

Transnational Visual Activism For Women's Reproductive Rights: My Body, My Choice

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Chapter 4

Birth Rites Collection: Imagining an Activist Art Collection

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BIRTH RITES COLLECTION

Imagining an Activist Art Collection

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In her article *The Art of Birth*, the American artist Carmen Winant asked why there are so few images of birth in contemporary art. Her own attempts at making work on the subject after giving birth led her to search for precedents (Winant 2016).¹ She found artworks about pregnancy and mothering, but birth seemed to be ‘less worthy of making serious visual and critical interventions into... the *image* of birth has not yet entered the mainstream as mutually interesting and worthwhile’ (Ibid.). She identified only a handful of contemporary examples, partially due to her focus on US art, but mostly, the lack of visibility of the subject.

The United Kingdom-based Birth Rites Collection (BRC), a collection of contemporary art about childbirth, addresses exactly this lack of visibility. It was initiated by the artist Helen Knowles in 2009 and is currently hosted at the University of Kent in Canterbury. It was previously at King’s College, London (2017–2021) and University of Salford (2009–2017). The collection includes some of the *before* and the *after*: metaphors of conception, experiences of pregnancy, motherhood, and loss. But most of the works deal with birth itself, that event often considered ‘Too grotesque? Too private? Too much a women’s issue? Not romantic enough (or at all)?’ to make art about, and for some, to bear to look at (Ibid.). Lisa Baraitser and Imogen Tyler (2013: 2) have pointed out that feminist artistic interventions into the visibility of birthing work against a history of Western philosophy in which childbirth was ‘imagined as unrepresentable and unknowable.’

When starting out, Knowles (2008) also found that ‘work on childbirth has been hidden away and underrepresented.’ The collection developed from a programme of five commissions for artists to observe childbirth practitioners. The resulting works were presented at the Manchester Museum and the Glasgow Science Centre in the exhibition *Birth Rites* (2008). BRC was set up to increase the visibility of birth and to create mutually enriching exchanges with birth care professionals. Over a decade later, the collection’s subject area has become a prevalent site of political and social contention through the ongoing transnational battles over reproductive rights. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the systemic race-, gender-, and class-based inequalities of care work and led to the situations

of mothers gaining greater legitimacy as an issue for cultural, academic, and media discourses (Campbell 2021).

BRC offers not only nearly a hundred artworks, but through its research and mediation activities, it also creates space for exchange between artists, parents, researchers, birth practitioners, students, and others. I encountered the collection in 2019 through the conference *Oxytocin – Mothering the World* at King’s College London. The conference created discourse and platformed practice through talks by artists, academics, and activists, performances around the campus, and a tour of the collection. The BRC Summer Schools create a similar context for mediation, discussion, and shared reflection.

I write about BRC from a position of involvement and care: having looked to BRC for my research as a freelance curator specialising in feminist perspectives on health and care, in 2020 I began a Collaborative Doctoral Award in collaboration with BRC funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership, supervised by Hermione Wiltshire, who has work in the collection and has contributed to its programmes. My practice-led research has allowed me to consider BRC from a position of insight into its inner workings and to contribute to its programmes through a digital commission, suggestions for speakers, and talks about my research for the Summer Schools. At the same time, I am not involved in BRC’s management and remain financially and intellectually independent from the organisation.

Based on my research on the collection and the ‘art of birth’ more broadly, I propose that BRC develop its focus on birth to hold more space for the full spectrum of experiences of reproductive bodies beyond that of live birth, taking a cue from the work of full-spectrum doulas. Throughout this chapter, I discuss care as crucial for reproductive experiences and for their various representations through the ‘art of birth.’ What I mean when describing curatorial care has a different quality to the care of a parent for their child, or to caring for one another in a community. This care takes the form of professional attention, commitment, and responsibility. This care is not ‘natural,’ but rather political. Like the work of mothering, this care is work. Care for the ‘art of birth’ comes from an understanding of what is at stake in its preservation and its curation.

