

Mother or Not: Parafictional Motherhood in the Work of Chelsea Knight

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“The parafictional mobilizes two contradictory assumptions in traditional understandings of aesthetic: that art reveals truth, and that art is a space apart from reality.”—Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Grabner 48)

“Why should I be limited to my own biography?”—Eleanor Antin (Broude, et al. 167)

Artists increasingly bring visibility to marginalized experiences of the human condition by offering us a different way of viewing and being in the world. The subject of motherhood offers a rich exploration for some artists who ask the question: what constitutes a mother? By representing maternity alongside nonmaternity, art projects can offer us a space in between to consider new, non-normative maternal categories. In moving image, artworks that present the artist playing a mother role for the camera yet reveal her own biography as a nonmother push against what this volume examines as the centrality of maternity as defining identity. Representations of non-normative maternal positions begin to do the hard work of unpacking maternal prejudices against nonmothers; they ask important questions about the power of art, truth, and subjectivity.

Chelsea Knight's *The Breath We Took* (2013)¹ wavers between documentary and fiction. Each layer of the film presents a story of a woman negotiating her identity while resisting norms of femininity, marriage, and motherhood. The work's formal arrangements include an amalgamation of unconvincing narratives and subjectivities interwoven with biographical information and documentary styles. For the viewer, *The Breath We Took* shares the anxious story of the artist becoming a mother while trying to accept her own mother's hatred of motherhood.

This essay traces *The Breath We Took*'s representations of maternal ambivalence, anxiety, and performativity. By utilizing the writing of Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Mark Nash on video, performance, and the quality of truth in art, I argue that *The Breath We Took* reveals useful, plural, and necessary entry points for the viewer within the massive category of the mother. Viewing the work fuels the following question: Can a maternal desire extend beyond the socially constructed necessity to have a baby to become a mother? I am not a mother and, therefore, wonder why Knight's performance of maternal anxieties and ambivalence offer useful points of engagement to me as a viewer and critic. As Eleanor Antin suggests in the quotation that opens this essay, a practice necessary for attaining a deeper knowing of self and place in the world is that of fantasizing you are someone else (qtd. in Broude et al. 167). Through this essay, I interrogate not only the representations of the layers within maternal intersubjectivity in Knight's work but specifically what is at stake when the artist raises issues of maternal desires by stepping away from the autobiographical, leaning outside the realm of the real, and into the realm of the parafictional.

Breath opens with a long shot of a suburban home, where tall symmetrical hedges line the yellow house's exterior. A neighbour's chimney pokes out in the top right corner of the frame. The melodic sound of a woman's voice carries the viewer into an interior scene,² where, moments later, a young girl around the age of nine slowly walks through a domestic space. She does not face us. Her red hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She is rather pale. The following cuts lead the viewer into rooms filled with framed portraits of babies, brides, and artwork, which capture several female generations in moments of traditional marriage and motherhood. One black-and-white photo depicts a young girl smiling. We then see her portrait on her wedding day.

At fifty-three seconds, the singing stops and a close-up of Knight's mother takes over the frame. Slowly shaking her head, the mother says, "I absolutely hated motherhood. I was not cut out to be a mother. There was nothing about it I enjoyed. Nothing." Almost immediately, *The Breath We Took* confronts the viewer with the mother's experience of hating motherhood. As the work continues, Knight dives deeper into her mother's feminist political consciousness. The viewer sees, and hears, the mother explain her position for navigating a complicated maternal subjectivity, one that negotiates love as well hate. In one scene, the mother exclaims to a female friend, "and interestingly enough I never wanted to have kids because I was totally opposed to raising kids in the nuclear family. I just thought that was the craziest thing in the world."

This essay is situated within this mother and adult daughter relationship and its tension. Throughout *Breath*, the subjects' conversations take place around the kitchen table, in the bedroom, and on the porch—domestic and intimate spaces that set the stage for examining social dynamics through body language, verbal, and nonverbal exchanges. In the opening scene, the mother sits with Knight and a friend at a dining table. Knight and her mother sit on the same side of the table, a dynamic that allows the viewer to read their expressions as constantly rubbing up against each other and creating friction. Knight's maternal anxiety runs parallel to her mother's ambivalence in *The Breath We Took* as both women unpack their experiences throughout the video. Whereas the mother has the benefit of historical distance, Knight negotiates maternal subjectivity in the (video's) present. The mother speaks with the benefit of hindsight and delivers her thoughts on motherhood directly and confidently. Knight's response to her mother's narrative here remains passive as her mother becomes more and more aggressive in her verbal delivery. The viewer observes a power play.

