

The Mother-Shaped Hole: Lise Haller Baggesen's *Mothernism*

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“If Punk is dad ... Disco is your eternal mother, into whose pulsating bosom you can always return.” (*Mothernism* 136)
—Lise Haller Baggesen

Introducing *Mothernism*

When not an object of desire—or in equal measures invisible—as a viewer, a subject, and as an artist, a woman’s body in contemporary art is often inappropriate. It does not belong. A mother’s body occupies an even more troubling space. In the contemporary art institution, the *maternal viewer* is merely tolerated: concessions (rather than standards) are made for strollers, play areas, changing stations, and breastfeeding spaces. Likewise, within contemporary art itself, the *maternal subject* is tolerated, albeit with some disdain. Setting aside the pervasive tidiness of the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception, in proportion to sexualized female nudes, just how many messy depictions of childbirth exist in major museum collections, much less appear regularly on view to the visiting public?¹ It is certainly a good omen for the place of motherhood in contemporary art that in 2015, curator (and newly minted father) Massimiliano Gioni organized a grandiose exhibition and catalogue on the iconography of

motherhood titled *The Great Mother: Women, Maternity, and Power in Art and Visual Culture, 1900–2015*, which was held at the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi in Milan. Yet, this major exhibition did not travel outside of Italy—perhaps such a show could only have been held in the country most known for its mother worship.

Much more than the viewer and subject in contemporary art, however, it is the *maternal artist* whose body is by far the most inappropriate in contemporary art. We continue to exist in a world where the female, the feminine, and the maternal are abject. It is difficult to accept the idea of the mother-artist, the maker who makes motherhood the mantra, the person who points the lens back at the mother-blind institution and says: *look, there are things to learn from here*. Society has told us the mother loses something of herself in childbirth, and in the art world, the maker-mama is assumed to have lost her creative self. Her presence among children infantilizes her artwork. Fear, of course, is the underlying factor, fear on an Oedipal scale. Fear of kitsch—Montessori colours, simplistic ideas. Fear of the body and its stretch marks, blood, fat, shit, and tears. Not surprisingly, fear of anything that could subvert the art market’s status quo.

Danish-born artist-writer Lise Haller Baggesen² embraces these issues wholeheartedly in *Motherism*, 2013–present, a hybrid and evolving audio-visual installation and text.³ *Motherism* highlights unchecked prejudice and attempts to stake a claim to a new, twenty-first-century possibility of being: a vibrant swirl of motherhood, feminism, and modernism. In the following essay, I first examine the *material context* for the installation, which most frequently takes the form of a tent surrounded by painted flags and soothing, colourful lights, and incorporates references to 1970s Danish interior design and Dutch therapy techniques. Then, I unpack the cultural context for this work, focusing on the roles that music, science fiction, and pop culture play in enticing the viewer to engage with motherhood in a contemporary art setting. Considering how Baggesen makes the case for a feminist “ethics of care,” I explore *Motherism*’s hybrid relationship to relational aesthetics, participatory art, and social practice—what could also be called “party as form.” Subsequently, I outline the *historical context* for the project in relation to art history and contemporary art theory, and analyze the artist’s specific mode of address: an alter ego who writes letters to her mother, sister, and children. Finally, I return to the mother in the contemporary art museum and offer examples of practical applications of what it means to be a Mothernist today.

What Is *Mothernism*?

Lise Haller Baggesen opens her book *Mothernism*—a purple object edged in the crisp silver of a fresh Wrigley's gum wrapper—with an account of a long drive on the German Autobahn, followed by an ode to Donna Summer's sultry disco style and to the lyrics from David Bowie's 1979 song "Fantastic Voyage" (17). 1979 was the International Year of the Child, the heyday of disco, and, for Baggesen, the touchstone for her multifaceted project, which is situated (as she describes it) at "the intersection of feminism, science fiction, and disco" (*Mothernism* 17).⁴

Mothernism developed from the artist's ongoing attempts to organize her thoughts on motherhood in history, music, art, and personal experience—or, in Baggesen's words, to "locate the 'mother-shaped' hole in contemporary art discourse" (*Mothernism* 17). Indeed, as Baggesen describes the term:

The word "Mothernism" is an elision, associating both the good stuff—like mothering and modernism—but it also has some negative connotations, like sexism, ageism and abled-bodyism [sic], which are often directed at the maternal body. This body freaks a lot of people out, to be frank, in myriad ways the stereotypical female body doesn't. I mean; it probably has stretch marks, for starters. Scars. Not to mention an (oceanic and slippery) interior. (qtd. in "Artist Spotlight")

Initially this project was conceived as a series of essay-letters written (and then read aloud) by one of Baggesen's artistic alter egos, Queen Leeba—an amalgam of "Donna Summer and a proto-feminist, Scandinavian love goddess"—and addressed to her children, sister, and mother (qtd. in Morris). Working through this alter-ego allowed Baggesen the freedom to use writing as an integral part of her visual studio practice: "the writing informed the work while it was being made and dared me to go places where I wouldn't have [g]one" (qtd. in Morris).

First exhibited in 2013 as an audio-visual installation that incorporates recordings of the artist (as Queen Leeba) reading the letters aloud, and subsequently published as a book of the same name in 2014,⁵ the *Mothernism* project has been presented in both U.S. and international venues.⁶ Baggesen tailors the installation to each exhibition space in

the spirit of the project’s nomadic, open-ended ethos, and she situates herself as an intermediary between the contemporary art institution and the viewer—offering up this environment to be used by the public as the need arises. Indeed, visitors are encouraged to activate the welcoming, multipurpose space as a platform for activities, from book browsing to breastfeeding, political debates to poetry readings. As an audio installation, epistolary manifesto, and “party as form,” *Motherism* is one twenty-first-century feminist’s affectionate call to arms.