I use the term m(other) in this essay as a shorthand to encompass the genders and identities of people who raise children, including trans parents, queer and nonbinary people, and those people who mother kids who are not formally ‘theirs.’ M(other) references the artwork *A Conflict of Interest* (2016) by Lauren McLaughlin for BRC, consisting of pink neon letters that alternatively illuminate to spell *Mother* and the shorter words it contains: *other*, *me*, and *her*. The work highlights the simultaneous and sometimes conflicting roles of m(others).

The experiences of birth, miscarriage, abortion, and baby loss are serious, important, and complex topics of artistic investigation and they are relevant beyond feminist circles and birthing professionals. Birth is a human—no, rather a mammalian topic affecting all our lives in one way or another. Yet as I write, BRC struggles for resources and sustainability to continue its activities as the only art collection in the world about birth. This is a crucial time to make a case for BRC’s importance and to dream its futures.

To set in motion our feminist imagination, I take stock of what the collection has achieved. Then, in the context of this volume, I ask whether BRC is an *activist art collection*. What might an activist collection be and do? My essay celebrates BRC as well as applying my perspective to point out areas of strategic importance for the collection.

Finally, my conceptual intervention into the future of BRC suggests that it expands its remit to hold space for the full spectrum of reproductive experiences through artistic practice and discourse. But first, let us look at a sample of the collection.

The 'Art of Birth'

Note to reader: All works in the Birth Rites Collection can be viewed online at www.birthritescollection.org.uk.

Birth is represented in BRC through photography, video, drawings, sculpture, wall-paper, ceramics, textiles, digital work, and paintings by British and international artists. I introduce a few key works in the order of the phases of birth, beginning with labour. Dominika Dzikowska's *Warm Wet Velvet* (2009–2013) is a triptych of photographic portraits. They are close crops around the figures, suggesting intimacy and physical proximity between photographer and subject. Clues in the background of each image, such as tiled wall, suspended rope, and a hospital-green curtain indicate that they were taken in a perinatal ward. Two subjects have tossed their heads back, lips sensuously parted in exhale; the third is stooped forward by the intensity of sensation. In contrast with the conventions of portraiture, their eyes are closed or covered by hair. Their expressions suggest a state of inward concentration on the sensations in the body; they have no attention for the photographer or their audience. In 19th-century painting, female figures with eyes closed and heads tossed back symbolised orgasm, pain, and conception (Høifødt 2008: 42). In Dzikowska's sensitive photographs, the pose conveys the sensuality of birthing.

Hermione Wiltshire's *Terese in Ecstatic Childbirth* (2008) (Figure 4.1) is one of the original commissions for BRC. It is an enlarged print of a black-and-white photograph that originally appeared in a birthing manual by the American midwife Ina May Gaskin. The image shows a bird's eye view of a naked Terese lying amid paisley cushions, splaying her legs by holding onto her knees. Her baby's head is crowning in this moment in the lower centre of the photograph, cupped by Gaskin's bare hands. Terese's face is the second focal point of the photograph: her eyes are closed, and she has an elated, toothy grin.

Over the years, Wiltshire's work has proven the most controversial in the collection. It is the only image which shows the liminal event of crowning, where a head emerges from the m(other)'s vulva—a rarely seen image, even among representations of birth. Wiltshire's work responds to the absence and fear of images of crowning she observed in perinatal classes (Wiltshire 2008). When shown to midwifery classes, the bohemian setting of this birth has caused upset (*the midwife isn't wearing latex gloves!*). Most importantly, the expression of erotic bliss on Terese's face—so at odds with filmic representations of birth that deal in women screaming in pain and gurneys being rushed into emergency rooms—has confounded some viewers to the point of anger and calls for censorship (Knowles 2017: 235–237).

