

Helen de Main x Mammas Write

In 2023, the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) presented *Repeat Patterns*, a two-person show with Helen de Main and Mandy McIntosh. Coinciding with the running time of the exhibition, Helen worked with Mammas Write and Maryhill Integration Network as part of the gallery's outreach programme. This text seeks to bring some of the less visible aspects of that work into view.

I was a new mother still reeling from the shock of bringing a new life into the world, a new life that completely eclipsed my own. No longer knowing who—or what—I was, I was lying prone on a park bench in a fog of sleepless dissolution when I saw Helen. Summoning the small shreds of energy still left to me, I raised my heavy eyelids in the hope of recasting myself as at least partially human—rather than... well, whatever un-nameable being I now was—and we greeted each other. Looking out from my straightjacket of early motherhood routines, I saw Helen's kids playing, more grown than mine; her partner and friends settled around her, chatting and smiling. So relaxed, so **at ease**, so impossible. We spoke about her upcoming show at GoMA and my being part of a collective called Mammas Write, which meets weekly in libraries. There we share our experiences of new motherhood by making rapid-fire zines passed around between nappy-changes, feedings and wipings.

A few days later, Helen messaged asking if Mammas Write would like to work with her, inviting us to visit her show and explore questions around childcare raised in her works. The invitation felt like a hand reaching through the long hours spent in dark solitary confinement to deliver a deeper metaphorical message that said: "I see you; I know how it is. I've been to a similar place. And back again, too". That's how Mammas Write came to work with Helen and with GoMA.

For us mothers, knowing that Helen understood early motherhood while embodying a later stage of the parenting journey, in which insight and autonomy are possible again, was a powerful connection. It was also clear that all the mothers in the group deeply value creative expression—though the term 'creative expression' feels like dry funding jargon. In reality, the few minutes we spent writing or drawing each week gave us the space to reconnect with ourselves, reminding us that we exist beyond the constant needs of our babies. We wrote, and we drew in order to bring ourselves back into existence. Maslow's hierarchy of needs places self-actualisation and aesthetic

needs at the top of the pyramid. For those of us who have cultivated a creative practice of one kind or another, motherhood has the unfortunate effect of slicing the top of the pyramid clean off—leaving a fumbling truncated sense of self that feels amputated and has to be brought back into existence piece by piece through the act of making.

In my conversation with Helen, the word 'trust' often returns in relation to her work with groups. With trust comes the possibility of keeping self-consciousness at bay long enough to make contact with the vulnerability inside ourselves. Trust is also key to establishing non-hierarchical decision-making processes within the group, and this makes it possible to work towards an outcome that no one, and everyone, has complete control over. Building trust is never easy, particularly in the current political era, surrounded as we are by superficial outcomes born of compromise.

The ongoing draining of arts funding down the plughole of austerity is a provocation that demands agile adaptation from artists practicing in the social realm. Traditionally, artistic practice that sits at the intersection of activism and creative expression has flourished in the in-between areas: the spaces between civic institutions and self-actualising social movements. The trouble is that social cohesion practised in person is harder and harder to sustain as the enclosure of social space progresses. Meanwhile, money is leaking out of gallery outreach programmes, leaving participatory practices stranded like a forlorn jumble of bath toys left upturned after the water's drained out. Against this bleak backdrop, Helen's advocacy bought us the time we needed to make contact with our creativity and gave us encouragement that the work we make offers valuable insight to other parents, too.

Our group began to meet in GoMA's studio space. Helen brought us printed and photocopied extracts of her research into feminist movements of the '70s and '80s advocating for accessible childcare provision and fairer division of reproductive labour. We cut, scribbled and pasted while we shared our own aspirations and frustrations. We discovered the rousing call for equality and care anew, marvelling at the energy and creativity of generations of mothers before us and staggering at the lack of progress on issues that continue negatively impacting women and children. Helen often took the role of scribe for our group, listing our insights on a roll of paper, typing, printing and returning the words to us in the form of a haphazard poem of motherhood:

hard edges, soft layers
seeds need energy
repeating
keep doing and something will connect
keep going
reaching out but not quite connecting
who pays for pregnancy?
stuff made of bodies
expectation
anger
lattice, container, prison

Sometimes we took turns to act out our feelings, using bodily gestures with the rest of the group, reflecting back their insights; sometimes we made collage, cutting into the printed words of mothers before us and sandwiching them with glue between our own commentary. These later became Riso prints, which we printed at Wild and Kind, an open-access print studio, while Helen kept an eye on our increasingly mobile babies. The surprise and excitement at watching our images emerge from the press filled the room with a palpable delight: blues and yellows, luminous pink layered with peachy orange; our compositions overlapped, and every new print was a surprise of colour that re-ordered our thinking on the page.

