

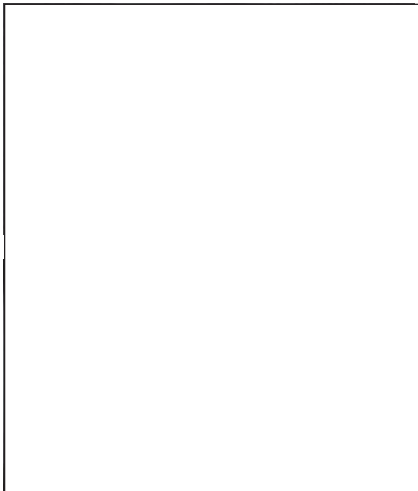
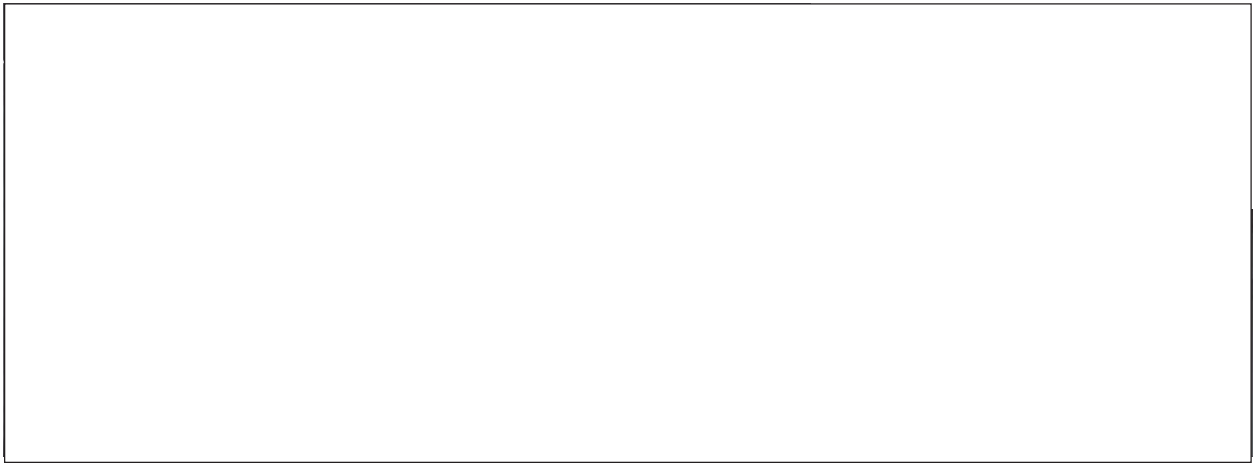
Memory Work, Trauma and the Maternal

Andrea Liss

Traumatic events are traditionally considered to be catastrophic world events such as natural disasters and war. Feminist psychoanalyst Laura S. Brown opened up this normalised concept of trauma, largely associated with men's history, to acknowledge the different states of trauma and their after-effects as they bear on women. Brown's work with women insightfully suggests that women experience traumatic events through memories not only of the large historical events but also in the intimate and non-monumental moments of the everyday.¹ It is the connections between the two which for women create the realms of what is traditionally referred to as history. In this essay I discuss (and metaphorically caress) Israeli artist Maya Zack's film *Mother Economy* (2007) and American artist Kristine Diekman's video *M for Mommy* (2008). Each work plays out different aspects of traumatic history and memory through the form of a woman, or women, as uneasy or absent players in the performance of both intimate and historical events. The insistent, yet obliquely referenced, subject in Zack's *Mother Economy* is the European Holocaust during World War Two and Jewish women's experiences of survival of the events. Diekman's

M for Mommy addresses infanticide but is underscored with the artist coming to an understanding of her mother's fraught relationship to motherhood. Each artist employs highly imaginative and complex visual strategies to attempt to give a sense of the traumas and their attendant post-memories experienced by the women who are metaphorically represented in each story.