Knight displays uncomfortable and unpredictable emotions throughout the scenes with her mother. When her mother says, "It was probably the worst birth ever, and the reason you are an only child. And it's only a miracle I didn't hate you afterward," Knight stares into the camera, breaking the fourth wall. Her position during this difficult moment slips between indifferent and curious, problematic and fixed. She squirms, unsure how to react, if at all, to her mother's words. In

popularized cultural representations, daughters react against overbearing mothers who love too hard and too much. How do daughters cope with ambivalent mothers, where feelings of hate are outwardly manifested alongside love?

Knight's discomfort translates into her solo scenes. In one such scene, the camera cuts to a close up of her sitting in a wicker chair; a breeze blows through the curtains behind her, and there are sounds of children playing in the background. Gazing directly into the camera, she discloses, "I do feel like I'm acting sometimes or I'm doing a performance ... I don't know exactly what kind of performance it is." Is Knight performing as a mother? Is her daughter the little girl from the opening shots? Unsure in this moment, Knight searches for language to answer a question that we, the audience, did not hear. Her brow is furrowed. Her eyes squint slightly. Her tone is soft yet urgent. In stark contrast to her mother's cadence, Knight's expression of her own maternal position appears unclear, and I would argue, a little unbelievable.

The child from the opening scene gives us a clue into Knight's performance and representations of truth. We come to know her as Pemma. Pemma and Knight display a close bond, a representation of a mother-daughter connection. Although Knight and Pemma share many intimate moments throughout *Breath*, in fact, Knight is not a mother, and Pemma is a hired actor. In this scene, Knight continues to shift in her seat and declares to the viewer that her anxiety is located within the action of becoming a mother or birthing a baby. Pemma's birth is brought up again towards the end of the work, where it is Pemma who recites to Knight, "I remember my birth. I remember breathing for the first time, like butterflies." *The Breath We Took's* location between fact and fiction is murky.

The appearance of Pemma's father (who is really a friend of the artist) further tests the viewer's assumption that Pemma is Knight's biological daughter. The viewer sees little of Pemma's father throughout the work. However, in an unconvincing and rather emotionless therapy session, Knight and Pemma's father debate their different styles of communicating with Pemma. They talk of performing their roles in either a cynical or sincere way. Knight thinks she is aware that she is performing with Pemma and, therefore, comes across as cynical. The father thinks he is more natural at communicating with Pemma, as he

is less aware of himself, which makes his performance seem more sincere. Their questions about parental performance while performing for the artwork have a doubling effect. The artist formally constructs *The Breath We Took* to present moments of scripted performance alongside documentation of her own mother's experience. Knight offers a multiplicity of positions within this complex web of maternal performances to create useful and engaging moments for the viewer, whether she is a mother or not.

Although the viewer may continue to ask, "Is she a real mother? Is that her daughter?" throughout the work, Knight's fluctuating positions as an anxious mother and passive daughter create a multifaceted, productive way to think about maternal representations. By focusing on Knight's performance and constructed identity, complicated subjectivities and non-normative maternal desires are present and at play. Arguably, it is through artistic practice that the artist negotiates a response to maternal ambivalence while coping with her limited position—a position of the adult daughter as well as a childfree woman. Knight's performance as a mother problematizes art's location between reality and make-believe.

Reading these scenes and the entirety of *The Breath We Took* through the conceptual framework of parafiction illuminates the work's formal location between documentary film practice and fantasy.³ Carrie Lambert-Beatty⁴ defines parafiction as "related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literature and drama. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Which is a nice way, of course, to say that instead of simply telling a story, it tells a lie" ("Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility" 54).

Lambert-Beatty discusses Michael Blum's project *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* for the 2005 Istanbul Biennial. For this work, Blum built an apartment museum to tell the story of Behar, a Turkish-Jewish woman who worked alongside Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk during the 1923 founding of the Republic. Blum created an entire installation to show viewers how the unknown Safiye Behar importantly participated in the secularization of Turkey and influenced the national enactment of women's rights. Blum constructed blurry photographs and placed fake artifacts in vitrines throughout the apartment to convince the viewer that Safiye Behar was a critical figure in Turkey's founding. As

the artist meticulously substantiated her story through fabricated documentation, the art installation started to raise questions of knowledge: how could Istanbul Biennial visitors not know about Safiye Behar? People simply left bewildered (Lambert-Beatty, 54).