Figure 1. Lise Haller Baggesen, *Motherism*, 2013–ongoing. Audio-installation. Dimensions variable. Total running time: 75:00. Installation view, Lise Haller Baggesen: *Motherism*, The Contemporary Austin – Gatehouse Gallery at the Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park at Laguna Gloria, 2016. Artwork © Lise Haller Baggesen. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Brian Fitzsimmons.

Viewers entering the *Motherism* installation in Austin, Texas, first passed under an outdoor pergola covered in lush vines and painted banners waving in the breeze, and, upon entering the gallery space, were bathed in a warm purple light (Fig. 1). The gallery floor, soft and plush, was carpeted in a deep shade of eggplant. Around a corner lay a radiating white Buckminster Fuller-esque dome of a tent that filled the space. This cozy, safe haven was flanked by silk and cotton flags painted in bright shades of pink, orange, purple, and metallic silver. Some contained abstract circles and concentric rings. Others had statements

painted in flowing, silver script, such as “LIBERTÉ / ÉGALITÉ / MATERNITÉ” and “Let’s mind / fuck and make / a beautiful / brain / child.” Some even had Texas-specific slogans on them, such as “Wendy / Davis / is your / Homegirl.” The room was illuminated by a slowly changing glow of blue-to-red light. Crouching down, viewers could enter the tent on their hands and knees, a playful, childlike action that effectively stripped all who entered of age, social status, and power. Inside, tiny fragments of light reflected off slowly spinning disco balls. One could reach out to flip through a series of books on the centre table or put on a pair of headphones. A soothing, lyrical Danish woman’s voice would begin to tell a story filled with love, curiosity, passion, and advice. Visitors, young and old, sank into soft purple beanbag chairs or bounced gently on yoga balls. Leaning back, the viewer found their visual field filled with colour. On the wall behind the tent was an image of Earth from space and on top of that a silvery drawing. The effect of lying inside the tent and viewing the planet from the vantage point of the moon through a scrim of light and colourful flags was otherworldly (Bowie’s 1969 “Space Oddity” came to mind). Once inside, everyone was equally submerged in the violet glow, and a sense of communal wonder and openness to discussion ensued (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Lise Haller Baggesen, *Motherism*, 2013–ongoing. Audio-installation. Dimensions variable. Running time: 75:00. Installation view, *Motherism* (in action), Mana Contemporary, Chicago, 2014. Artwork and image © Lise Haller Baggesen. Courtesy the artist.

In *Motherism*, the use of bright colours, soft surfaces, and soothing lights in immersive surroundings references a therapy technique first developed in the Netherlands in the 1970s for children with autism and other developmental disabilities: a controlled multi-sensory environment (MSE), or *Snoezelen* room. This word is combination of the Dutch verbs *snuffelen*—meaning to sniff, or colloquially, to poke around and inquire—and *doezelen*, meaning to doze or rest lightly and peacefully (Kinkead; Stephenson and Carter).

This kind of environment is also a nod to two major mid-century Danish artists with a love of saturated, luscious pop colour: Poul Gernes (1925–1996) and Verner Panton (1926–1998). Baggesen describes both artists as “united in a radical approach to colour theory as well as a design philosophy characterized by a social conscience with respect for the ordinary individual and its right to inhabit a meaningful, stimulating and nurturing environment” (*Motherism* 141). A contemporary of the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, Gernes was a conceptual artist, a printmaker, and an abstract painter whose work Danish curator and gallerist Bibi Saugman says invites the viewer “into an ethical, socio-political project, in a playful, exuberant and popular universe where everyday life rhymes with well-being, and where pleasure and moderation go hand in hand.” Gernes is best known for his public design of the interior of the Herlev Hospital from 1968 to 1976 in Copenhagen, a space of care that evokes the healing power of colour and is still considered Denmark’s biggest artwork to date. Panton is famous for his furniture, lighting, and interior design, which he incorporated into all-encompassing displays, such as *Phantasy Landscape*, which was installed in 1970 at the *Visiona 2* exhibition in Cologne, Germany. In an essay included in a recent monograph on Panton, design curator Sabine Epple writes of *Phantasy Landscape* as “Panton’s dream of the future,” which Epple views as “an inhabitable sculpture” that complements “the inner life of people” (176). Indeed, Epple emphasizes the maternal connection to the space in her reference to German art historian Heino R. Möller, who wrote in 1981 of the installation as a “soft, warm protective cave,” one that “evokes impressions of the mother’s belly, of prenatal, intra-uterine contentedness” (qtd. in Epple 176). Whether or not Panton himself intended *Phantasy Landscape* to be quite so literally womblike is unclear, but for Baggesen’s purposes, the maternal connection is evident—Gernes’s blending of life, art, and ethics is a tactic

also taken up by Baggesen.

Since 2013, the *Motherism* project has undergone many reincarnations, and reinvented itself for many spaces. In Chicago, visitors might have brushed through a triumphant entryway of flags before coming into a massive room with a glowing tent at the other end. In Philadelphia or New York, in galleries too small for the footprint of a big, welcoming tent, visitors might have swung on hammocks and listened to the stories on headphones while interior images of other *Motherism* tents played on nearby screens. In rural Wisconsin, visitors may have entered the dank confines of an unfinished basement, only to find themselves submerged in the festive atmosphere of a subterranean youth club staged as a glitter beach party. In Elmhurst, Illinois, museum goers would have seen Baggesen's painted banners filling the building's Mies van der Rohe windows, subverting the building's mid-century modernist minimalism and flooding the space with a stained-glass effect of coloured light.

