenza Longhi and Francesco Cagnin, and collaborated on the audiobook *Notes on Furniture* with Chantal Kaufmann. From 2013-2019 she was assistant curator at Kunsthalle Bern.

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