

# Mother's Milk

Essay by Josephine Mead

The mouth connects us to ongoing modes of attachment. *Each modality of oral expression [...] — of the voiced and the unvoiced, the sounded and the gestured—twists and turns the mouth to register the extreme breadth of our vitality.*\*1 Glands are organs that can release a substance. We all move through modes of storage and release throughout our lives. We build and we leak. We collect and we receive. Surely there is a relation between my own mouth and my mammary glands? *Care*, like *mothering*, manifests in many guises. There is no set way to mother and maternal offerings can expound without acts of birthing. To drink until your heart is content; to ruminate in milky waters. Artists are like mammary glands. We are in constant modes of filling and decanting. Works can pour without restraint, creating a torrent. Sometimes, all the works dry up. Today I fill with words from others; *written colostrum*, the first form of milk.

We had offers of donated breastmilk for this exhibition. I learnt about what it means to clarify milk: *to remove solid matter; to make an idea clear, solid, intelligible*. Milk has a rather limited shelf life, but its components, if separated, can last longer and can be used in a variety of ways. We have been moving through modes of clarification; birthing a show and birthing a gallery. Coming back to language, I wonder, to what extent is a mother an author? How are we read, marked and written? Can we write the body of the self into the body of another? Sheila Heti suggests, *if my desire is to write, and for the writing to defend, and for the defence to really live—not for just one day, but a thousand days, [...] that is no less viable a human aspiration than having a child with your mind set on eternity. Art is eternity backwards. Art is written for one's ancestors [...] Children are eternity forwards. [...] The farther back in time I can go, the deeper into eternity I feel I can pierce.*\*2 The act of mothering can exist without ever having giving birth.

In ancient myth, *Greek women took their bloody revenge [...] The ancient belief, which persisted for centuries, that mother's milk was transformed blood, reinforces this image.*\*3 We are capable of bloody transference. Our artworks connect via a system of veins, tubes that form part of the circulatory system. Sometimes the course runs smoothly, sometimes there is a rupture. Siri Hustvedt proposes that, *the life and the work of every artist [is] entwined, but all forms of representation partake of distance. The artist sees the object unfold, a thing that rises out of you, is related to you, but is not you either. And it is precisely the distance, the ultimate otherness of the artwork that provides relief and satisfaction, during the process of creating it. Art is the "I" that is also "not-I." It is "the alien familiar."* [...] *In this way all art is the portrait of a relationship.*\*4

Brandon LaBelle follows *our primary relationship to the mother, and the experiences of breast-feeding—which also relate to experiences of affection, such as cuddling and caressing, as well as types of oral expression, that of kissing, nose-touching, smiling, etc—it is clear that the mouth performs a vital channel for developing connection between people and things and, importantly, for often "holding onto" the loved object. The mouth is a type of cradle, an active container for capturing and prolonging the love relationship, and all such intimacies.* To keep it in the mouth. *Experiences of love are deeply connected to an oral drive, an oral wish, and the range of oral behaviours that dramatically reveal the ways in which the world passes across our lips. Relating to the world as well as to others, is radically shaped by these oral experiences, whether in the form of verbal language or in acts of tasting, chewing, and ingesting: a constellation of oral gestures by which self and other are brought into relation. Although to incorporate the loved object into oneself—that primary oral drive—also runs the risk of devouring, endangering, or even destroying it. One might bite too hard or even tear apart.*\*5 In Noriko Nakamura's, *Maternal Chaos*, she marks the land as body and the body as land. *I felt like my social role as a mother was overtaking my identity, at the same time, I worried this sexual drive might take over my identity as a mother.*\*6 We are never far from being torn, but our mouths are always capable of biting back.

*Mother* can be used, as a term, to denote the starting of an institution. We can move through different modes of mothering: mothering ourselves, and others, and even our own mothers. Lucy Foster's, *third eye*, translates [...] *the feeling of despair of being left alone without her. [...] It took years of her illness, understanding how to be still with her and nurture her needs... to be the mother she needed at times. At the same time I was nurturing this attachment inside of me, by continuing to make work that questioned my identity as a daughter and a woman. It became a beautiful exchange of care and friendship; the ties to identity between mother and daughter began to dissolve and I saw her as another human being who suffers and dies and goes back to the earth just as we all do.*\*7 The eye becomes a shutter; the shutter becomes an eye; to mother one's mother. Through focused modes of looking we can start to see through grief. To share the work becomes a gesture of nourishment and generosity to the viewer. We drink the artwork in. Most people will have an opinion on when to stop breast-feeding. Grief will not necessarily have an end point. The milky waters of grief are non-linear. There are many tributaries. Often, to yield to growth, we must first yield to grief.

Coming back to motions of the mouth; LaBelle notes that, *the mouth continually unsettles the limits of embodiment.*\*8 Birth and death can be written as an entry and an exit, but that seems too simplified, too exact. *The mouth is a vessel piloting numerous utterances and potent silences, [...] as to condition and influence acts of coming out as well as going in; of entries and exists, and the ways in which we cross boundaries or reinforce their presence; the mouth is first and foremost a device for modulating the limits of the body.*\*9

An invitation to open up;

to fill one's mouth with

*milk.*



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## Mother's Milk

Noriko Nakamura, Lucy Foster & Kirby Casilli

Curated by Brodie Kokkinos & Josephine Mead

February 17 - March 3 2022

Performance by Kirby Casilli, Thursday  
17 February, 7.30pm.

Mother's Milk is a testament to and examination of the power of maternal structures— a rumination on notions of mother's milk.

*Mother's Milk can nourish, fill, leak, sustain, poison & run out. Mother's Milk speaks to care and softness but also to the struggles of love. What does it feel like to fully love another being? What sacrifices do we make to give and receive love? Care, like mothering, can manifest in many guises. There is no set way to mother and one can give maternal offerings without birthing. Some of us will never experience maternal love. Some of us will never be able to acknowledge how hard it was for our mother's to show up and express love. Some of us will fail in giving love. One thing remains clear, there are always possibilities for alternative modes of nourishment.*

Essay References:

\*1 *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*, François J. Bonnet, 2016, p.15.

\*2 *Motherhood*, Sheila Heti, 2018, p.120.

\*3 *Mothers, Fathers, and Others*, Siri Hustvedt, 2021, p.23.

\*4 *Mothers, Fathers, and Others*, Siri Hustvedt, 2021, p.221.

\*5 *Mothers, Fathers, and Others*, Siri Hustvedt, 2021, p.221.

\*6 *Maternal Chaos*, Noriko Nakamura, 2021, digital video, 7 min.

\*7 Written email correspondence with Lucy Foster, 2022.

\*8 *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*, François J. Bonnet, 2016, p.2.

\*9 *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*, François J. Bonnet, 2016, p.8.

This exhibition has been kindly supported by Yarra City Arts, Centre for Projection Art & Melbourne Gin Company.

Gallery Hours:  
Thursday - Saturday, 12-6pm

MILK is situated on Wurundjeri woi-wurrung Country.  
Always was, Always will be, Aboriginal Land.