In all of these installations, the elements that have remained constant are the audio recordings, the archive of books, the wall drawing, and the painted flags. The books are mostly from Baggesen's personal library (or Queen Leeba's "Leebrary")—a collection of *Motherism*'s primary texts that are offered up to nurture, educate, and stimulate intellectual cross-pollination and to acknowledge the project's matrilineage. The drawing—a rhizomic pattern of lines and names written in silver ink over a photographic image of Earth as seen from space—is what Baggesen refers to as a mind-map. A fascinating document for following the flow of the creative process, it illustrates a technique Baggesen used when writing the essays for *Motherism*, one that allowed her to visually link her thoughts on motherhood in contemporary art to disparate people, places, and things throughout history. The silk banners are beautiful paintings in themselves, with political slogans and revisionist Color Field works: Baggesen's homage, or what she jokingly calls "cultural necrophilia" (qtd. in "Artist Spotlight"), to abstract pioneers such as Helen Frankenthaler, Poul Gernes, Hilma af Klint, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland.

Entering this room filled with colour and light evokes the experience of stepping into a painting, informed by Baggesen's formal training as a figurative painter in the Netherlands in the late 1990s.⁷ In an interview about *Motherism*, Baggesen notes the following: "I was

actually a figurative painter for a long time and I still regard myself as a figurative painter. In this kind of project the figure/ground relationship has changed of course” (qtd. in Morris). Rather than solely addressing the figure in painting, the *Motherism* installation challenges Greenbergian ideals of “flatness” and upends them by inviting the viewer (figure) into Baggesen’s painting-as-installation. If the pigment of a Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland colour field painting bursts vigorously across the unprimed cotton surface like the cold smack of an ocean spray, then the colour field of *Motherism* pushes under the surface to the calm depths of the ocean floor, inviting and enveloping in its immensity. Rather than confronting what could be seen as the vertical, monolithic barrier of a canvas, the viewer is invited into the experience of a painting, with all the inherent colours, lights, shadows, and sounds (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Lise Haller Baggesen, *Motherism*, 2013–ongoing. Audio-installation. Dimensions variable. Running time: 75:00. Installation view, *Motherism* (interior), Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chicago, 2013. Artwork and image © Lise Haller Baggesen. Artwork and image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Brian Fitzsimmons.

Feminism, Sci-Fi, Motherhood, and Disco

The popular “hooks” of the *Mothernism* project (to borrow a phrase from the music world)—the way they sneak around the eye rolls and through the glazed expressions when “feminism,” “motherhood,” and “contemporary art” are mentioned in the same sentence—are the two other key components to Baggesen’s world: science fiction and disco. As referenced by art historian Gavin Parkinson, science fiction—which became a distinct genre in Western, English-speaking cultures in the 1920s and 1930s (led by writers like H.P. Lovecraft)—was at its height of popularity in the 1950s (thanks to writers like Philip K. Dick and Frank Herbert), when technology advances allowed space travel to seem like a real possibility. Disco, meanwhile, came of age in the 1970s and was as much a style of music as it was a cultural movement embracing inclusivity and encompassing both Black and queer cultures. These two themes, science fiction and disco, act as (borrowing from *Star Trek*) “universal translators”; they allow for a colourful entry into the mothernist conversation. As a mother might, it is as if the installation itself engages us in playful conversation: *Disco is open to all and fun to dance to—let’s think about what that means. Science fiction is philosophical and imagines other worlds—how could the two relate?*

The combination of these areas of inquiry helps to ground the *Mothernism* project in academic discourse while engaging the audience’s curiosity on a pop cultural level. While *Mothernism* touches on many different kinds of music throughout Baggesen’s writings—and, indeed, musical lyrics are treated like poetry—the two musicians who hold the most importance for her are indisputably Donna Summer and David Bowie. The first album Baggesen purchased, which she did on the sly during one of her first big trips away from home, was by Donna Summer. And, as Baggesen describes in a 2015 video interview produced by the Chicago-based Poetry Foundation, Bowie’s lyrics deeply resonated with her as a teenager growing up in rural Denmark: “when you’re out in the sticks and nobody understands you, and you discover that David Bowie understands you, it can be a really profound moment” (qtd. in “The Unputdownable”).

Brian Eno famously said to David Bowie after hearing “I Feel Love,” Donna Summer’s sultry, crooning disco track of 1977: “I have heard the sound of the future” (qtd. in *Mothernism* 116). Summer and Bowie (and Eno, for that matter) create music that seductively pulls the listener

in, which then paints a picture of another life, another world beyond this one. The allure of these musicians is in their otherworldliness and in their visual and aural ability to transport the listener to another place or time. In the same way, Baggesen describes her interest in science fiction as a “maternal voice projecting into the future,” and she proposes that entering the space of *Motherism* creates a “parallel timeline” and a “rethinking” of history, “instead of rolling over at the idea that we’re at the end of history and capitalism won” (qtd. in “Q+A” 213). All of *Motherism*’s components share a common investment in a future utopia, a time and a place where life just might get a little bit better for everyone.

This Is What a Motherist Looks Like: A Feminist Ethics of Care

The question remains: in practical terms, what does it mean to *be* a Motherist? One answer: to be a Motherist is to have the inner capacity to care for someone, or something else, and to fight for those who cannot yet fight for themselves. For Baggesen, it is the next logical progression of feminism: the twenty-first-century wave. As writer and cultural critic Roxane Gay argues in her book *Bad Feminist*, many kinds of people have been at worst excluded from, and at best forgotten by, twentieth-century feminism (including women of colour, queer, and transgender women). Yet, Gay writes, “feminism’s failings do not mean we should eschew feminism entirely.... We should disavow the failures of feminism without disavowing its many successes and how far we have come” (xiii). If contemporary feminism contests, on a basic level, that all people should be treated equally, Baggesen’s *Motherism* takes that one step further—all people should be cared for equally. This basic tenet—that people should all live according to an “ethics of care”—is a moral and philosophical theory that posits the self as fundamentally relational. This theory was first outlined in the early 1980s by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings and then challenged and elaborated upon by second- and third-wave feminists, such as Donna Haraway and Fiona Robinson (Sander-Staudt and Robinson).