Another work resulting from the early commissions is Suzanne Holtom's *Forceps Series* (2008), a set of five delicate pencil drawings. Traced from video footage Holtom took in a delivery room, the consecutive scenes show a semi-recumbent patient with their legs in stirrups surrounded by hospital staff. In one drawing, the patient leans their head forward and grabs their thighs whilst a doctor's hands are clasped around an absent object between theirs and the patient's body: the forceps, omitted from the picture and instead named in the title of the work. A comparison between Wiltshire's image of Terese and

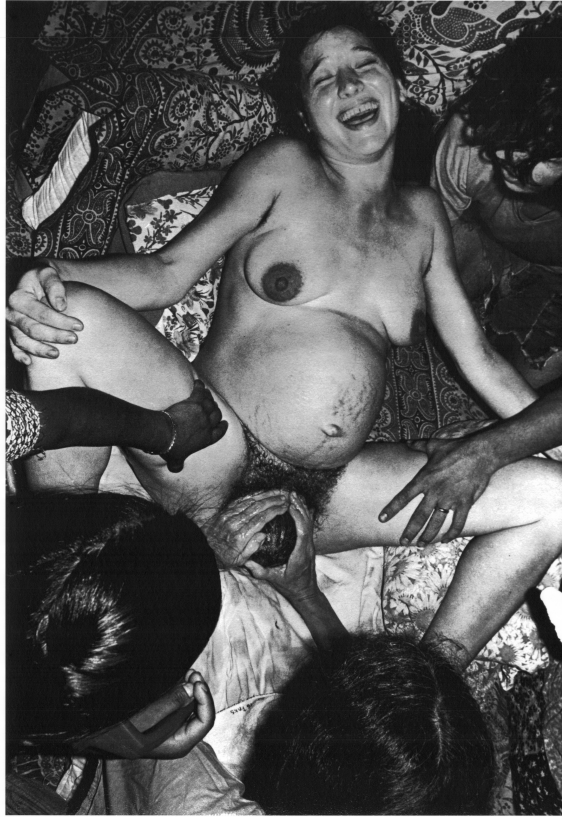


FIGURE 4.1 Hermione Wiltshire, *Terese in Ecstatic Childbirth* (from the archive of Ina May Gaskin), 2008, digital print, 65 × 50 cm.

Courtesy of the artist. ©Hermione Wiltshire 2008.

Holtom's drawings demonstrates the tension between 'natural' home birth and medically managed hospital birth within the collection and the wider birthing discourse.

In Eti Wade's c-print *Home Birth (in the kitchen)* (2001), a boxy TV plays birthing footage on a cramped kitchen counter between stacked dishes and the kettle. On screen, Wade is pictured from above, lying on a hospital bed with a foetal heartrate monitor strapped around her belly. In its partner work *Home Birth (with vacuum cleaner)* (2001), a TV plays the footage next to a parked vacuum cleaner. In this moment, the film has been shot from the midwife's perspective during a cervical examination. Wade's compelling images juxtapose the exceptional event of birth with the ordinary domestic environment in which most new m(others) spend much of their time. A detached objectivity conveys the 'deadening of the emotions' Wade experienced with postnatal depression, a condition that remains stigmatised and often silenced (Wade 2001).

Seeing a body in labour among signifiers of housework invites reading Wade's works through the lens of social reproduction theory. This field analyses the essential work that reproduces human life and keeps our world going, such as gestation and birthing, childcare, housework, and care for the elderly. Infuriatingly, the work of social

reproduction is usually un(der)paid, un(der)valued, feminised, and racialised: it makes up the invisible half of capitalism (*What the f**k is social reproduction? An introduction by Plan C*, 2015).

What Makes an Art Collection Activist?

BRC holds space in the public sphere for experiences often relegated to the private realm as ‘women’s issues.’ When it has the resources to run its programmes, it creates community, contributes to cultural and academic discourses, and provides a transdisciplinary context for reflection about how we practice reproductive healthcare. Through in-person and digital offers, it reaches local, national, and international audiences. But is it *activist*? What might an activist art collection do?

