

Maternal Matters: The Political Aesthetic of Lena Šimić

I think about the daily routines mothers are expected to maintain. I think about parents who only want what's best for their kids. I think about the impossible expectations placed on mothers. I feel trapped. I feel out of the game. I feel like an outsider. It feels good (Šimić from *Contemplation Time* 2007)

The current noisy political and public debate which circulates around the maternal body is fraught and contradictory. Whilst maternity has never been so visible in popular culture, consider for example celebrity motherhood, the imagery available to communicate maternal experience is limited and only particular versions of maternal experience are visible and communicable. Since 2003 the Croatian born, Liverpool based, performance artist Lena Šimić has produced an extraordinary body of artistic work which, drawing on a history of feminist performance art, offers an alternative to the hegemony of contemporary representations of the maternal and captures something of the ambivalence peculiar to maternal experience. In what follows, I will touch briefly on three of Šimić's recent projects, *Medea/Mothers' Clothes* (2003) *Contemplation Time: A Document of Maternity Leave* (2007-2008) and *Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić* (March 2008).

Medea/Mothers' Clothes (2004) is a 30 minutes long solo performance which includes a slide show, audio-visual footage and live action. Medea is the archetypal anti-mother of Greek Myth who revenges her betrayal by her husband by murdering their young children. It may seem odd that Šimić employs this murderous figure to explore the shared experiences of motherhood in the two Liverpool toddler groups she attends with her small children. However, for Šimić , the mythic Medea is a means of interrogating, translating and giving voice too the unspoken and hidden aspects of maternal experience: the drudgery and repetitious nature of childcare, the anxiety, the boredom and tiredness, the bitching and the judgements, the internalised rage. As Šimić writes:

Each mother tries to cover up her insecurity by presenting herself in the most positive light within the communal toddler group environment. The secrets about the 'real' experience of motherhood soon start emerging through intimate

confessions, chats and teas. A new darker side of motherhood slowly seeps out
(Šimić , forthcoming)

Šimić stages *Medea* with objects, texts and images from the toddler group bringing this ancient Greek play into a startling dialogue with these working class Liverpool mothers: Indeed, her first performance of *Medea/Mothers Clothes* is for the toddler group mothers. A central element of performance of *Medea/Mothers Clothes* is Šimić 's washing of clothes given to her by the mother's, wringing them out and hanging them to dry. There is something terrible about the endless cycle of maternal labour that repeated scenes of hand washing invoke. But there is also an incredible intimacy in this activity, the washing of the mother's clothes an act of love. A metaphor for *Medea/Mothers Clothes* itself—a performance that is gifted to the mothers in the audience.



Untitled still, film footage *Medea/Mother's Clothes*

Medea/Mother's Clothes draws on experience as a means of rallying against the ideologies of 'ideal motherhood' which haunt maternal lives. As Šimić notes:

The performance draws on the figure Medea as a means of critiquing, trans-coding and rebelling against prescribed maternal ideals...that Mother that smiles

at us from *Boots* and *Mothercare* catalogues; who gazes at us from NHS education leaflets about pregnancy, birth and parenthood

Contemplation Time: A Document of Maternity Leave (2007-2008) consists of the written and visual documentation of 32 visits by Šimić and her newborn baby, Sid, to a local park and a specific park bench between 5 July 2007 and 27 April 2008. During these visits Šimić , in her words, `performs or gets baby Sid to perform` for the camera. This notion of motherhood as performance is central to Šimić 's understanding and development of a maternal aesthetic. Everyday motherhood restaged as a performance which might reveal maternal truths and secrets: the codes, structures and relations of power at stake. This `mimicry` of real maternal practices is one of Šimić 's central critical strategies. In *Contemplation Time* this performance of maternity, reveals that motherhood is never a property but always a relation between subjects: a relation between Lena, Sid, the camera, the bench, pram, props. Maternity is a process and a practice which is not distinct from the work of the artist, but is on the contrary enabling of life and art. Thus Šimić describes the visits to the park as `the artistic process of me getting on with my life as a mother and as an artist', a sentence which like so many of Šimić 's is both transparent and a loaded political statement—a statement of will : *I will be both a mother and an artist, I am artist-mother.*



Untitled photograph from 'Contemplation Time'

Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić was staged in March 2008 as a part of MAP Live event at Source Café in Carlisle. It was composed of a live art performance in which Šimić went through Sid's bedtime routine. As Šimić notes:

The live action on stage consisted of performing the daily routine with Sid: bathing, dressing, feeding, laying down to sleep. This very banal everyday action was heightened through its staging. My movements on stage were quite sharp, neat and timed. Props were arranged and the performance space was highly organized. Additionally, the action was complemented by audio-visual footage: extracts from my diary and photographs from my walks in the park.



Untitled photograph from in publicity still for *Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić* (2008)

Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić (2008) draws for inspiration on a live art performance by Lea Lublin (1929-1999), a Paris based conceptual artist who exhibited a piece called *Mon Fils* in May 1968, in which she and her seven-month-old son Nicholas moved into the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Like Lublin, Šimić's aim is to trouble private/public binaries. As the title of this piece, 'Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić' (2008) suggests, this is a political aesthetic in which the woman-mother is a public subject, she refuses to be privatised (see Tyler, 2009). Šimić's work is concerned with what within maternal experience resists capitalization. In this respect her work is concerned with the political potentiality of the maternal as the unmarketable.

Šimić called her two Sid projects 'Maternal Matters' concerned as they are with the everyday, routine and often banal aspects of maternal labour. 'Maternal Matters' has other resonances. 'Matter' derives from the Latin *mater* meaning origin and of course mother. *To matter* is to take form, to become *palpable*. In the 1970s the philosopher

Luce Irigaray traced the disavowal of what she termed `mother-matter` within the history of European thought and representation. Irigaray called for a revolution to challenge this foundational matricide, a representational insurrection which would transform the relationship between matter and form, so that mother-matter might come to matter. Through careful staging, performance, figuration and representation Šimić forces a critical valuation of the maternal--she makes it matter: `the elevation of the domestic activity from its everyday routine to its stage presence... This is my call for adventure'. *Maternal Matters!*

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