

**C: ~~MAINTENANCE~~
ANIMATION IS A DRAG:
IT TAKES ALL THE
F***** TIME***

ORLA MC HARDY**

* Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Maintenance Manifesto, 1969! Proposal for an exhibition "CARE,"* 1969.

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Orla Mc Hardy is an artist based between Donegal (IRL) and Richmond, Virginia (USA). Working through expanded animation, video, text, documentary, collage, sculptural installation and within a tradition of feminism(s), her current work interrogates where value is placed (and not placed) on the hidden time of care and labour. Her research-based practice reclaims embodied subjectivity and the interrupted time of caregiving as sites of critical knowledge, where our lived experiences and daily activities are forms of expertise that exist outside of institutional frameworks. Using interdisciplinary animation processes as a starting point, she has collaborated with poets, radio producers, sound artists, architects, designers, and animators and has crossed over into live-action and documentary filmmaking. She is currently an Associate Professor and Graduate Director in the Dept. of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. orlamchardy.com

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Abstract

Animation and motherhood are parallel acts. There are striking overlaps between animation practices and the maternal time of maintenance and caregiving: repetitive acts and gestures, interruption, incremental and elongated time, the embodied experience of slow mundane practices, the durational drag of staying alongside something or someone. The pooled time of caregiving and maintenance, and the pooled time of animation production have a lot in common. In this paper, I want to pull apart some of the ways that an expanded animation practice-as-research shows how animation's formal self-reflexiveness and media specific histories can start to reveal where value is placed (and not placed) on the time of their shared invisible labours. Possibilities emerge from thinking these invisible labours together, revealing the problematics of what constitutes a rightful subject or object of mothering, and what can be said to constitute animation.

Keywords: Expanded Animation, Sculpture, Caregiving, Care, Maintenance, Feminism

Introduction

Animation and motherhood are parallel acts. There are striking overlaps between animation practices and the maternal time of maintenance and caregiving: repetitive acts and gestures, interruption, incremental and elongated time, the embodied experience of slow mundane practices, the durational drag of staying alongside something or someone. The pooled time of caregiving and maintenance, and the pooled time of animation production have a lot in common. In both instances “what is hidden, however, is not just labour but the time embedded within this labour.”¹ In this paper, I want to pull apart some of the ways that an expanded animation practice-as-research shows how animation’s formal self-reflexiveness and media specific histories can start to reveal where value is placed (and not placed) on the time of their shared invisible labours. Possibilities emerge from thinking these invisible labours together, revealing the problematics of what constitutes a rightful subject or object of mothering, and what can be said to constitute animation.

I am deeply indebted to the writings and ideas of Lisa Baraitser, Professor of Psychosocial Theory at Birkbeck University. I read her books in order. *Maternal Encounters: the ethics of interruption*: Baraitser, (2008), accompanied my grappling with becoming a mother for the first time in 2016. I’ve carried *Enduring Time*: Baraitser (2017), along with me since becoming a mother for the second time in 2018. In each case, they provided a framework to think through my experiences, to find ways to understand how the embodied experiences of caregiving could relate to and expand my understanding of animation and lived time. They orientated me towards new ways to understand animation as a mode of thinking and in doing so valuing lived experience as theory. Recently there has been an increase in literature by women writing about pregnancy and motherhood.² These books

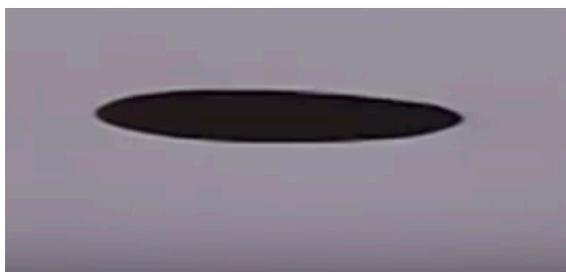


Fig. 1 A still of a sinkhole, screen grabbed from an episode of Looney Tunes, *Roadrunner*.

freshly interrogate the family as experience, institution and site for intellectual inquiry, while acknowledging the long-standing previous attempts at revealing the hidden labour of women from the beginnings of the feminist movement onwards.