Mother Economy majestically describes a surreal realm – part domestic and part research laboratory – in which a lone figure of a mother carefully performs household work and more obscure office work. In the background a radio broadcasts news of the Third Reich. The light in her sealed environment comes from above, casting dramatic and unearthly light into her workspaces. Her meticulous tasks convey a sinister foreboding: stranger still, they are imbued with deep sensuality. The eerie quality of the mother's work is punctuated by precisely orchestrated corresponding sounds of distress.² Powerful among these image and sound correlations is the first scene of *Mother Economy* in which the mother, seen from above, works at a sewing machine forming patterns that look like a map made from flesh. The

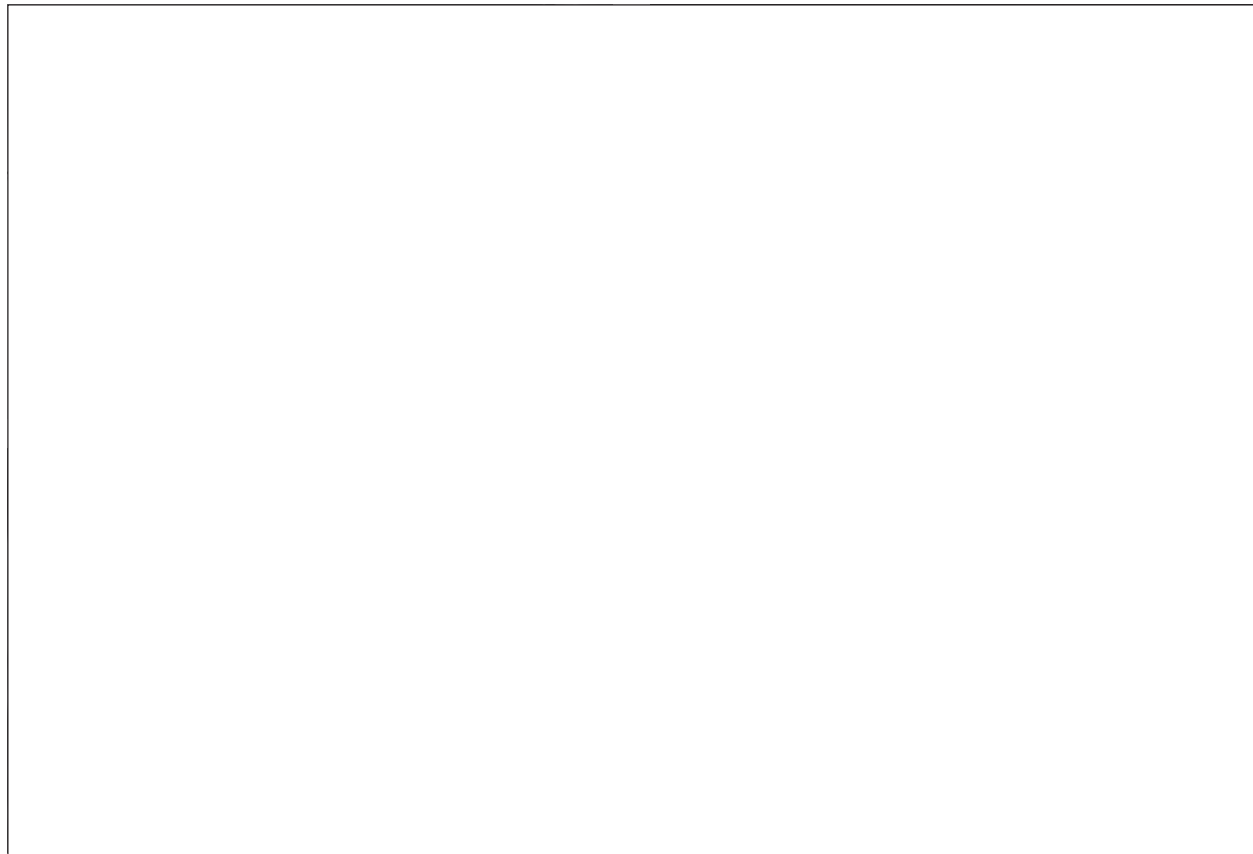


Film stills from Maya Zack *Mother Economy* (2007) film, 19:45 mins.

camera zooms in on this perverse pattern. The insistent sound of the needle hitting the fluid material echoes the firing of a machine gun. This shocking image and the corresponding violent sounds confuse the boundaries of time and space. A seemingly normal activity occurring in present time – working at a sewing machine – uncontrollably turns into an insistent memory from the past. Another emblematic image that marks the space of trauma is the lush, round *kugel* (noodle pudding) the mother has baked for an absent family. She carefully takes it out of the oven, and it becomes an ambiguous object of life and death in this context. She cuts into the deliciously sensuous pudding as if she were performing surgery, dividing it up into percentages of land conquered, of populations annihilated.