First, let me establish that birth is a necessary site of activism. Black feminist activists developed the reproductive justice framework in the 1990s, proposing a holistic and intersectional view of reproductive rights. Beyond abortion, sexual education and bodily autonomy, these include the right to safe and humane birth and the right to raise children in safe and healthy environments (Ross et al. 2017). Considering that pregnant and birthing people’s agency, consent, and choice are by no means a given, birth remains a site of struggle. The concept of obstetric violence, originating from Latin America in the early 2000s, is being articulated and developed by activists and scholars to name and abolish structural violence against birthing people in the obstetric institution (Van Der Waal et al. 2023).² Furthermore, experiences of abortion, miscarriage, or the choice not to have children are silenced and stigmatised in many different societies globally, although they are so common. Being able to safely discuss and find support with these reproductive experiences should be understood as part of a continuum with birth justice.

There is an inherent contrast in the proposition of an activist art collection: activist work is usually responsive and time-sensitive whilst pursuing long-term goals, whereas museum collections mostly operate in slow time, preserving objects for posterity. Activists try to influence public opinion; museum collections traditionally reflect conventions and concerns of past times in their holdings. To be clear, by activist collection I don’t mean a collection of artefacts related to activist movements or significant social and political events, such as the Rapid Response Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This collection shortcuts lengthy acquisition processes to assemble objects of significance to world events, such as the Pussyhat popularised through the 2017 Washington DC Women’s March (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2023). An activist collection is not primarily archival but tries to intervene in the structures that shape our world. In the case of BRC, its mission from conception has been to make visible the ‘art of birth’ and to engage the complex politics of childbirth.

Some BRC works are overtly political, such as Laura Yuile’s surreal *Once You Care, You’re Future* (2019) (Figure 4.2), featuring multi-racial performers cleaning the floors of a King’s College lobby with baby dolls strapped to the mop, vacuum cleaner, and trolley as if to slow down and weigh down the work. Like Wade’s photographs, the performance emphasises the relationship between the reproduction of the next generation and the feminised and racialised work of maintaining our world.

The duo Conway and Young’s *Milk Report* (2019) reads as an art-activist project. Their publication tallies the hours Young spent breastfeeding her baby during the first



FIGURE 4.2 Laura Yuile, *Once you care, you're future*, 2019. Performance commissioned by the Birth Rites Collection, King's College, London.

Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Rebecca Lennon.

six months after birth. The artists highlight the work of m(others) and 'seek full remuneration for the labour-intensive work undertaken' through sales of the booklet (Conway and Young 2019), a statement reminiscent of the Italian Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s.³ Young may eventually be paid for some of her mothering work, but the income won't stretch to also cover her labour making the publication. In fact, this accounting problem highlights the un(der)paid nature of both art-making and mothering, which are often expected to be done purely for love, as if our time and energy were endless.

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe articulates critical art as 'art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate' (Deepwell, 2020: 13). By this definition, most work on the invisibilised birthing body performs a critical intervention into the canon. But the collected artworks need not be obviously political for a collection to be activist in how it performs in the world.

Other works in the collection become charged through their presentation in this very context. For instance, in a Victorian corridor at King's College, London, a pair of sculptures of seated women, one pregnant, the other nursing a baby, by Billie Bond (*A Link with the Past*, 2011) was installed opposite a row of busts of notable alumni. When positioned as if staring up at the male scientists, the confident expressions of the young women in ancient Egyptian style come across as defiance with a patriarchal establishment that had excluded women, and especially m(others), from universities.

The site and display of artworks can amplify their politics. Whilst museums can make objects appear neutral or objective, an activist collection performs the work of politicisation of its holdings through their curation and mediation. At the same time, my proposition of an activist collection runs risk of instrumentalising artworks for politics they do not really speak to. Avoiding this requires a commitment to art's complexity, which must never be compromised for convenient simplifications or to create controversy with the aim of raising visitor numbers.

BRC's university settings emphasise the discursive roles it performs: that active and ongoing negotiation of the 'art of birth' with young people, professionals, academics, members of the public, and creative practitioners. It functions differently to a museum collection, where the contained works are institutionally legitimised as valuable and important for the city, the region, the nation, or indeed the world. BRC has had to push for space and visibility, building its reputation over the years, in part through its affiliations with institutions and universities. It contributes to making the art of birth more visible within and beyond the arts and produces a feminist counter-discourse to the hegemony of museums. In the British art world, we have been seeing more exhibitions, publications, public programming, and conferences dedicated to birth and mothering in recent years (see Buck 2022; Cosslett 2023, Hayward Gallery, n.d.).

