

## **Whose Everyday? Politics, Ethics and Art**

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### **Published version**

STEWART, Judith (2014). Whose Everyday? Politics, Ethics and Art. In: An Endless Round of Repetitive Tasks with Operatic Anger and Comic Turns. Sideline Publications.

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## Whose Everyday? Politics, Ethics and Art

I am sitting at the kitchen table. Writing this is a struggle. I suspect this is partly because of the constant minor disruptions of domesticity, so that even when I set aside a day to write, it is eroded by aspects of daily life that refuse to be postponed. And at this point in writing I realise that the dog hasn't had his breakfast...

### I (Politics)

There is a need for us, as artists (probably brought about by the impossible demand to know what one's work is 'about') to categorise what it is we do. When asked this question, we have to be very careful with our words, because how we answer will determine whether our questioner decides to dismiss us as unworthy of further consideration. Such dismissal is rarely based on the work itself, but rather on how we, as the artist, contextualise our work and the language with which we do this. The questioner who is *au fait* with contemporary visual art practices will recognise the key words, listen for omissions and switch off if an unfashionable phrase slips into the sentence.

What the 'knowledgeable' listeners want is a short-cut to tell them whether this is the sort of artist we want to engage with. The initial conversation acts as a sort of CV that is scanned, looking for clues that this work has been validated by arts professionals, relieving the listener from the burden of having to judge for themselves because the work has already passed muster. This is the substitute for a lengthy process of getting to know the work: of engaging in a tangle of conversations that reveal doubts and questions, that take us to realms outside of the artworld and 'professionalism'.

My conversations with Townley and Bradby began on a train. A couple of journeys with Lawrence (Bradby) to the gallery where we were both working, and discussions about art and our own interests and practices developed into longer sessions around their kitchen table. What gripped my interest with their *Artists-as-Parents-As-Artists* project, was precisely the way it occupies a space that is difficult to define: it is too close to reality to be 'art', but their use of that reality to make something they then define as 'art' raises all sorts of questions.

On one of these journeys Lawrence had been speaking of the difficulty of critically framing this work, and of how both he and Anna (Townley) have found it hard to distinguish between the activities of art and parenting - what is purely personal and what is for public consumption? And why is this of interest?

My initial response was that their practice, and the thinking that contextualises it, is clearly part of the discourse associated with 'the everyday'. However, the more I have thought about this, the more uncertain I've become. What practices do we associate with the everyday? Often these are the casual observations of daily life, of the discarded and unwanted, turned into something beautiful and engaging. I instantly think about Igor & Svetlana Kopystiansky's *Incidents* films where litter blows around the streets accompanied by the sounds of an urban landscape; of Pavel Büchler's *Work* which, tongue in cheek, documents his cigarette breaks during exhibition installations; or Mark Lewis's *Man* where, looking past the hand clutching a car key, we notice the body of a vagrant. What these images call to mind is an everyday framed by an urban existence: an existence that

depends on the artist as flâneur, separate from their surroundings with time to look and notice the potential of the world that surrounds them. However, this position of detached observer is not a neutral one and cannot be considered outside of the power relations and cultural hierarchies embedded in our social structures.

Within the genre of the everyday lies the unspoken privileging of the urban, the nitty-gritty of life on the streets, and by default this marginalises the experience of the domestic everyday. In our conversations about the domestic, about parenting as subject matter for the artist, the interruptions brought about by Lawrence and Anna's baby have provided timely reminders about why this might occur. We live our domesticity. It is not something that we can observe as detached bystanders. Whether it is doing the washing or answering the demands of children, we do not become observers lying in wait for poetic moments to catch us unaware. This is not to propose a privileging of the insider view over the 'detached' observer, but to recognize that the repetitive, demanding nature of domesticity makes it harder to find those poetic moments. For all the desire to merge art and life, we do not normally conduct our domestic chores with a camera in one hand and a dishcloth in the other.

As Townley and Bradby, through a self-conscious attempt to use their personal everyday as material for their work, force us away from the urban streets back to the domestic, one thing that becomes apparent is the different experience of time that parenting creates. Gone is the possibility of hours of thinking time, of the solitude of the studio, of roaming the streets to observe other people's everyday experiences. Instead there are snatched, interrupted moments, bounded by an over-familiar environment. Anna grasps these moments, drawing what is to hand – the contents of a child's pocket; collections of toys that bear traces of play or conflict; one of the children asleep. This is what parenthood looks like, a seemingly endless, repetitive round of toys picked up and discarded, longed-for moments of silence, and comical turns. By drawing the stuff of parenting, we bear witness to an on-going process that is inseparable from the *Artist-As-Parent-As-Artist's* work.