Blum's intervention into, and questioning of, the founding story of the Turkish Republic illuminates how art can poke holes and dismantle a history's metanarrative. For the viewer, *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* creates a space to criticize the nation-state, the way things seem to be, while offering a host of possibilities, the way things could be.

Similar to experiencing *The Breath We Took*, viewers of *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* were not made aware of any falsities or lies within the narratives presented. For both works, only after the viewing experience is complete, where "fictions have been experienced as facts," does skepticism begin to percolate (Lambert-Beatty, 54). Blum's project was presented in a city apartment, straddling the ambiguous line between art and life, but *The Breath We Took* was shown in a designated art space. The gallery setting of *The Breath We Took* helps the viewer to recognize the fiction in parafiction.⁵ The viewer can choose to recognize Knight and her conflicted narratives as key components to complicating the mother category, or not.

By using documentary styles of filming, Knight performs as a mother. Mark Nash has written extensively about a "documentary turn" in contemporary art. Like Lambert-Beatty, Nash explores how artists use moving-image to question art's relationship to reality. Rather than focus on the tension between reality and fiction, he concerns himself with the artist's role in these projects. Artists tap into new realities and propose new situations. Nash argues that artists' "border-crossing" between fiction, documentary, reality, and fantasy fuels their work as critical.

Knight's "border-crossing" in *The Breath We Took* provides a framework for the viewer's reception. According to Nash's contextualization of video work that pushes the documentary turn, the artist must engage with an element of social reality and provide a space for social change. Knight needs to engage an established context in order to convince her viewer that some element of *The Breath We Took* documents an existing social situation. She does so by selecting her mother as the first narrator in the work.

Her mother's story is a familiar one. As Knight's mother communicates her disdain for motherhood, the work becomes severed from its opening scenes of melodic music and pictures of smiling families. The viewer hears a white noise as the mother talks, almost an echo. Are we, the audience, experiencing raw footage, a home movie? Who else is in the room? The mother's remarks seem off the cuff in their delivery, as if someone had just asked her a question. She does not address the camera as she speaks; it is as if the viewer observes a private conversation. We hear that she was a young mother in the 1970s and a supporter of the Women's Movement. We come to understand the mother's maternal experiences as deeply complicated and formed within the context of great political awareness. The video's aestheticization of her history latches onto bodies of knowledge that exist in social reality. Her statements exist within the art piece but are also grounded in tenets of second-wave feminism. As Lambert-Beatty states of parafictional work, the mother's situation is tethered to the "world as it is being lived" (54). The viewer can recognize and digest her situation as one existing outside of the artwork and within individuals who came of age in the 1970s.

The mother's position both within and outside the work invites the viewer to engage with the contested space between fiction and fantasy. This chasm created by the artist's "border-crossing" toggles the viewer between boundaries of maternal fantasies and realities. Within this parafictional artwork, such distinctions remain ambiguous. In Knight's first scene as a (sort-of) mother, she talks to the camera about the fear she felt when she became a mother, appearing uncomfortable and her gaze meets the viewer's. Her breaking of the fourth wall shifts the viewer as voyeur to the viewer as participant. The viewer is no longer concerned with the boundaries between what exists as a potential reality outside the work versus what exists within the work; rather, they are concerned with what Knight's performance does in the domain of art. Knight's investigation of her mother's ambivalence is troubled by her own performance as a fictional mother. The artist's intermittent "border-crossing" helps us think about the paradoxes at play. As parafiction, the work's unstable location between reality and fiction and between art and life "mobilizes two contradictory assumptions in traditional understandings of aesthetic: that art reveals truth, and that art is a space apart from reality" (Grabner 48). *The*

Breath We Took can tap the maternal desires and fantasies of the viewers. The act of viewing the video allows them to explore feelings of indifference and empathy towards Knight's mother, where within might lie questions about their own maternal intersubjectivity. Perhaps, then, these feelings can bring forth a conscious desire to negotiate, and even accept, one's own ambivalence.