If feminism’s weakness is that it is too abstract, too loaded with decades of politicization, and filled with too many generations trying to reshape it on their own terms, *Motherism*’s power is that, in accessing

motherhood, it is truly a universal language. As feminist poet Adrienne Rich reminds us, “All human life on this planet is born of woman” (11), and every living being is connected to someone who cared enough to help people come into existence and to continue to exist beyond their vulnerabilities. Rich makes the point that “physical motherhood is merely one dimension of our being” (284) and that “in the original matriarchal clan *all* females, of whatever age, were called ‘mothers’—even little girls. Motherhood was a social rather than a physical function” (250).

Care and compassion are, theoretically, the ethical foundations for most major world religions and philosophies, yet in practice are so rarely implemented. *Mothernism* proposes this “radical” shift in perspective: care for this world and the people in it, as if they were your children. Place yourself in a mother’s shoes. Ask: how can I help this grow? Is there space for mothering here? Is this safe for growth, conversation, or existence? Beyond its seductive aesthetics, this writer’s primary interest in *Mothernism* stems from its inclusivity: biological and nonbiological mamas alike can be Mothernists, and are welcomed as such. Rich offers up alternate terms to the nonbiological mother such as the “unchilded” woman or, in the positive, “spirit-sister” (252). *Mothernism* is a philosophy open to all, as it spans race, gender, creed, and class. Biological motherhood is not a requirement; indeed, for *Mothernism*’s ideals to be effective, nonbiological mothers are a key component of this paradigm shift equation. Without naming this theory precisely, *Mothernism* makes the case that mothers, fathers, and their children alike—institutions and governments, even—should live with an ethics of care.

Equally, *Mothernism* asks us to consider an environmental perspective: in order to care for others, we must also care for the physical world around us. Baggesen emphasized this in her Austin installation and asked visitors to explore The Contemporary Austin’s outdoor sculpture park with her by listening to a newly commissioned text written specifically for the site: *The Mothernism’s Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria*.⁸ Based on research related to the history of the architecture, grounds, and sculpture of the museum’s Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park at Laguna Gloria—and incorporating Baggesen’s signature mélange of art history, pop culture, politics, and music—this walking audio tour invited visitors to uncover forgotten stories and explore the

historic site and its artwork in new ways. As Baggesen argues in *The Mothernist Audio Guide*, “Universally, the defense of ever tightening fists is that ‘we cannot save the whole world.’ Alas. If we cannot save the whole world, the whole world cannot be saved” (5). Indeed, as we witness with increasing regularity, children cannot survive, or thrive, in the future conditions that climate change supposes. From inside the mother-ship of the tent, *Mothernism* asks us to take a look outside and hum a little David Bowie. To see the Earth shining out there and to recognize the intricate web of connections between all of us. To work to ensure a safe space for generations to come. If space travel, as Brazilian painter Lygia Clark mused in 1960, is the natural progression of humanity’s need to resolve “the vertical expression of its spirituality” (96), then from space we must look back at this earth with that same spirituality, with precepts that exist in every major religion—do unto others, practice no harm, love thy neighbour—and ask, from this perspective, from here, how, and whom, can I help grow?

Participatory Art and Party as Form

The acts of care and inclusivity triggered by Baggesen’s words exemplify the all-encompassing power and purpose of the kind of project *Mothernism* represents. Baggesen created *Mothernism* to be, as she describes, “something that worked like a mama, something that would be nourishing and smothering and immersive—a total experience” (qtd. in “Q+A” 211). Yet although the extended effect it has on the surrounding community could be considered social (Beuys), relational (Bourriaud), or participatory (Bishop), *Mothernism* does not fit precisely into these neat art historical packages.

“Social sculpture,” “relational aesthetics,” and “participatory art” are all terms used with increasing regularity since the late 1990s when (predominantly male) artists, such as Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, began to push the boundaries of interactivity between artist, audience, and life. These descriptors fit into a web of vague art-world linguistics as attempts to categorize work that does not fit into an easily commodifiable or modernist lineage.⁹ Consider, for example, art critic and theorist Lane Relyea’s take on this social, relational art of the late twentieth-century in his 2013 book, *Your Everyday Art World*, an analysis of contemporary art and capitalism:

What seemed at the beginning of the 1990s to be an opposition between the apparitions of spectacle and the opacities of abject art's embodiment and trauma soon disappeared, as artists instead embraced a new 'middle' ground between the two—the realm of everyday life and common cultural exchange, of casual existence and informality. Not superstar celebrities or abject flesh but people wearing clothes, eating food, and hanging out with friends. (41)

In Relyea's perspective, what had been an art of spectacle and the body coalesced into a vaguely performative art of the casual quotidian. A glaring omission from his analysis, however, is the inclusion of an "everyday life" that relates to the realities of motherhood, family, or domesticity.

Nicholas Bourriaud first coined the phrase "relational aesthetics" in 1998 (although it was not translated from French into English until 2002). Citing contemporary artists Maurizio Cattelan and Gabriel Orozco as examples, Bourriaud describes "relational art" as "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (41). Furthermore, Bourriaud sets up the distinction that relational art has less to do with the physical constraints of the exhibition space and more to do with the temporal duration of such art, much like the experience of having a verbal discussion (41–42). Unfortunately, these simple dichotomies do not allow for a work like *Mothernism*, which is a form of contemporary art that encompasses everything Bourriaud describes: *social* human interaction within a *private*, symbolic space, and a space to be *walked* through as well as the experience of a lived *time*. *Mothernism*, coming from the mind and hand of a painter, is wholly an ode to the modernist, private, and independent experience of a work of art. You can enter it alone, read the books alone, and are encouraged to listen to the audio tracks alone through individual sets of headphones. It is your own private disco. Yet just as identity is always more multifaceted and complex than meets the eye—for example the artist-as-mother-as-feminist—*Mothernism* is *also* a stage for social interaction, where durational conversations about motherhood are wholeheartedly encouraged. Bourriaud, in his attempts to put a finger on the present moment in art, does not make space for a contradictory self (a unique pleasure of being human) or a multifaceted work of art.

