

ISEA2024 submission

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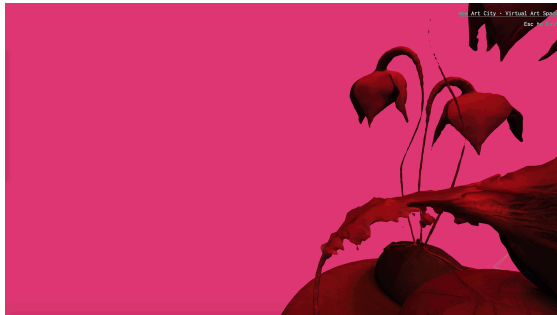
THE POSTMOTHER MANIFESTO
VIRTUAL TEXTURAL ASSEMBLAGE
New Art City screen capture 01
(Joy, 2023)

Abstract

From Lilith to Mary, the monstrous to the virtuous; the mother image is an enduring cultural artifact that reifies heteronormative systems of care and mothering. Many within, and without, these systems- namely the non-compliant, are rendered alien-other and in-turn denied interdependent modes of care. This creative practice research project offers sci-fi speculations of care that neuroqueer the mother image, imagining collective care and kin making, beyond the mother.

A photographic (expanded) research method that begins with material/textural soft sculptures and moves through to virtual, experiential outcomes will be used to imagine, propose, and speculate. This creative research defines and explores the mother image and the cyborg-mother; specifically, as represented in contemporary science-fiction film. In response, creative outputs propose divergent soft-cyborg speculations for systemic multi-species care; *postmother*.

Working with an autoethnographic approach, as a neuroqueer mother/child and underpinned by a cripp/queer/feminist manifesto-as-method, this research and resultant soft-cyborg imaginings reclaim the cyborg as a neuroqueer site of generative speculation. Beginning with Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, this research aims to propose technologically mediated modes of care for non-compliant bodies; *meaningfully holding our othered, alien bodies and our more-than-human kin*.



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New Art City screen capture 02
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Keywords

Neuroqueer, neurodivergence, Autism, queer, posthuman, xenofeminist, manifesto, kin, kin making, maternal care, mother, mother image, ethics of care, multi-species care, cyborg, soft-cyborg, sci-fi, technology.

Introduction

The personal is political. (Hanisch. 1969)

This creative research has emerged from a deep sense of isolation and alienation.

Soft-sculptural, biomorphic creatures that travel with me into our future, virtual worlds are the offspring birthed from this creative enquiry. These creative offspring are *acts of care* and speculations for soft-tech- soothing my past and future selves, disrupting, and queering technologically mediated, dominant grey worlds. This creative research offers modes of divergent, maternal care for non-compliant bodies.

My entry point to this creative enquiry is my own bodymind as an Autistic, queer, mother and child. Tracing threads of collective experience highlights that my isolation and alienation is a shared Autistic experience. This alienation is more than just a feeling, more than an imagining, but quantified and qualified by numerous studies into Autistic experiences, interrogated further as I move through this research. Autistic and queer beings assigned-female-at-birth, existing in a producing-mother-body experience a very specific, multi-dimensional, material form of social policing, exclusion, and isolation. Among autism community advocates, Autistic activists, and academics there are two key approaches that attempt to overcome Autistic exclusion and isolation. The first is to educate and advocate; asking (begging) our overculture (the cultural requirements that bear down upon us) to be kinder and make space for Autistic difference. The second is to stand firm in our alienation, claiming that space as a site of generative resistance; to cripp, queer, hack and demand space for divergent modes of being.

This creative practice-led, photographic (expanded) research project joyfully and defiantly takes this second approach - surrendering to this alienation we imagine past the edges of normative systems of care. Within our social order to care and to nurture- *as mother*, has been the dominant mode of care, and care taking labour. This work moves beyond maternal care and motherhood, thinking