The camera slowly, repeatedly moves around the mother's space in a circular manner. As the camera surveys this space, it stops to zoom in on a drawing of two grammar-school aged boys and a younger girl. This drawing is placed near the radio broadcasting propaganda which typified the Third

Reich and masked its genocidal activities. This is one of the many repeated cinematic movements in *Mother Economy* that signals the presence of a traumatic representation. As viewers we are brought into the mother's uncanny space through her punctuated gaze at this drawing of the children. Her accentuated and repeated movements create a sense of psychological and bodily trauma, the metaphorical aftereffects of losing control of one's mind and body. Yet, the figure of the mother here has not been completely overtaken. She is constantly in motion. This maternal figure meticulously records indecipherable data in notebooks made of fragile tracing paper. The walls of her indeterminate space are covered with layers of larger drawings – tracings of her fervent markings to record and to remember. Her activities are carried out in slow motion, as of she is performing in a dream turned nightmare. Paradoxically, she is in control. She does not appear as a victim. Her activities are determined and purposeful. They carry their own internal logic. The



mother's lovingly precise and surreal home economics and her performance of rituals associated with maternal order mark and mock the unseen yet menacingly felt outside world of inhumane statistics and genocidal order.

Cutting across the multitude of familiar documentary images that depict Holocaust victims in all stages of dehumanisation, the image of this mother powerfully implies survival and self-determination. Zack's depiction of the mother endows her with grace and sensuality, as if this woman actually existed. The mother's visual credibility within the realm of her surreal and traumatic space is a trace of Zack's projections about her grandmother, who she never met. Zack made *Mother Economy* after she went to Kosice, Slovakia, the site of her grandmother's abandoned house. The house was sealed off; she could not go inside. Her image of this Jewish woman in her film embraces and respectfully memorialises the lives of mothers and of women whose humanity was so horrifically ripped from them through deportation to extermination camps or by witnessing the brutal killing of their families in their own homes and in the camps by the Nazis.

Kristine Diekman's devastatingly beautiful experimental work, *M for Mommy*, subtly explores the taboo subject of infanticide and simultaneously creates a poetic form of apology to her mother. The video opens with Diekman repeatedly sketching and erasing the image of a plush couch, the one she remembers her mother curling into: her only retreat from what became her dread of daily domestic tasks. Moving gently from this scene drawn from the daughter's hand and heart, Diekman skillfully introduces increasingly menacing images and sounds into this piece. A male instructional voice describes how a magician uses a knot trick to fool his audience: a metaphor Diekman employs for the trauma that results from the shame and pain felt by mothers who are not able to fulfill their maternal roles, who urgently need psychological help, but seem to keep their families fooled. Another foreboding image is that of a hurricane ready to strike. It becomes the symbol for the confusion, fear and rage that mothers on the edge store up. A beautiful image of a mother tenderly, furtively covering her daughter from the impending storm is followed by the image of a hand slowly, methodically hitting an unpictured



Above and left: videostills from Kristine Diekman *M for Mommy* (2008) video 9:30 mins.

child. The mode of representation moves from a mimetic image in real time – the woman protecting her child – to one that is less distinct yet decidedly more frightening in its opaque depiction of reality. Immediately after this cruel and silent juxtaposition of images picturing mothers touching their children, the viewer is jolted by a woman's voice. It narrates the horrific incident of a real mother from the Midwest who killed her children on her front lawn with a pair of garden scissors. Diekman's perplexed voice follows this and it is filled with the horror that she feels from the gruesome and (im)possible reality of the event and with empathy for the children and the mother. She poignantly wonders and demands to know why mothers are made to feel that they must be selfless, mechanical and always respond to the child's supposedly insurmountable needs. Her queries cut to the bone of maternal guilt and its attendant sense of inadequacy and hopelessness: identifying the negative maternal emotions that lead to the unimaginable act of infanticide.³ Overlaying the horror of infanticide with her own mother's deep maternal frustrations, Diekman asks, **'Is it only within the realm of another different fantasy that I can pull my mother out of her maternal agitation and let her rest in my mind and heart?'**