If not relational, then what? *Motherism* could equally be described in the context of what art historian Claire Bishop has labeled “participatory art.” Indeed, in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Bishop writes, “Participatory art demands that we find new ways of analyzing art that are no longer linked solely to visuality, even though *form* remains a crucial vessel for communicating meaning” (7). This is perhaps the strongest link between participatory art and *Motherism*, in that Baggesen’s ideas take form in an audio-visual installation, but the meaning exists beyond the physical work in the context of her writing. Throughout *Artificial Hells*, Bishop focuses on the increased prevalence of the artist’s “project,” which is, as she writes, “the indicator of a renewed social awareness of artists in the 1990s” (215). Such projects aim “to replace the work of art as a finite object with an open-ended, post-studio, research-based, social process, extending over time and mutable in form” (74). Bishop’s description would seem to apply to Baggesen’s *Motherism*, as the project is political, socially aware, research based, and ever evolving. Yet as flexible as Baggesen is with *Motherism*’s mutability, the power of painting and specific objects of colour and visuality remain at the core of her visual interests. *Motherism* is not *solely* a participatory work of art.

Clearly, in its book, audio, and installation forms, Baggesen’s *Motherism* is filled with subversive, social justice, and participatory elements that relate in some ways to Bourriaud’s and Bishop’s theories. In Chicago, Baggesen’s current home, the related term “social practice” gets bandied about in equal measures.¹⁰ Yet Baggesen refuses this label as well—perhaps because of what curator and writer Dieter Roelstraete describes in his contribution to the *Chicago Social Practice History Series* as “the paradigm’s occasionally questionable humanitarianism” and “its undeniably paternalistic impulses” (49). Instead, Baggesen aims to create a space for joy and pleasure: “I believe the next feminist wave must be all about women’s right to pleasure—the pleasure we take in our bodies, our sexuality, motherhood, leisure, and professional and intellectual pursuit” (qtd. in “Artist Spotlight”). The artist herself would prefer to label *Motherism* as a kind of “party as form,” a term coined by a friend and colleague of Baggesen’s, curator Shannon Stratton, as the premise for a class.¹¹ Stratton elaborates on this idea in the following way:

I was feeling as though social practice as an “art form” was something students studied at arm’s length—through other artists’ work, through theory, but maybe also through a presumed idea about what it meant to work socially without really studying what the social was. So Party as Form took the subject of being social—that is throwing and attending “parties”—as the foundation from which to build a “social practice” without ever having to use those terms. (qtd in “PAF”)

This more glamorous, disco-infused, and celebratory designation opens up the possibilities for—in the queer cultural use of the term—“switching.” A mother-artist can be this *and* that, rather than this *or* that. The visual and literary language of *Motherism* offers both dominant didacticism and a passive, anticipatory presence. It allows for the possibility to consider simultaneous modalities of being and to engage in critical acts of becoming more self-aware. The intention, whatever the critical or art historical label, is for each visitor or reader to pass on concepts of *Motherism* as a way of being in the world—to spark thought like wildfire and bring about positive change, all while having a great deal of fun.¹²

A Home, a Tent, a Room, a Womb

Motherism’s connection to social practice, Chicago style, actually has less to do with how the term applies to Baggesen’s work and more to do with *Motherism*’s matrilineage with other artists, makers, and activists throughout the city who enact social practice in various ways. The installation form of *Motherism* arose from a particular network of Chicago-based feminist curators, organizers, and artists whose lives intersected with Baggesen’s as she worked on the project, and it bears a conceptual resemblance to many artist-run domestic spaces throughout the city. The most notable connection is to the Suburban, co-founded in 1999 in Oak Park, Illinois by Baggesen’s mentor and thesis advisor Michelle Grabner and Grabner’s husband Brad Killiam.¹³ Other contemporary Chicago-area domestic exhibition spaces on the *Motherism* family tree include The Green Lantern Gallery and Press, founded by Caroline Picard in 2005, and Sector 2337, founded by Picard and Devin King in 2014; 6018 North, founded by curator Tricia

Van Eyck in 2011; the front yard of Terrain Exhibitions, founded by the late artist Sabina Ott and writer John Paulett in 2011 as well; and the backyard patio of The Franklin, founded by artist Edra Soto and her partner Dan Sullivan in 2012.

From this domestic lineage, the “total experience” that Baggesen ascribes to *Motherism* is also situated in a framework of immersive spaces in contemporary art—becoming something altogether familiar yet also radical and new. From the artist’s studio to the conceptual installation, spaces housed within other spaces have a long lineage in twentieth-century art: Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau*, 1937; Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*, 1946–1966; Robert Therrien’s rooms-within-rooms, 1984–2019; and Mika Rottenberg’s video installations, 2011–present. As I have described, the *Motherism* room-within-a-room most often takes the form of a tent, which offers a way for Baggesen to stage an intimate scene separate from the typically urban environment of the exhibition space. Just as her flags are also scarves—“protest chic” for the fashionable working mother who Baby Björns with the fabric by day, attends rallies with the banner at night, and discos on with the scarf into the morning, but who is equally happy to “lean out” of the twenty-four-hour economy and to sleep when the baby sleeps—*Motherism* is both nimble and mobile, and can be installed quickly and can exist simultaneously in multiple cities at once. Conversely, the use of a tent could indicate a site of dissent, reminiscent of scenes of historical protest where tents, banners, and bodies have been used to political effect: such as the not-so-distant memory of the Occupy Wall Street movement that started in Zuccotti Park, New York, in 2011, or the now-almost-forgotten Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp in Berkshire, England, from 1981 to 2000.¹⁴