Whilst works from BRC are sometimes loaned for exhibitions in art galleries, the collection has been hosted by midwifery departments in universities for most of its existence. Initially, BRC had difficulties getting the works exhibited in dedicated art spaces (Tyler and Baraitser 2013: 3). When BRC is on display in university corridors, libraries, and seminar rooms, it does not look like a white cube exhibition. Increasingly, it became clear that situating the collection in healthcare education spaces is generative of trans-disciplinary discussions that can mutually affect perspectives of the artists and students, teachers, and researchers. As Knowles observes, 'this kind of work, situated in an institution of learning, can be both challenging and thought provoking and that is exactly what should be happening in higher education' (Knowles 2017: 242). Although there is no study to prove this, I am confident that meaningful contact with this collection will have sensitised midwifery students about the experiences of m(others) in birth care. As such, BRC indicates that art could be employed in healthcare training more widely as an alternative strategy for raising consciousness about reproductive justice.

Since the 'Birth Wars' of the 1960s–1970s, the conflict between advocates for medically and technologically managed birth and those calling for 'natural' and low-intervention birthing still features strongly in feminist discourses about birth (Al-Gailani, 2018). The siting of BRC within healthcare contexts keeps these tensions live without polarising the positions or closing down the discussion. It contributes a healthy dose of feminist criticality *within* rather than *against* medical birth education and research environments, an approach which could be instructive for other contexts.

As a non-profit company, BRC is neither a traditional private collection, nor is it a permanent part of a public institution like a museum or archive. BRC's independence has allowed Knowles to build and run the collection with an autonomy that would be unusual in a public collection. And yet, BRC is dependent on changing hosts and highly competitive grants. Not least King's College London's discontinuation of the hosting agreement in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic making the collection temporarily

homeless and inaccessible, revealed the downside of BRC's status: whilst it is itself not an institution, it relies on institutional resources and goodwill.

Much of the collection has been acquired through donations from artists, offering a home and visibility for their birth and mothering-themed artworks. Whilst works have been made for BRC through commissions and funded residencies, BRC has never had an acquisitions budget to buy completed pieces. This strategy has allowed the collection to grow quickly with few resources, but it limits scope for curatorial direction over acquisitions. In my view, the donation-based model inadvertently reproduces the undervaluation of artwork about birth and the work of artist-m(others) by not being able to pay them.

A long-term acquisitions strategy for BRC could create greater intersectionality in the collection beyond the traditional feminist lens of gender. How do race, class, ability, age, or sexual orientation converge to shape experiences of (non)reproduction in the United Kingdom and beyond? Whose voices and which experiences are missing from the collection? Could the persistent stigmas around baby loss, abortion, and living without children be broken down through greater emphasis on such experiences in the collection?

The necessary acquisitions and commissions would require resources. Especially artists of marginalised identities cannot be expected to donate their works without recompense. The curatorial labour of establishing and caring for BRC is nearly as un(der)paid as the work of gestating, birthing, and raising children. The precarity of the collection—which exemplifies a wider crisis of the arts in the United Kingdom—is disheartening, but it also represents an opportunity to evaluate how BRC might continue to strategically act on the art world and connect with audiences.

Thinking through BRC as an activist collection raises the question of how its activism would be steered. It could adopt a distributed decision-making process for strategic plans by consulting the artists represented in the collection. BRC could partner with aligned initiatives such as the Art Working Parents Alliance, a network founded in 2022 by Jo Harrison and Hettie Judah to represent the needs of parents working in the British art world (Harrison and Judah, n.d.). With a proper team and resources, BRC could forge global networks with reproductive rights organisations, activists, and arts initiatives that are working towards similar goals. For its near and long-term future, a central concern is how BRC can become sustainable, increase its resources to implement an acquisitions strategy, and reach new audiences, whilst retaining the curatorial independence that have allowed it to critique the dominant canon through its very existence.