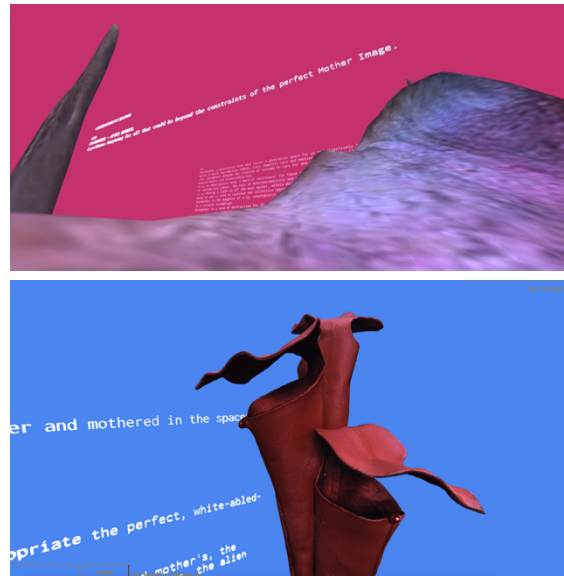
through what could possibly be birthed after mother. My position is that mother, mothering and maternal care, within dominant systems, does not serve all of us, and in many cases causes harm. Holding this position, I stand with many queer and feminist theorists that have come before me. With *S&F* speculation, feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway and fantasy/science fiction writer Ursula K Le Guin have proposed familial family structures for multi-species care that move past the nuclear family and mother archetype.

So, make kin, not babies!. (Haraway. 103. 2016)

Thinking with and past mother, I begin with world building fiction; specifically, with the contemporary film genre of science-fiction. Threading this fiction through to my autoethnographic approach, as a Neuroqueer (Autistic and queer) mother/child and underpinned by a *crip/queer/feminist manifesto-as-method*, this research will interrogate the mother image and modes of maternal care, as represented in contemporary science-fiction films. In response, creative outputs will propose divergent soft-cyborg speculations for systemic multi-species care; *postmother*.

These soft-cyborg imaginings hold the cyborg as a neuroqueer site of generative speculation; imagining technologically mediated methods to reconfigure modes of care and reproduction. Neuroqueer(ing) is a conscious divergence from the neuronormative, and, in turn heteronormative systems; it is, as defined by Autistic academic Dr. Nick Walker ‘intentional non-compliance with the demands of normative performance’ (Walker, 2021, 297).

In disrupting the neuronormative, the neuroqueer are made kin with the xenofeminist (Cuboniks, 2015), occupying ‘site(s) of radical recomposition’, as framed by Helen Hester in her *Xenofeminist* writings (Hester, 2018, 1). This kin making becomes intentional intervention into and of, heteronormative care and reproduction. Within normative modes of care and reproduction, some are captured within, and others excluded from; both are rendered alien-other. Cyborg as kin with the othered body, and as a site for queer/feminist/posthuman political resistance has been described by Haraway in her 1991 book- *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway, 1991). *Armed with Haraway’s manifesto, I step out into an imaginary future...*



THE POSTMOTHER MANIFESTO
VIRTUAL TEXTURAL ASSEMBLAGE
New Art City screen capture 03 & 04
(Joy, 2023)

Description

This creative enquiry is a thought experiment; an imagining for technological modes of maternal care, a dreaming for all that could possibly come after the mother image. This unfolding research will seek to frame and define the mother image and question-where are the systems of maternal care for the mothers? Where is the compassionate release for bio-mothers? Or the maternal care for the not-mothers? Where are the frameworks of care for non-compliant bodies- for the crip and the queer? The cyborg, as ‘critters in a queer litter’ (Haraway. 2016. 105), has been deployed as motif, alien-mother-archetype and theoretical position for an imagining, post mother. More than simply meaning bodily intervention, the cybernetic organism represents a slippage and breeching of borders; a feedback loop, transversing bodies and overcoming boundaries. The cybernetic organism as a theoretical position, continues to be bought into focus through feminist writings, threading stitches to the whispery borders of the reproducing human body, and the non-compliant bodymind.

Non-compliant bodies and cyber/techno-feminists think with and through Haraway’s manifesto, for example the 2015 *Xenofeminist Manifesto* by collective Laboria Cubonicks. As a child of my feminist/posthuman mothers, I have taken up this call and have begun to craft an offspring manifesto. This manifesto, titled *The Postmother Manifesto*, is a living and evolving work; unfolding, contracting and expanding as I/we move through this research. The usage of ‘post’ within this work, as with the posthuman, is not an erasure of mother, but a speculation for what could come after the perfect mother image, so central to our conceptions and creation of maternal care and mother. The manifesto contains evolving definitions

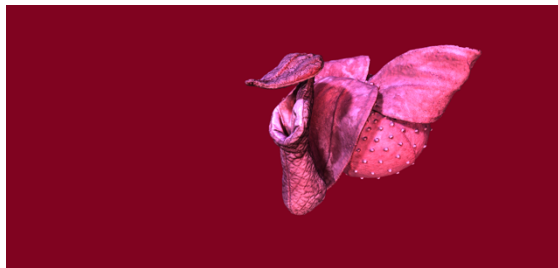
and actions, guiding and shaping this research, and in turn being shaped and guided by the research. The manifesto is a key research method and evolving creative artifact, existing as a live virtual world one can move through.