Specifically, in *Motherism*, Baggesen references and pays homage to two no longer extant contemporary art works: British artist Tracey Emin’s sculptural tent from 1995, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, 1963–1995, and French artist Niki de Saint Phalle’s massive sculptural installation, *Hon (She)—a cathedral*, 1966. The Emin tent is a small blue camping tent covered in the brightly coloured, appliquéd names of Emin’s lovers, friends, relatives, and acquaintances who had lain beside her at one point or another. In her book, Baggesen describes this work by Emin as the place “where I would most like to rest my weary head,” because, Baggesen continues, “the canopy opens itself up as a motherly

embrace in which we can curl up and forgive ourselves" (*Mothernism* 74–75). In similar homage, *Mothernism*'s womblike room references the now-mythological space claimed by Saint Phalle's *Hon* installation. Saint Phalle, along with her partner Jean Tinguely and friend Per Olof Ultvedt, staged a monumental sculpture in the galleries of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm: a gargantuan, supine, pregnant woman (a version of Saint Phalle's now-classic *Nana* figures) filling the museum's gallery at 77 by 20 by 33 feet (Andersson 59). Visitors could enter this figure through a door between the legs—a return voyage through the birth canal, or the physical embodiment of Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *L'Origine du monde*—and experience what Patrik Andersson describes as a labyrinthine “night-club-like interior,” which included a floor made of foam, strange kinetic sculpture by Tinguely, the sound of breaking glass, a Coca-Cola bar in the figure's breast, and parodies of contemporary film and art (59).¹⁵ What a party! Staking a claim on institutional territories and confusing the boundaries between interior and exterior, *Mothernism* re-envisioned and recreates these lost spaces of feminine sexuality, motherhood, and power.

Motherhood in Cultural Context: The Private-Public Relationship to the Pregnant Body

Baggesen's decision to write these feminist essays on motherhood, contemporary art, and music came about through her cultural experience as a Danish artist living in America, and as a young mother battling the occasional deep conservatism disguised as academic superiority that she found present in her graduate program in Visual Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.¹⁶ As Baggesen describes it, although gender and identity politics were being discussed in her graduate classes at length, “whenever I brought up how motherhood had influenced my art-making or my position in the art world or my thoughts on feminism, it was always shut down pretty quickly. There was this real notion of the mother being this bourgeois figure that you had to distance yourself from. It was very Freudian” (qtd. in “Q+A” 210). This experience, unfortunately, is not an unfamiliar one. Adrienne Rich describes her academic life in the mid-1970s in similar terms, as her colleagues had a “fundamental perceptual difficulty” in recognizing women's issues—what Rich calls “an

intellectual defect, which might be named ‘patrivincialism’ or ‘patriochialism’” (16). Four decades later, in Baggesen’s experience, the “idea of mothering [w]as a reactionary position incongruent with art school,” and she took up the resistance she encountered as a challenge to create (qtd. in “Q+A” 211).

Similarly, in her award-winning memoir *The Argonauts*, contemporary poet and critic Maggie Nelson describes the same kind of systemic dismissal of a critical discussion of motherhood within academia that inspired *Motherism*.¹⁷ In a pivotal juncture in *The Argonauts*’ narrative, Nelson describes a lecture she attended while in graduate school in 1998: a presentation by Lacanian scholar Jane Gallop, followed by a conversation between Gallop and art historian Rosalind Krauss. Nelson describes Gallop’s presentation, which included nude photographs of the speaker as a subject with her young child:

She was coupling this subjective position with that of being a mother, in an attempt to get at the experience of being photographed as a mother (another position generally assumed to be, as Gallop put it, ‘troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned’). She was taking on Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, and the way in which even in Barthes—delectable Barthes!—the mother remains the (photographed) object; the son the (writing) subject. ‘The writer is someone who plays with his mother’s body,’ Barthes wrote. But sometimes the writer is also the mother (Möbius strip). (40)

Then, Krauss takes the stage, and as Nelson wryly quips: “The room thickened with the sound of one keenly intelligent woman taking another down. Dismembering her, really” (41). Krauss (as Nelson tells it), flings out such terms at Gallop as “mediocrity, naïveté, and soft-mindedness,” and according to Nelson, “the tacit undercurrent of her argument ... was that Gallop’s maternity had rotted her mind—besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting” (41). Krauss’s pithy take-down of one woman’s subjective, photographic depiction of an “utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others” seems almost laughable today, for just the following year, the popular blogging website LiveJournal was launched (1999), and only four years after Nelson recalls Krauss’s comment, our

lives began to be inundated by the ordinary, subjective experiences of others through social media such as Friendster and LinkedIn (2002), MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), and Instagram (2010). Today's present economy can now monetize those "utterly ordinary experiences" to the *nth* degree, and as Relyea describes, "Instead of being suppressed for the sake of getting work done, now the communicating and performing of subjectivity is itself put to work" (5).

However mistaken Krauss may have been about Gallop's subjective method, this single-minded, dismissive perspective of motherhood offered by Krauss—seared in Nelson's memory seventeen years after the fact—is not an outlier or a fluke. Krauss is considered by many to be one of the preeminent critical minds of the postmodernist art historical canon. This perspective is almost certainly shared (although, I would like to believe, unconsciously) by many other academics within the field. In a different context, in a different city, but similarly within a well-respected graduate academic program is the kind of mother-dismissive environment from which Baggesen's *Mothernism* arose.