Animation interests me as a mode of thinking, as a way of slowing down and paying close attention to a given idea, question or area of interest. In terms of process - the bit by bit, frame by frame, slow incremental build – has the potential to be a generative space of care and invites the maker and viewer to inhabit very particular qualities of time. I view expanded animation as being non-media specific, a messy leaky container into which you can bung in all these modes of working and shake it all up and animation can hold it. Especially when the end result looks nothing like animation as you might normally define it. So, I wonder, how can animation make visible the intimate relationships between time and care? What can an expanded understanding of maternal time teach us about animated time?

Interpreting the maternal in the broadest sense opens it to include any act of ongoing caregiving and maintenance, of

1 Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2017. 49

2 Seghal, Parul, *Mothers of Invention*, <https://parulsehgal.com/2015/06/06/mothers-of-invention/>, 2015

staying alongside another. If we take this 'other' child that we are to care for as non-human, as a project, an ecology, a system, a frame, an animation - what can maternal time teach us about 'taking care' of time in a moment when the ways we imagine and experience time are changing dramatically in the face of massive sociological inequalities and intense ecological uncertainty?³

When I think of animation and motherhood together what happens? Disjuncture and overlaps. Some words and phrases that come to mind are:

absolutely nothing

a blank page, repetition, interrupted time, care, play, metamorphosis, broken parts, death, folly, repair, limitlessness, limitedness, tears / tears, emergence, touch, transitions, attention, immediacy, modesty, leaky, colours, tenacity, soundtracks, melting bodies, squashing, stretching, wiping, waiting, timelines, acceptance, layers, being patronised, fluidity, performance, queerness, invisibility, stealth, skill, ooze, collaboration, magic, dream-logic, absurdity, wonder, anticipation, exhaustion, feminisms, speculation, discovery, failure, love, exaggeration, slowing down, a certain impossibility at capturing boundlessness, follow-through. It's opening the flashlight one day and finding a pacifier jammed in where the battery ought to be.

Working through expanded animation, video and sculptural installation, my recent body of work, *Nitefeedz*, (2016-2019), looks at where value is placed on the interrupted time of caregiving and reproductive labour. I became interested in what happens to narrative which has been punctured "at the level of constant interruptions to thinking, reflecting,

sleeping, moving and completing tasks. What is left is a series of unconnected experiences that remain fundamentally unable to cohere."⁴ Taking these interruptions as generative, the work looks to connect the provisional gesture to acts of provisioning and care. It poses the question as to whether a new, formal language could be created for the time-intensive medium of animation, at a moment when there's less time because of the issue being interrogated. This paper is a provisional gesture.

The first step in installing *Nitefeedz*, was how to configure the space into a peering and stumbling bodily experience that made sense to the work and the experience of making it. To do this, the objects were placed low to the ground on custom made painted plinths. The walls were painted three foot up from the ground in the same dark, aubergine colour - a colour I'd eye-dropped from sinkholes that featured in stills screen grabbed from old Looney Tunes, *Roadrunner* series. These were frames in which Roadrunner held up a sinkhole for Wile E. Coyote to fall through (over and over). The sinkhole of the repetitive stuck time of caregiving.

I felt mildly embarrassed putting *Nitefeedz* out in the world, with maternal subjectivity so front and centre in its thinking. I wonder about this embarrassment now. Is it the social and culturally conceived embarrassment of motherhood itself? The lack of seriousness given to the experience of motherhood is paralleled with the cultural stigma around much animation. Both are viewed as less important and unserious, yet both are blushing excessive subjects. I am interested in upending the expectations for these 'cartoonish' sites/sights (huge pregnant belly, squishy postpartum body, squishy animated character, squishy so-called baby brain). Feminist traditions that open towards embodied knowledge, such as

3 Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, (Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2017). 49

4 Lisa Baraitser. *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*, (Routledge, London and New York, 2009), 17



Fig. 2 Nitefeedz, RHA, Dublin, Jan-March 2019 (installation view)