"But why," asks Anna, "would anyone be interested in drawings of my baby?" The question reveals the self-doubt behind the practice and I am driven to ask in response why would anyone be interested in photographs of urban detritus. Yet there is sufficient engagement with this abject subject matter for galleries and critics to generate exhibitions and critical theory. So we return to hierarchical values. Our cultural experience of images of childhood makes us (particularly women) wary. How do we avoid the appearance, as well as the actuality, of sentimentality? Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* famously presented her experience of motherhood through the lens of psychoanalysis, but it is not Townley and Bradby's intention to scrutinise the mother-child relationship. Rather, they consider the dynamics of the family as a whole. In spite of the changes that have taken place in our conception of what constitutes 'a family', it is still the basis of our social order. This means our economic structures still ensure that family reinforces the patriarchal order. It is the attempts to circumvent this, to negotiate a way of being (and becoming) in the world, that permeates *Artists-As-Parents-As-Artists*.

This in itself creates a fluidity of subject. Not only do Townley and Bradby observe the changes brought about by time, and by the acclimatization of their children into the social order, they must see the nature of the family itself as an unstable entity. Townley and Bradby's immediate family has changed from four to five in the last year, and the wider family will continue to expand and contract with inevitable impacts on individual members.

When we look for examples of the domestic as part of the discourse of the everyday, it features as an add-on: a product of feminist practices that attempt to make traditionally female activities more visible. Typically, these practices emerged from 1970s feminist practices and can be viewed from a distance as interesting but of their time. Writing about *Post-Partum Document* in 1976, Laura Mulvey suggests that Mary Kelly "...forces into public view the unacceptable combination of roles mother/artist - a slap in the face for old guard concepts of the artist as freewheeling genius...she organises this material in an attempt to turn the most unspoken and culturally repressed of everyday experiences (mother-child relationship) into an art work inspired by feminism and psychoanalysis".<sup>1</sup>

Can we still think of the mother-child relationship as 'culturally repressed'? While it is still an issue, focusing on the mother-child relationship alone allows us to ignore one of the central tenets of 1970s feminism - the demand for a radical overhaul of social relationships so that parenting and work are shared equally. This, rather than parenting alone, seems to be the territory that Townley and Bradby are navigating. By addressing parenting as a subject for art practice, they raise questions not only about social structures but about the expectations faced by contemporary artists.

For all the Cultural Studies absorbed over the past thirty years by those who now shape contemporary art practice, the view of the artist as a 'freewheeling genius' is arguably even more embedded in 2014 than it was in 1976. Leaving aside the now common artist's CV which declares the subject to be based in two separate capital cities, it is difficult to function at a high level within the art world unless one is prepared to adopt a semi-nomadic existence. As one artist observed "...I think that model of no ties is really romantic [but] there's life issues in that - always being away from my partner, and wanting a child...all those things that are normal and important".<sup>2</sup>

The implications are that either the artist, whilst flying from one cultural event to another, needs a partner to hold their social life intact, or else the artist foregoes a domestic life altogether. Needless to say, it is easier to fulfill this role if one is male or childless.

## II (Ethics)

I receive packages in the post: a film, a CD with scanned images of drawings, and a fat pack of 8" by 5" index cards. Looking through these and the notes that accompany them, it is clear that the work produced is a collaboration not only between the adults but also between the children. The index cards (Observation Cards) reveal the minutiae of parenting: recorded snatches of conversation, reflections on the development of language, descriptions of games and tantrums.

In the film, the children not only feature on screen, but also, as Townley and Bradby say in the notes they sent, "they control the filming style: jerky camerawork, continuous commentary on what's happening both in view and out of shot. The sudden changes of direction or topic...". It raises questions (discussed round the kitchen table) of definitions of collaboration and of the ethical issues involved in working with children.

At this point in the discussions, I had only encountered H and M, Townley & Bradby's eldest children, through their portrayal in the work. As I watch their antics on the screen, eavesdrop on their conversations and read about their actions and quarrels, I feel at an unfair advantage in relation to them.<sup>3</sup> I wonder whether they are aware that I have accessed their domestic life/private world and whether, when we do meet, they will think this meeting is my first impression of them.