Knight's work addresses maternal ambivalence, indifference, and overall anxiety in ways that prod viewers yet also keep them at a safe distance. Although these experiences and emotions linger outside of normative maternal culture, even seen as taboo, Knight represents them modestly and in a subtle explication. Neither Knight nor her mother ever speaks directly about hating her offspring. Whereas much writing on maternal ambivalence defines the child as the object of a mother's hate and love, this direct line from subject to object, from mother to daughter, is muted in Knight's work. Knight refrains from crossing the line of what is socially acceptable. Refreshingly frank, however, is how her mother speaks in front of Knight and how Knight appears indifferent. At the dinner scene, Knight barely flinches as her mother recalls her birth. Representing an adult daughter perspective, Knight reacts ambiguously towards her mother. She appears totally disengaged with her mother's sentiments in this moment: she chews her food, eyes focused on the cake in front of her, and then concentrates on sipping her beverage. She does not face her mother or respond in any physical or vocal manner. And yet, right before her mother says these words, Knight looks directly into the camera. She does this again immediately after her mother speaks. Her eyes meet the viewers' seemingly to ask, "Did you hear that?" Although the viewer can imagine Knight's potential emotional response through these subtle cues, they cannot see any visible consequences of her mother's remarks. Knight's struggle, if there is one, appears only below the surface.

Therefore, in experiencing representations of non-normative maternal subjectivities in an art piece, we, the viewers, can recognize ourselves more fully. *The Breath We Took* can validate maternal ambivalent feelings and aid in the acknowledgment of anxieties that are otherwise deemed inconvenient for society. Since the categories "woman" and "mother" are already massive, involving a breadth of intersectional identities, behaviours and self-representations, outward expressions of non-normative emotional responses can intersect with

viewers at different cross-sections of their identities. The compelling representations in *The Breath We Took* create, as Lambert-Beatty argues, “specific multiplicities” (73) through the parafictional apparatus.

Art’s meanings are produced through encounters with its spectators and a parafictional reading of *The Breath We Took* tethers the complexities of motherhood, womanhood, and daughterhood to its viewers. These viewers and their desires remain individualized, avoiding a collapse along the spectrum of receptions. The questions Knight raises address each viewer right where they are—as a mother, non-mother, stepmother, adoptive mother, caretaker, nurturer, childfree person, daughter, estranged daughter, artist, and so on—without running the risk of producing sameness among experiences. The viewers’ collective experiences may be found in, and fostered by, common desires for representations of non-normative maternal anxieties, fantasies, and needs. Such representations create a model that favours complexity, presenting the maternal category as restlessly plural as well as ever expanding.

Endnotes

1. *The Breath We Took* is a single-channel video Knight shot using a Canon 60D. The immaterial medium is the moving image presented by a single display mode, either a monitor or projection. The work was shown at Aspect Ratio (Chicago, IL) from 3 May through 1 June 2013. The duration of the video is just shy of twenty-three minutes and includes several moments of narration by different subjects.
2. The song is titled “If I Keep a Green Bough in My Heart,” written in 1987 by Kathy Wonson Eddy from the self-published CD *The Singing Bird Will Come*. The text is from a traditional Chinese proverb. The music is soprano and flute.
3. The interest in art’s intersection with our current age of alternative facts, fake news, and “truthiness” has resulted in several major exhibitions. Major recent exhibitions include Contemporary Arts Museum Houston’s 2014 *More Real Than Reality Itself*; the Minneapolis Institute of Art’s 2013 *More Real?; The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image, Part 1: Dreams; Part 2: Realisms*, in 2008 at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C.; *Come and Go: Fiction and Reality*, November 2007 through June 2008, at the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; Mark Nash’s 2004 *Experiments*

- with Truth* exhibition at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia; and Nash's work in 2002's *documenta 11*.
4. Carrie Lambert-Beatty championed this idea in her 2009 *October* article "Make- Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," although her ideas were originally presented at ThreeWalls Gallery and DePaul University in Chicago, as well as the Institute of Fine Arts, New York in *Talking With Your Mouth Full: New Language for Socially Engaged Art*, edited by Elizabeth Chodos, Green Lantern Press, 2008, pp. 54-75. Lambert-Beatty's subsequent *October* essay was reprinted again in 2013 in a broader conversation.
 5. Located at 119 N. Peoria, Chicago, Aspect Ratio held the solo exhibition of *Chelsea Knight: The Breath We Took*. The gallery held a Friday night opening; otherwise, the space was open Thursday by appointment, 1:00-6:00 PM on Fridays, and 12:00-5:00 PM on Saturdays. The Chicago exhibition of Knight's work was presented in a small, dark room on loop. *The Breath We Took* was shown in a black painted room, whereas its corresponding materials, the list of credits and press release, were available to the viewer in an adjacent white painted room. An HD projector and two speakers were used. Besides a small light in the front of the gallery, there was no additional lighting used during the exhibition, and the projection of the work served as the main source of light in the gallery.

Works Cited

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