Later, I talked with Helen about how difficult it is to assign value to the act of holding space for others' creativity. Artists with participatory practices often wish to step away from traditional assumptions around authorship. Retaining too much control over what is produced introduces the risk that participation becomes superficial or that participants don't feel valued enough to carry the project to completion. Yet there's usually no getting away from the artist's name headlining the bill. I get the sense that Helen's awareness of how our group's need for agency rubs up against her visibility as an artist is part of the productive tension that propels her work forward. For a printmaker, introducing a new layer of colour feels like a risk. Negotiating risk sparks a fear and a thrill that's part of the attraction to making art. Participatory practice is no exception; people are easily as volatile as other, more material mediums.

In her work with *Mammas Write*, Helen moved between a range of roles. She managed communication, negotiated the parameters of our work with GoMA, including handling the

budget for the project, she arranged childcare for us so we could work without our usual interruptions. These are just some of the things we needed to get to the starting point of accessing a space in which creativity is possible. The undivided attention she gave us while we worked through our emotions and insights felt luxuriously incongruent with the rest of our lives, in which our mothering labour felt more or less invisible. Saying that Helen was assigned a mothering role by our group would be a little too saccharine, but there are significant similarities between the work of a mother and the work involved in participatory art practice. Being positioned so closely to the realm of reproductive labour, there is consequently a risk of participatory practice being undervalued, particularly within dominant power structures that continue to treat this labour as an externality.

Respecting the autonomy of those she works with is important to Helen. There is a reflexive process of questioning her identity as an artist that unfolds while she holds space for the group. I have a feeling this underpins her ability to foster a non-hierarchical group dynamic in spite of working in gallery contexts, which are inherently hierarchical institutions. Not knowing if she's an artist, not knowing if she's simply a facilitator, this withdrawal of influence is an important part of her approach. Hans Arp is often credited by the art historical canon as a pioneer of the use of chance, waiting for pieces of paper to fall at random onto a page as a means of placing creative control just beyond the reach of the artist's hand. To share authorship with another person or people is more ambiguous and challenging; requiring constant negotiation of subtly inferred social expectations. These are the invisible materials that participatory art is made of, and the partial withdrawal of the artist's visible influence is a mechanism that re-balances the power dynamic to give participants greater autonomy.

When Mammás Write met Helen, we felt that she understood our need for creative expression, not as a luxury add-on once all our basic needs are met, but as a foundational requirement of our ability to feel a sense of agency. A shared understanding of this need is what holds our group together and keeps us meeting from week to week. Helen's own practice moves in cycles; sometimes focused on facilitating creative space for others and sometimes focused on her work in the print studio. When she describes mixing ink pigments for printing, I hear excitement in her voice as well as a sense of playful freedom that comes from working in her body, and being in tune with her materials and beyond the realm of language. She describes her work in the studio as having a restorative or recharging effect, bringing her the energy she needs to support the groups she works with.

In the work *Mammas Write* do together, there is often a sense of possibility that our creative exploration could take us in any number of directions, and while this is an exhilarating feeling there can be a flip side, a paralysis borne of infinite possibility. Helen's engagement with our group provided a constructive set of limitations; a set time frame, a finite budget, a professional network of people with practical skills to support us, and knowledge rooted in her own printmaking practice. All of these contributed to the final look and feel of the prints we made, but more than that, each of these factors marked out a finite space in which we were able to prioritise playful experimentation and creative decision-making over the clamouring practical needs of work, home and children.

For us, the power of participatory practice was in the process of making contact with our creativity and with each other. The prints we produced offer a material record of what we discovered and chose to bring into the foreground from our experience as mothers, but it was the space of possibility Helen intuitively created by balancing our need for risk against our need for security that constitutes the primary outcome of her work with us. The intangible nature of this outcome is difficult to measure and evaluate, except by those who have directly participated in the process.

As our babies have grown into busy curious toddlers, we mothers have watched their capacity for imagination grow too. We have made spaces for play, provided boundaries and paid attention every step of the way. In turn, Helen paid attention to us, our need to reach one another and communicate the power and frustration of reaching our limits and the limits society has imposed on us. In the bounded space of creative possibility she laid out, each of us slowly pieced together a sense of self out of the wreckage of early motherhood.

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Jessica Ramm is an artist and writer based in Glasgow. Her work in sculpture, print and performance explores themes of vulnerability, communication and connection. She often works collaboratively, and the relationships she builds inform how her processes unfold.