The activism I am tracing through the case study of BRC lies in what it means and what it does to collect, care for, and mediate artworks about reproduction: it means to stage these works in considered ways in particular contexts, to allocate resources to their care, to research them, to create discourse around them, to defend them from censorship and vandalism, and to safekeep them for the future. This investment is significant in an art world that still considers works about sexual reproduction icky or uncomfortable—certainly not saleable—and parts of which still considers mothering incompatible with being a serious artist (Judah 2022: Introduction).

Could Birth Rites Collection Be Like a Full-Spectrum Doula?

A crucial aspect of the notion of an activist art collection to examine before concluding this essay is the function it performs for its audiences, both local and transnational.

Could BRC speak to even wider and more diverse audiences by holding space for the full spectrum of reproductive experiences, including and beyond the outcome of live birth? To set in motion our feminist imagination, I introduce the profession of the full-spectrum doula to propose that BRC could orient itself towards this expansive practice as an analogy for what the collection might offer its audiences.

Doulas are trained individuals who accompany people through pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period. They prioritise their clients' emotional, spiritual, and physical needs during periods of transition, but are not medically trained to deliver babies like midwives. Doulas offer a different mode of care to the obstetric institution, their practice being 'based on different values and foundations' (Van Der Waal et al. 2023: 3).⁴ A full-spectrum doula accompanies not only births, but the full spectrum of reproductive experiences: fertility treatment, adoption, birth, abortion, miscarriage, and surrogacy. (Glenn 2019).

The doula's role is often described as 'holding space' for the client, witnessing and honouring their experience within the busy (medical) world, which can silence, judge, or delegitimise the client's experiences (Moran, n.d.). I have not had the opportunity to work with a doula, but as a recent birthing partner for my friend, I recognise the great value of this caring role. The multi-practice community 'What would an HIV doula do?' applies the doula role to the support of people with HIV/AIDS. It thereby models a translation of this caring work into a cultural practice that produces discourse and community through event programmes, zines, and online resources (HIV Doula Work, n.d.). During the Covid-19 pandemic, they made a zine that asked, *What does a Covid-19 doula do?*, demonstrating the mobility of the doula practice of accompanying bodily, affective, and psychological processes that require care.

Too often, births are the only discussable outcomes of people's reproductive biographies. (Non-)reproductive lives include the common experiences of miscarriage, abortion, and not having children. Whilst journeys with the public outcome of a live baby are valued, experiences that do not end this way are often hidden and stigmatised. Whilst BRC was set up with a focus on the event of birth, a small number of particularly tender works by Bella Milroy, Tabitha Moses, Marie Brett, and Puck Verkade already create opportunities for reflection about miscarriage, abortion, and stillbirth. These works inspire my vision for BRC to hold space for and raise consciousness about the full spectrum of reproductive experiences like a full-spectrum doula.

I develop this idea by taking a closer look at Puck Verkade's *Unborn* (Figure 4.3), co-commissioned by BRC in 2021. In the curious world of this video, Verkade takes on the persona of a pigeon ambivalent about its role in procreation. Through costume, stop-motion animation, and puppetry, the film draws viewers into a nuanced discussion of reproductive choices and their consequences for the individual. The bird persona who lays eggs and incubates them is a metaphor for human (mammalian) reproduction instead of a direct reflection of it. This metaphor creates some distance that allows for a humorous approach to the loaded subject, whilst still facilitating identification with the anthropomorphic pigeon. A particularly funny effect is produced by the soundtrack of a scene in which the crow chick squirms in her crib, for which Verkade layers a baby's cry with a crow's caw. Having an animal discuss her ambivalent feelings about reproducing cleverly disables the essentialist anti-choice argument that it is all women's 'instinct' and 'nature' to be mothers.



FIGURE 4.3 Puck Verkade, *Unborn*, 2021, HD video installation, stereo sound, 5 min Installation view from the exhibition *Reproduction Otherwise*, MU Hybrid Art House, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Co-commissioned by Birth Rites Collection, London, Science Gallery, London, Wrocław Contemporary Museum, and Mondriaan Fund, Amsterdam.

Courtesy of the artist and Durst Britt and Mayhew, The Hague. Photo by Stephan Velema.