Here I am (black-hole-eating-star-super-tease) wall painting, black-like colour (colour extracted from a sinkhole in an episode of Looney Tunes: Wile E. Coyote & Road Runner), dimensions variable, 2019. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Donna Haraway's idea of 'situated knowledge',⁵ have taught me that particular embodied subjectivities can be forms of knowledge which exist outside institutional structures and oversight. What can we learn from this overlooked knowledge? Is there a quiet power to this embarrassment, this vulnerability brought on by close care of another, even if this 'other' is animate/in-animate? If at a time when the physical planetary resources are close to exhaustion and the social mind close to breakdown, can consciously working to take 'care' of time break the spell of the pressure to produce for the sake of production, a way of performing 'I can't in the key of I can'?⁶

Now it's just over two years on. I teach full time and have two small children. These days I'm feeling the effects of extended, day in and day out, year in and year out caregiving. I'm in a constantly cycling present. I'm extremely lucky to have kept my job during the pandemic, however there's been neither much time to reflect or make new work. But what goes on is the game of finding ways that the day in day out routine of caregiving and maintenance can be instructive to broader contexts. In some ways, having small kids is already a socially isolating experience - a lot of staying in place, routines, days rolling one into the other, elasticated waistbands, a lack of travel and being excluded from many social opportunities

5 Donna Haraway. *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, from *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991).

6 Jan Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform*, originally published in 'Dot Dot Dot 15', 2008.



Fig. 3 *Nitefeedz*, RHA, Dublin, Jan-March 2019 (installation view). Photo: Ros Kavanagh

and nights out. So lockdown⁷, while challenging no doubt, has maybe not been the shock for me as it has been for others.

The pandemic⁸ has brought attention to the importance of caregiving and maintenance- of what essential work really is, of how different value is apportioned to different modes of labour and how dependent many of us are on the de-valued

labour and time of others. As we stumble into global ecological collapse, there is a prescient need for a modest inward turn, a recalibration of what is valued as being productive. Being home all day with a young family gives you skills which while undervalued, nevertheless have potential currency outside the domestic sphere such as - listening, being attentive to the needs of others, nimble, adaptive thinking, play and

7 During the worldwide Covid- pandemic, 'lockdown' in Ireland began on March 12, 2020, and on 27 March, the first stay-at-home order banned all non-essential travel and contact with other people. by June and restrictions were gradually lifted, while schools remained closed for summer break. In August, a three-week regional lockdown was imposed in three counties following a spike in cases linked to meat processing plants. Schools re-opened in September. This was followed by a surge in cases, and in October another statewide lockdown was imposed, excluding schools. In early December, Ireland's infection rate was the lowest in the European Union, and restrictions were eased. Due to rising case numbers, on December 24, another statewide lockdown was imposed. Schools and daycare reopened in March 2021. From the middle of May, 2021, restrictions continue to be slowly lifted.

