

Art **Reviews**

The Politics of Being a Parent in the Art World



Gregory Sholette March 4, 2016



Home Affairs, "Does your Gallery, Museum, Conference Center or Gallery Provide Childcare?" screenprint on paper, 22 x 30 in (image courtesy Arzu Ozkal and the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts)

The Let Down Reflex is essential viewing for anyone engaged with issues of caring economies, so-called “women’s work,” or the question of living wages for the art world’s service workers. Smartly curated by **Amber Berson** and **Juliana Driever** at Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA) Project Space, the exhibition of 11 artists (including three collaborations) shines an invaluable light on the typically marginalized task of parenting within the culture industry. Made up of Arzu Ozkal, Claudia Pederson, and Nanette Yannuzzi, the group **Home Affairs** has collectively redefined the phrase “labor of love” by focusing on the fact that female family caregivers must **struggle** twice as much to maintain their art careers, even as the percentage of women **represented** by galleries, museums, and biennials is decidedly below their **presence in the art world workforce**. Home Affairs provides ceremonial “award letters” crediting those — far too few — art institutions showing support for families, like EFA Project Space, which encouraged visitors to bring their kids to the opening of *The Let Down Reflex*. Scheduled for the afternoon, so that parents could get their children home early, the opening dissolved into a clamorous rumpus of young kids amusing themselves at ground level while drab little islands of staid adults gathered in customary art world conversations. One of these tiny, energized attendees was artist **Dillon de Give**’s two-year-old son,

Peregrin, who remained that evening to camp-out overnight in the gallery with his father and who returned to EFA another day and night as a participant in “[By My Own Admission](#)” (2016), De Give’s “prime time” public art project staging [Peregrin’s bedtime routine](#) before a live audience.



Dillon & Peregrin de Give, “By My Own Admission” (2016), performance and installation, dimensions variable (photo courtesy Ramsay de Give)



Lise Haller Baggesen, “Motherism” (2013–16), multimedia installation, dimensions variable (photo by Michelle O’Connell, courtesy The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) (click to enlarge)

Other works include [Lise Haller Baggesen](#)’s feminist, sci-fi, disco space “Motherism” (2013–16), complete with its own pageant of ceremonial flags and a swinging hammock several mothers made good use of during the opening, and a video pastiche by [LoVid](#) (Tali Hinkis and Kyle Lapidus) called “Kids at a Noise Show” (2015–16), offering images and sound snippets of efforts to manage small children while also functioning as an artist (or is it about being managed by children while trying to function as an artist-parent?). On the far side of the central gallery wall is an unassuming research piece, “Conversation with Magic Forms” (2015), by the group Leisure (Meredith Carruthers and Susannah Wesley) that visually riffs on a 1970 illustrated autobiography by English artist Barbara Hepworth; in it, the famed sculptor’s family and children appear alongside her abstract, organic forms, suggesting a curious maternal homology (compare this treatment to that of the virile sculptor Brancusi, typically photographed with tools or in his studio sans his one unacknowledged offspring). Meanwhile, a video by the artist, writer, and organizer [Shane Aslan Selzer](#), “Horizonlines: Gowanus” (2013–ongoing) presents a series of fixed-camera shots showing Lower Manhattan viewed from the window of her compact

Brooklyn apartment, with a young child cooing and chirping on the soundtrack. Time speeds up, slows down, and seems to reverse as multicolored lighting gels and handwritten notes appear superimposed over the cityscape — the artist-mother’s presence is clearly operative, though never revealed. And finally, in the middle of the space, we hear Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn’s “The Wages Due Song” (2016), originally written by a mid-’70s Toronto-based feminist collective, with lyrics that chant, “If women got paid for all we do / I’ll tell ya one thing that’s true as true / We wouldn’t be free / but I’m telling you / There’d be a lot of wages due.”



Leisure (Meredith Carruthers and Susannah Wesley), “Conversation with Magic Forms” (2015), inkjet prints on paper, 22 x 59 in and 74 x 53 in (photo by Michelle O’Connell, courtesy The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) (click to enlarge)

Precedents for service-oriented practices like this reach back to the early 1990s, when Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler argued that works of art had always concealed a certain degree of service labor, but now this facet of production was becoming unavoidable, as value was “consumed at the same time it is produced.” Reading this shift in broader, political terms, theorist Sylvia Federici argues:

not only has state investment in the work-force been drastically reduced, but reproductive activities have been reorganized as value-producing services that workers must purchase and pay for. In this way, the value which reproductive activities produce is immediately realized,

rather than being made conditional on the performance of the workers they reproduce.

Grasping the value added to the discipline of art through the labor of bearing and caring for children is a process of politicization. By “politics” I mean not only undertaking informed critical resistance to institutional standards, but also the imaginative exploration of ideas, the pleasure of communication, the exchange of education, and the construction of collective, sometimes even fantastic alternatives within a space illuminated by dissent. This is precisely the activism we encounter in *The Let Down Reflex*, whose title refers to the reflexive lactation of mothers that’s sometimes accompanied by a stab of pain, as well as perhaps the ache of invisibility associated with nurturing as a service within the indifferent field of high culture. When artists and other cultural workers demand day care be provided from an employer, including even a temporary one such as an art gallery, or when they insist on recognizing the essential economic role played by the seemingly external and “natural” labor of reproduction, these are critiques that challenge the norms and values, both real and symbolic, used to maintain and reproduce the market-driven art world system. Such developments also significantly complement the important work of groups such as W.A.G.E.,

BFAMFAPhD, and **Debtfair**. For an exhibition with a militant motherly touch, don't miss *The Let Down Reflex*.



Home Affairs' "And Everything Else" (2015) installed at EFA Project Space, with remnants of children's handiwork (photo courtesy the artists and The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) (click to enlarge)

The Let Down Reflex continues at EFA Project Space (323 W 39th Street, 2nd floor, Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan) through March 12.

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