Manifesto As Method

Manifestos ... ; question the system; invent new language; impose the future; (are) theatrical: performed, screamed. (!!)
(Szulc, 2023, 22:59)

Beginning with Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, it is fitting that this creative enquiry should take the form, in part, of a manifesto. The manifesto has a long and complex history, created and deployed by those held in the social periphery, used by both the left, the right and many in between. Significantly, however, the manifesto has long been a tool for the queer and the feminist, agitating for progressive social change and advocating for utopic counterpublics.

A public is many things; it is a textural assemblage, a story threaded between the speaker and witness group. A public, distinct from the public, is a communication feedback loop, 'a space of discourse organised by nothing other than discourse itself' (Warner, 50, 2002) the manifesto



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then, becomes a methodology of polemic, textural assemblage. The queer/feminist manifesto is textural agitation, demanding the creation of counterpublics, and/or the disruption of publics. Postmothering is to agitate for counterpublic-collective-care, the manifesto then, is the perfect point of departure for this creative disruption. To write a manifesto is to participate symbolically in a history of struggle against dominant forces; it is to link one's voice to the countless voices of previous revolutionary conflicts. (Lyon, 1999, 4)

I have many manifesto ancestors, mothers and siblings, having been held by Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto and the 1991 Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century by collective VNX Matrix; as 'terminators of moral code' (VNX Matrix, 1991) I have moved through their slime, towards the destruction of puritanical maternal codes.

This work and myself have been deeply nurtured by the manifestary writings of Jack Halberstam,

specifically *The Queer Art of Failure* published in 2011:

...we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate.

(Halberstam. 2011.110)

And so, along the path of this creative enquiry a post-mothering manifesto, as both guiding method and unfolding creative artifact has began. The Postmother Manifesto draws heavily on the 2015 Xenofeminist Manifesto, by collective Laboria Cubonicks and the 2019 Crip Technoscience Manifesto by Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch. Both pieces are beautifully aggressive, fighting for the rights of alien, non-compliant bodies. Both advocate for the hacking and co-opting of technologies for personal and collective care and emancipation. The Xenofeminist Manifesto is delivered through a feminist lens calling for the co-opting of reproductive technologies for maternal emancipation. The Crip Technoscience Manifesto was deeply moving, situated in a crip-queer framework, calling for 'imagining the transformative possibilities for crip hacking, coding, and making as frictional access practices' (Hamraie & Fritsch. 2019. 5.), rupturing borders and holding othered bodies.

Seeking to 'rupture' and queer screen production practices (Taylor, et al. 2023), a predominantly Melbourne based filmmaking collective have used manifesto-as-method in their short film thesis *A mani-pedi-anti-counter-FESTO*, the work was created 'both with, and as, a manifesto' (Taylor. Et al. 2022). Working with this sibling approach, I have used the manifesto as a method. The body of my manifesto is declarative, then concludes with a series of actions. These actions then guide my specific methods of creative praxis and form the framework for this research.

The Postmother Manifesto constitutes the beginnings of my first creative artifact birthed from this research. The manifesto, is encountered in the virtual, in New Art City, a virtual world platform. The manifesto will impact and be impacted by this research, being an evolving, virtual textural assemblage. Encountered in the virtual, the words of the manifesto will create a textural assemblage and repeated birth with each encounter.

The manifesto begins with prose. In these words, I sought to create a textural punctum, if there could ever be such a thing. These pricks and words then slide through to the body of the manifesto; a series of declarative statements defining what postmother and postmothering is and could be. This collection of declarations are the orphan-grandchild of Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, and lean heavily on my tech-feminist mothers, created as a companion piece and offspring to the Xenofeminist Manifesto and Crip Techno Science Manifesto.

With the intention to move beyond text and to agitate for material change the manifesto ends with a series of actions, guided by the postmother declarations. These actions are intentionally open, allowing for individuated interpretation and methods, for any being to explore and play with. Guided by these open actions and working from my own practice and research focus, I have created a series of closed or focused actions, noting specific methods for each action. Each action has been used to create my research plan, mapping actions to my research timeline. We are composting the old and birthing the new, creating new ways of being mother and mothered. As I/we/you/us move through this research and manifesto we are becoming both mother and mothered, held and released, contracting and expanding. Mother and mothered...

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