8 COVID-19 pandemic is part of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

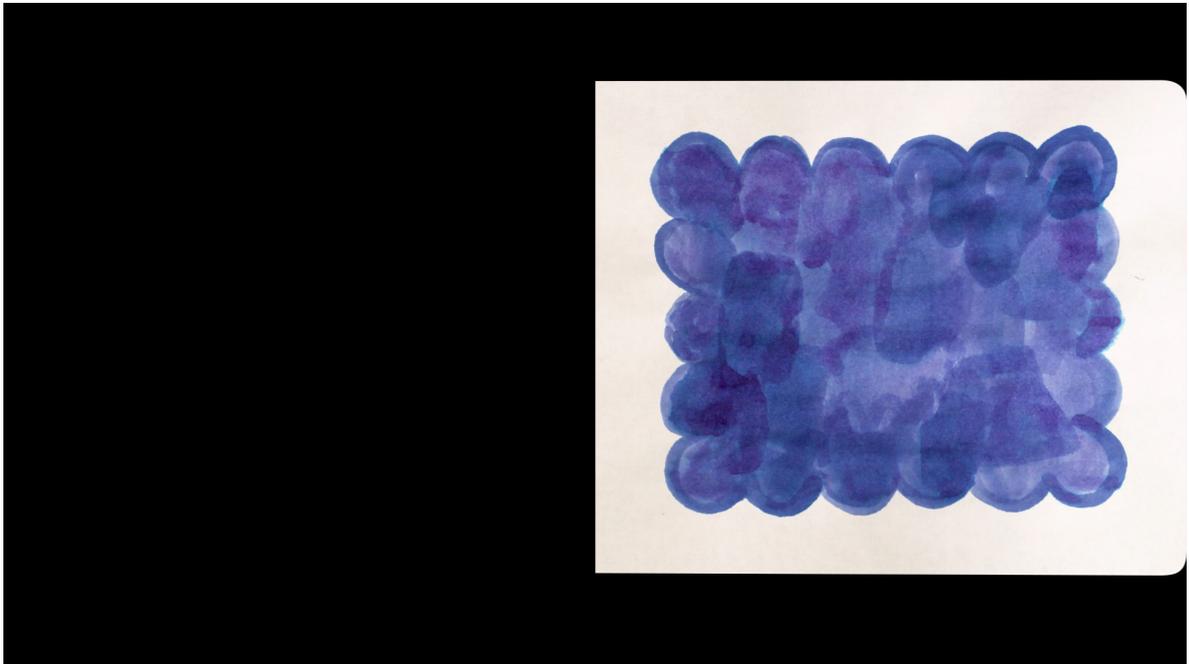


Fig. 4 *Goodnight*, hand drawn animation (still), 08'22, 2017-2020.

improvisation and staying the (a) course. All are modes of situated knowledge.⁹

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, gave me permission to think about pregnancy as a valid site for critical thought and research. British artist Pyllidia Barlow talks of sculpture as an act of material transformation and notes that with housework a similar transformation of materials takes place. Animation is also the art of transformation. In my limited domestic circuit, this makes the endless loads of laundry more interesting. Laundry as expanded animation?

"Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! *Proposal for an exhibition "CARE,"* was a manifesto written by Mierle Laderman

Ukeles, a mother and artist. Divided in two parts, in each Ukeles outlines the differences between "two basic systems: Development and Maintenance." Development is associated with the avant-garde and implicitly male, is concerned with "pure individual creation; the new; change; progress, advance, excitement, flight or fleeing." Maintenance includes tasks generally associated with women and domestic work, which "keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight." Ukeles observes that the problem is that our culture values development, while maintenance "takes all the f***** time". Her solution is to combine them, creating a show that "would zero in on pure maintenance, exhibit it as contemporary art."

9 The term "situated knowledges" coined by Donna Haraway is a central topic in her concept of feminist objectivity. In her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988), Haraway assumes that all scientific knowledge is fundamentally conditional.

Maintenance and animation are both temporal expressions of care. In *Enduring Time*, Lisa Baraitser states that they are also a set of “durational practices that keep ‘things’ going: objects, selves, systems, hopes, ideals, networks, communities, relationships, institutions.” She goes on to say “maintenance is in part generated by conditions of vulnerability that we all share, and in part by the excesses and internal logics of capitalist cultures that make maintenance so necessary.”¹⁰ In a recent interview, on the occasion of the manifesto’s 50 year anniversary, Ukeles said of the of the manifesto:

The first section is ideas. I’m saying a kind of tricky thing. Separation, individuality, avant-garde, to follow one’s own path to death, do your own thing, dynamic change—I’m describing Western culture actually—highly autonomous individualistic change, I’m attaching to a death instinct. The life instinct—unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species, survival systems and operations, equilibrium—this is not Western culture.¹¹

I began making *Goodnight* in 2017, and finished it in December 2020. The film plays through twice. The shapes in the animation are based on the pooled shadowed parts of the illustrations from the classic US children’s book, *Goodnight Moon* written by Margaret Wise Brown and illustrated by Clement Hurd. Each iteration is bookended by a different quote and is made up of two sections. The timing of the first section is of a set duration predetermined by myself. Each image is held for 5 seconds and shot in the order they appeared in the original, working from beginning to the end of the book. The second time round, the timing and order are dictated by the pace of my then 18 month daughter ‘reading’ it which I filmed, using this video as a timing reference. Her embodied reading had her trying to repeatedly eat certain

pages, skip backwards and forwards with complete disregard for the perceived order or assumed narrative of the book. The timing of her actions translated to erratic pools of animation, and were to me like what Scott Bukatman calls “little utopias of disorder, provisional sites of temporary resistance.”¹²

The breakages in the animation - the black spaces in between - for me speaks to the constant interruption, exhaustion, impossibility of making work while being a caregiver. The animation is somewhat crude and unfinished. But I am saying it is good enough because that is all there is left. By quietly and somewhat defiantly taking up space - by inserting the quotes from poet Alice Notley and feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, the mundane, undervalued time of caregiving and maintenance is validated through this film’s very existence. Lived experience as theory.