Another example offers, perhaps, one possible interpretation of why Krauss might have reacted as she did and why it is so important that we look at motherhood in art and academia critically. Writing about the tenuous state of female reproductive rights in America today, Roxane Gay remarks on the disjunctive nature of pregnancy as it exists for a mother in both private (within the body) and public spheres (on the level of social interaction, government intervention, and abortion legislation): "In a perfect world, pregnancy would be an intimate experience shared by a woman and her partner alone, but for various reasons that is not possible. Pregnancy is an experience that invites public intervention and forces the female body into the public discourse. In many ways, pregnancy is the least private experience of a woman's life" (269). Maggie Nelson also comments on this private-public relationship to a woman's pregnant body, arguing that, in public, the pregnant body is seen as "obscene":

It radiates a kind of smug autoeroticism: an intimate relation is going on—one that is visible to others, but that decisively excludes them.... It especially irritates the antiabortionists, who would prefer to pry apart the twofers earlier and earlier—twenty-four weeks, twenty weeks, twelve weeks, six weeks.... The sooner

you can pry the twofer apart, the sooner you can dispense with one constituent of the relationship: *the woman with rights*. (90)

Perhaps this private-public relationship to the pregnant body is how we start to get at the root of *why* motherhood has historically been considered so gauche a topic in contemporary art. As much as the larger art world pays lip service to the public realm of popular culture when individual artists serve a larger, more profitable purpose (Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, for example), nonetheless the smaller, academic art world remains trapped under the thumb of that cantankerous father of mid-century contemporary art criticism, Clement Greenberg, and his utter loathing of pop culture's pinnacle: kitsch. If the public sphere marks the boundary of the distasteful realm of kitsch as separate from what is *not* kitsch (as art, Greenberg would call it *avant-garde*, whereas today it may be called critically acclaimed), then pregnancy and motherhood reside precisely in the centre of the public, and exist primarily as an aspect of pop culture. For what is more kitsch than Norman Rockwell's mothers and children, Anne Geddes's flower babies, or the Christian iconography of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus? Motherhood, as we are regularly subjected to popular culture's depictions of it, is cheesy, vapid, and shallow. The pregnant body is something without a mind of its own that—we are told—should be regulated, legislated, and depersonalized by its government and medical practitioners.

The Mother in the Museum

Motherism asks us to consider the personal (our individual relationships with mothers and motherhood) with the political (how mothers and motherhood exist in the world around us). For this reason, I will conclude here with my own perspective and share the impact that *Motherism* has had on me and on the people around me. These examples illustrate the practical implications of why it is so important to link motherhood to the ways in which we interact with the world around us: in our interpersonal relationships, in our workplace, in our politics, and in our contemporary art museums.

The power of *Motherism* is its ability to activate like wildfire at its very invocation. In the months leading up to the exhibition's installation at The Contemporary Austin, the internal mechanisms this work

set in motion were profound. Staff began reading the *Mothernism* book, and subsequently discussions of breastfeeding, feminism, reproductive rights, ability and disability, women's rights, and gun control all took place in advance of the opening. A number of significant changes occurred in and for the museum as a result. For example, with new Texas gun control laws coming into effect on 1 January 2016 ("New Laws"), museum staff established a formal written policy prohibiting open-carry weapons on museum property (significant in that one site of the museum stands on downtown Austin's historic Congress Avenue, just south of the state capitol building where the law was signed into effect). Additionally, staff definitively acknowledged that as an institution, the museum supports mothers who choose to breastfeed in public, a policy that is also state law but that had never been discussed (State of Texas). Finally, in a part of the country that is not known for its acceptance of difference—Houston having made national headlines in 2016 for upholding transphobic bathroom use policies (Ura)—staff decided to install a single-user and gender-neutral bathroom as part of a downtown building renovation project later in the year.

It can, of course, be problematic to ascribe therapeutic value to a work of art; religious overtones and complicated power dynamics immediately come to mind. But consider, for a moment, a simple precept of therapy, as in, a method of emotional healing practiced by therapists: before any work can be done, there must be a safe space to do it in. *Mothernism*, as an art installation, also applies. As an artist and a mother, not finding a safe space to be both in the art world, Lise Haller Baggesen set about to create a place where she was welcome. Similarly, empowered by the knowledge that a safe space was *defined*, employees at all levels within the museum worked to make the whole institution safer and more inclusive to all.

When *Mothernism* finally arrived in Austin, adults and children alike used the exhibition space with enthusiasm (Fig. 4). A group of local artist mothers gathered with their families to read and breastfeed in the tent. Some visitors took naps and used the space for rejuvenation. Museum docents shared memories of what it meant to be a woman in the 1970s disco-era. Young artists regularly held meetings on the beanbag chairs and yoga balls, and the museum's Teen Council elected to spend free time in this space whenever possible. And in a heartwarming indication of the exhibition's positive and lasting effects,

in August 2016 at the eighth annual Teen Convening conference held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (a conference that brings together the best teen museum educational programs in the country), *Motherism* was offered up by two members of The Contemporary Austin's Teen Council as a representation of the museum. They presented *Motherism* as their favourite exhibition, largely because of the safe space for dynamic and memorable conversation that the installation afforded, and, as they described, because of the teens' close relationship with their own mothers.



Figure 4. Lise Haller Baggesen, *Motherism*, 2013–ongoing. Audio-installation. Dimensions variable. Total running time: 75:00. Installation view (in action), Lise Haller Baggesen: *Motherism*, The Contemporary Austin – Gatehouse Gallery at the Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park at Laguna Gloria, 2016. Artwork © Lise Haller Baggesen. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Brian Fitzsimmons.

Ultimately, the value in considering the mother-artist lies in the reminder of a feminist ethics of care. To care is to encourage growth and to nurture; to allow for messy mistakes and to keep going; to return to a conversation that never lands in the same place twice. As an unchilded / spirit-sister / nonbiological mother, the way that I deeply identify with *Motherism* is as a curator from the very root of the word: to care for, to nurture, to help grow. As Baggesen herself argues, “ideally, mothers

and curators operate in similar ways by providing space and nourishment for those in their care to learn and grow” (qtd. in “Lise Haller Baggesen’s Disco Feminism”). In this role, I can establish a feminist ethics of care on both the personal and political level, and work to enact it within the contemporary art institution. I am indebted to Baggesen’s writing and art for its ability—by its sheer presence—to spark conversations, ignite change, and empower those who experience it to stand up for equality and care in our spheres of influence. For all of these reasons, and many more, I count *Mothernism* as a success. I look forward to its future effects and will continue to do my part to keep filling and reshaping the mother-shaped hole in contemporary art discourse.