With deep emotional power, tenderness, and artistic inventiveness, Diekman and Zack approach issues that have been and continue to be visually taboo. Holocaust images have become sensationalised and are overplayed in Western visual culture; infanticide, by contrast, remains a silenced visual space. These artists do not use documentary images to depict the experiences of trauma experienced by the women metaphorically alluded to in their stories. This is not to say that documentary modes of representation are not appropriate, if not imperative, for the articulation of traumatic events, especially when employed as uneasy witnesses to

these events.⁴ Yet Zack and Diekman have sought alternative forms for representing experiences and histories that have been made taboo and must be accounted for. Their wise decision not to use documentary material allows for revelations about the visual articulation of both atrocities. Working imaginatively, the artists allow traces and senses of the traumas to be realised and in some miniscule, yet imperative, way communicated. The events themselves resist any absolute historical understanding and in the case of infanticide, any simple moral judgment. The reenactment of events negates complete accessibility, especially as visual depictions of the real. Zack has taken on the ethical demand to bear witness to Jewish mothers' and women's experiences in the context of the European Holocaust of World War Two; and Diekman, the responsibility to expose the cultural neglect of women too desperate to carry on as mothers. Both artists bring to bear on their work a feminist approach to history, especially in their respect for the anti-monumental or everyday events within traumatic histories. In playing out and recreating intimate moments and taboo events, these artists create new potential spaces for different psychic connections between the women metaphorically depicted and the perceptions of them in viewers' minds.

Furthermore, the artists' works echo how survivors of traumatic events characteristically describe their experiences in a layered manner, in which memories overlap and intrude on the mental zones of the past and present. In instances of extreme traumatic dislocation, chronological time stands still; it is sealed away into a space where psychic time takes over.⁵ This description of psychic time shares deep visual affinity with the surreal and uncanny spatial environment Zack has created within *Mother Economy*. This articulation of traumatic time is also found in the way everyday objects turn into obscure sites of horror, as in Zack's depiction of the cloth at the sewing machine which transforms into human flesh.

In *M for Mommy*, Diekman's visual and sound strategies similarly suggest the intrusive overlapping of events in time. This occurs especially in her video when moments of action collide, as in the image of the mother gently covering her daughter with a blanket, which is followed by the deeply disturbing and discordant image of a hand abusing a child. The overall jarring juxtaposition of a gentle cadence with a foreboding sense of time in *M for Mommy* suggests both the relief and the terror of trauma when time stands still.

The artists' understanding of the acute difficulty of visually representing the horror of the events and the post-

traumatic memories experienced by women who survived or did not survive them is crucial. Zack's imaginative projection of a woman seized by the events of the Holocaust and Diekman's artistic approximations of the indeterminacies of infanticide – the immense differences in the realities of the mothers they represent and their cultural resonances notwithstanding – grant the women a feminist gift: the crucial acknowledgement of the unimaginable and often insurmountable pain, horror and sorrow they experienced.

Dr. Andrea Liss recently curated the exhibition *Reel Mothers: Film, Video Art and the Maternal* at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido. She is the author of *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota, 2009) and *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998). She is Professor of Art History and Cultural Theory at California State University San Marcos, where her teaching focuses on feminist art and theory, photographic theory and representations of history and memory.

Notes

1. Laura S. Brown 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma' *American Imago* 48:1 (Spring 1991) pp.119-33
2. Ophir Leibovitch is the music composer and Omri Levy-Jungle Sound is the sound designer for the film.
3. See Cheryl L. Meyer and Michelle Oberman *Mothers Who Kill Their Children, Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the "Prom Mom"* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) and Allison Morris and Ania Wilczynski 'Rocking the Cradle, Mothers who Kill Their Children' in Helen Birch (ed) *Moving Targets, Women, Murder and Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994)
4. See Andrea Liss *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)
5. The literature on trauma, history and its aftereffects is rich and immense. See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub *Testimony: Crises of Testimony in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) and Geoffrey H. Hartman *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) and see my bibliography in *Trespassing Through Shadows*