With this work and future work, and in the wake of lessons learned since lockdown, I’m thinking about access, about ways to activate hyper-local networks, about genuine and idiosyncratic outreach tailored to lived schedules. I’m noticing ways in which the failings and unsustainability of larger institutions has been exposed in Covid times. Is there a subversive power of exhaustion, of performing *no* against the mandatory capitalist yes? What can shared vulnerability teach us? What is the value of stripping back the excess and zoning in on what bridges life and death; moments that circle around in the mind as well as in life itself? I’m thinking of the learned lessons of an expanded understanding of maternal time, as expanded understandings of animation as an enactment of ongoing care. In a time of planetary exhaustion and limited resources this speaks to the quiet heroism of staying in place, digging where you stand (over, and over, and over and over).

10 Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, (Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2017), 49

11 Toby Perl Freilich, *Blazing Epiphany: Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969!*: An Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles

12 Scott Bukatman. *The Poetics of Slumberland; Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012).

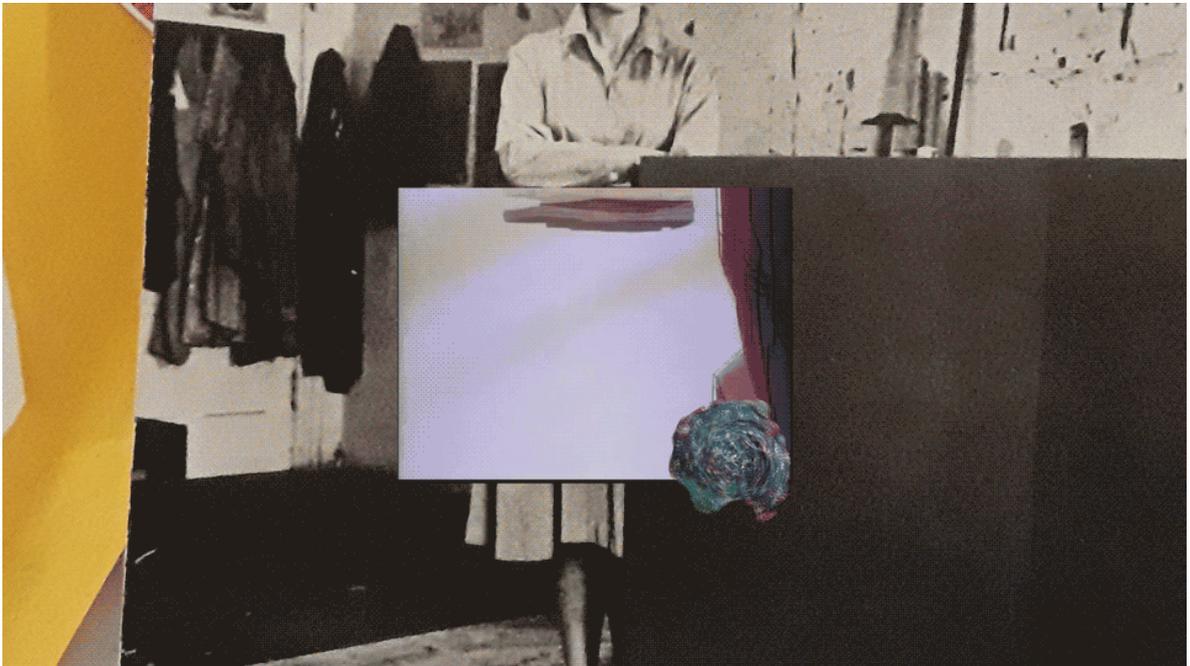


Fig.5 Gif#1, from *No Common Sentence*, 2016-2019, 25'11.

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