Endnotes

1. There are, of course, some examples, but few: Kiki Smith’s excreting and birthing women; Catherine Opie’s graphic self-portraits with her child held to her mutilated body; Rineke Dijkstra’s cool, detached depictions of women just after childbirth. I would love to see the Guerrilla Girls tackle this subject.
2. The Danish artist Lise Haller Baggesen was born 1969 in Aarhus, Denmark, and is based in Chicago, Illinois.
3. *Mothernism* (italicized) is, interchangeably, an exhibition created by Baggesen in 2013, which continues to have many different iterations; a collection of essays, published as a book in 2014; and a philosophy of being, which I will elaborate on throughout this essay. A Mothernist is someone who values motherhood, mothering, maternal creativity, and an ethics of care, and works towards positive change for mothers of all ages, races, genders, and beliefs.
4. Portions of this essay were originally written for and published in The Contemporary Austin’s Winter/Spring 2016 exhibition guide, in conjunction with the exhibition Lise Haller Baggesen: *Mothernism*, which was on view at The Contemporary Austin’s Gatehouse Gallery at the Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park at Laguna Gloria in Austin, Texas from 13 February through 22 May 2016. I am grateful to Louis Grachos, The Contemporary Austin’s executive director and CEO; Heather Pesanti, chief curator; as well as the entire museum staff for their support and encouragement of all things *Mothernism*.

5. I first encountered *Motherism* in 2014 through Lise's writing. Living in Chicago at the time, in my job coordinating catalogue production at a local gallery, I worked regularly with the design team Sonnenzimmer (Nadine Nakanishi and Nick Butcher), who were also independently laying out the *Motherism* book. They connected me with publisher Caroline Picard who needed copy editors for the text, and thus began one of the most enjoyable and enlightening editing experiences I have had to-date, each page filled with passionate, lyrical prose, and jam-packed with literary, artistic, and pop culture references.
6. As a testament to Baggesen's commitment to community engagement, social discourse, and a research-based practice, *Motherism* has traveled extensively since 2013, with iterations at Ordinary Projects, Chicago; Mana Contemporary, Chicago; Vox Populi, Philadelphia; PrintRoom, Rotterdam; the Elmhurst Art Museum, Illinois; A.I.R. Gallery, New York; and The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York. Baggesen's project spawned the curatorial suite "3AM Maternal" for Vox Populi, and *Motherism* has been presented at conferences internationally, including "The Motherists," a conference held in various locations throughout Rotterdam in June 2015 in collaboration with the Dutch artist and research group m/other voices; the June 2015 conference "Motherhood and Creative Practice" held at London South Bank University; a lecture at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, also in June 2015. In May 2016, the installation served as "mother-ship" for the conference "Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene" at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.
7. Baggesen studied at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam from 1996 to 1997 with Belgian figurative painter Luc Tuymans, and in 2002, she was awarded the Royal Award for painting by the Royal Palace Amsterdam.
8. Baggesen worked on this text in the months leading up to the installation in Austin and recorded it onsite in February 2016. The audio guide was released to the public on 8 March 2016, International Women's Day. The audio recordings, as well as the text, can be found on The Contemporary Austin's website.
9. Whether or not many other, earlier kinds of art—Dada performances of the 1920s or Happenings of the 1970s, for instance—

also fall into this broad category is a question for another time (see Bishop).

10. The concept of “social practice” carries enough weight in Chicago that in 2014, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago started an imprint titled the *Chicago Social Practice History Series*, distributed by the University of Chicago Press and edited by Mary Jane Jacob and Kate Zeller. There are currently five volumes, on varying themes.
11. Stratton taught the class “Party as Form” at the Ox-Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, Michigan, in the summers of 2013 and 2014. Most recently the William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Stratton was the founder and former executive director of Threewalls, a Chicago-based nonprofit arts organization.
12. Aptly, of Baggesen’s work that has since followed *Mothernism*, titled *Hatorade Retrograde*, critic Matt Morris wrote for *Artforum* that her futuristic installation was “as if the world had fallen apart but the party persisted.”
13. The Oak Park Suburban was an independent, internationally recognized artist exhibition space in a small building outside of Grabner and Killiam’s former home, with a tentlike footprint of only 8 by 10 feet. In 2015, the Suburban was relocated with Grabner and Killiam to a new configuration in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Since 2009, Grabner and Killiam have also run the Poor Farm, an exhibition space in Little Wolf, Wisconsin, and Poor Farm Press is their publishing imprint (which co-published *Mothernism* with Green Lantern Press, run by Caroline Picard in Chicago).
14. Margaretta Jolly devotes a fascinating chapter to feminist acts of letter writing and webs of communication in the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp (113–28). Of the Occupy movement, Monica Westin and Rich Zito remind us that the symbolic staging of a tent in a public place remains within the U.S. First Amendment rights; however, it is the act of living inside the tent that can be countered by the state, and this act of domesticity resulted in the dispersal of the movement from Zuccotti Park.
15. Camille Morineau illustrates that with this work, Niki de Saint Phalle “took possession of public space” in the form of “a new type of sculpture, the body-house” (255). She would go on to construct

other monumental works with orifices for entryways, including *The Golem (Le Golem)*, 1972, in Jerusalem, with multiple red tongues that double as children's slides, and a massive sculpture park in Tuscany called *Tarot Garden*, 1979–2002, which was filled with humanoid buildings to be explored, inside and out.

16. Even before Baggesen moved to Chicago, however, another injustice started her on the path to creating this feminist project: “My gallery dumped me when I was seven months pregnant with my second child. It was almost like Oscar Wilde—one is a tragedy but two is unacceptable.... It’s assumed that as soon as the baby moves in, your talent moves out” (qtd. in “Q+A” 213).
17. *The Argonauts* won the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award. The publication of this remarkable book (Nelson’s ninth) directly preceded Nelson’s MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 2016.

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