A discussion of *Unborn* showed that viewers detect narratives of both abortion and miscarriage in the work (Kretschel-Kratz and van der Waal 2023). One in four pregnancies in the United Kingdom results in baby loss, making this a common experience among people with and without children (*Tommy's*, 2022). In polarised political and media discourses, birth and abortion are often represented as opposites too easily mapped onto a wholesome/destructive binary. In reality, the majority of people who have abortions have already given birth and others may become parents at a better time (Guttmacher Institute, 2019; BPAS. British Pregnancy Advisory Service, 2019). Abortion, pregnancy loss, and birth coexist in many people's reproductive lives. It is crucial to think abortion and pregnancy loss *together with birth* in cultural representations and spaces such as BRC, normalising their concomitance and widening the narrow cultural imaginary of family-making.

Precisely because of their complexity, artworks and other cultural expressions have the capacity to surprise, activate, and engage audiences, to initiate nuanced conversations beyond entrenched positions on subjects such as abortion. As the right to safe and legal abortions is contested in many countries around the world, including the United Kingdom (Thomas 2023), BRC could initiate a collecting drive or set of

commissions for works about abortion and baby loss. By making dedicated space for these experiences, BRC could move in the direction of becoming an activist collection about the full spectrum of reproductive experiences. The analogy of the full-spectrum doula shows the potential for an activist art collection to perform a radically caring role towards its audiences. If it becomes like a full-spectrum doula, BRC's holdings could be more inclusive to queer families, m(others), and people with reproductive experiences who did not become parents. This form of radical care for experiences that are often silenced, invisibilised, and denigrated would itself be activist. Care—a sadly feminised and devalued form of attention, investment, and work—reveals itself *as activist*.

It is important to point out that I envision radical care through culture and meaningful discourse, to the extent to which culture can make people feel seen and represented, as well as inspired and challenged. There is a tension between my vision for a collection that radically holds space for its audiences' (non-)reproductive experiences and the instrumentalisation of under-resourced arts organisations to fill the gaps left by a broken public health and social care system in the current care crisis. The doula's work of witnessing, caring, and holding space is similarly context-responsive, affective, immaterial, and difficult to quantify as curatorial care (Reckitt 2016). Both practices are undervalued and often barely visible but can be deeply political and transformative by caring for what is marginalised and invisibilised.

BRC is an important resource through which to consider the intersectional politics of reproduction in ways that complement and expand the work of theory and of activism. It is crucial that artists continue to mobilise their creativities, experiences, and skills on the topic of (non-)reproduction and our cultural imaginaries of family-making. The work of caring for and mediating artworks that open space for the imagination, that sensitise viewers, that create discursive arenas, that hold space for denigrated experiences, is important but under-valued. Through this case study, we can establish that what makes a collection *activist* is a combination of its holdings, how it functions as an organisation, its mission, its curation and mediation. Most importantly, an activist collection could radically care for experiences that are marginalised and invisibilised by the hegemonic culture.

Notes

- 1 Winant later made the installation *My Birth* (2018), consisting of over 2,000 found images of people giving birth tacked densely onto the gallery walls (The Museum of Modern Art, n.d.).
- 2 'Obstetric violence is a global phenomenon and takes place at the hands of obstetric health workers during any encounter in the prenatal, intranatal, and postnatal period. Obstetric violence consists of ... physical, verbal, sexual, structural, and epistemological forms of violence, such as nonconsensual procedures, neglect, gaslighting, surrogate decision-making, shaming, and discrimination' (Van Der Waal et al., 2023, p. 1).
- 3 The Wages for Housework movement at the beginning of second-wave feminism called for a wage for domestic work naturalised as women's work. The movement demanded recognition and valuation of women's socially reproductive work, usually undervalued and invisibilised (Toupin, 2018).
- 4 Van der Waal and her co-authors 'regard the outspoken independent counterpractices of doulas, midwives, and traditional birth attendants as not part of the obstetric institution, although they need to rely on the institution regularly' (Van Der Waal et al., 2023: 3).

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