The *Observation Cards* particularly make it feel as if I have intruded into a personal space. The domestic space is where we metaphorically let our guard down, where we behave in the ways negotiated through our family relationships without having to think about how we are perceived in the wider world. Listening to the conversations via Lawrence's notes, I become an observer of private games, collected treasures, invented language, sibling rivalry, parental frustrations and uncontrollable emotions. An interesting thread emerging from the Observation Cards relates to the concept of the everyday – not just Townley and Bradby's responses to their domestic everyday – but the children's experience of the everyday as novelty. If the everyday involves noticing what is commonly overlooked, Lawrence's record of H and M's observations presents them as experts in the field. From a tissue falling out of a stranger's pocket at the doctor to a dog riding in a bicycle basket to ants crawling along the ground, nothing is too trivial for their attention.

Looked at in combination with the drawings, something else starts to happen with these everyday observations. H and M's games and imaginations begin to activate slight, inanimate objects which in turn start to play a central role in the dramas that unfold. *Observation Card 155*, for example, shows a line drawing of two small, spotted, plastic dogs

whose existence generates extreme emotions and anxiety. Not only is this recorded as an observation, but Anna's drawings of these (and similar) objects also articulate something of this significance.

Recording incidents in the snatched moments available could easily result in a series of amusing or cute anecdotes of the 'kids say the funniest things' genre. This is not what emerges here. Introducing students to Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* for the first time usually prompts a question about how Kelly's son felt about being used as a subject for his mother's art, and this is a question that has been much discussed around the Townley/Bradby kitchen table in relation to their own practice. However, the the *Observation Cards*, through their number (261) and evenness of tone are, rather like *Post-Partum Document*, are records rather than responses, where amusing conversations in invented languages are given the same treatment as violent arguments over treasured possessions.

Whether it is possible to think of H and M as collaborators in this process depends on how one wants to define collaboration. Certainly their intellectual and artistic intent is not the same as an adult's, but their contribution to the practice is vital and to a greater or lesser extent, determines the development of the work. What is perhaps of more interest in this age of relentless screen presence is how this conscious involvement in making art will affect the children's sense of self. To some extent it could be argued that this is no different to other families where children's every move is recorded for posterity, but the Townley & Bradby collaboration is an investigation. Taking part not only involves collaborating in the making but also in the analysis and reflection so that arguably H,M and C will develop a more critical understanding of how images operate.

### III (Art)

I first get to meet H and M at an evening event at the Queen of Hungary art space where Townley and Bradby show some of their recent work. H & M engage with this in various ways: playing with some of the construction materials lying on the floor, running in and out and making comments to visitors about the various works. These consist of a film, '*Shadowing*', in which H stands behind a semi-opaque curtain mimicking the actions of the baby, C, who lies on the floor out of sight but whose gurgles provide the soundtrack; "*Parrot in the Window*", a photograph of a steamed up window (the detail noticed by H and the photograph taken by her parents); and *All Over Again*, two large photographs of Anna amongst the domestic chaos of the Townley/Bradby sitting room. These latter have become something of a reference point in my thinking about the everyday.

The event at Queen of Hungary is immediately followed by the inclusion of *Shadowing* and *Parrot in the Window*, along with the *Observation Cards*, in a *Clause Four*<sup>4</sup> exhibition. Here the domestic context brings a different vitality to the work, particularly *Shadowing*, where the sounds of a baby seem less unexpected but more compelling as they follow me from room to room. It also generates discussion about how the intended destination and ownership of the work affects the way it is seen and experienced; how the involvement of the family as makers and subjects in this work alters the way it is regarded. Several of our discussions broach questions of how appropriate (or not) it is to be using one's children as subjects for art practice; whether, at such a young age they can be said to consent to participation, and how they might view this practice when they are older. With this in mind, it is evident that when making work, *Artists-As-Parents-As-Artists* have additional problems to consider in choosing the location where the work becomes public.

In December we all go to the Photographers' Gallery to *Home Truths: Photography, Motherhood & Identity*, an exhibition which aims "to challenge long-held stereotypes and sentimental views of motherhood by addressing issues such as gender roles, domesticity, the body and the identity of individuals within the family unit"<sup>5</sup>. However, not only is there little in the exhibition that questions gender roles or the nature of domesticity, but most of the work presents motherhood in relation to the maternal body rather than any cultural context. Whilst this raises issues about the taboos associated with the maternal body and its

invisibility, both the content and 'glamour' of the photographs meant that the everydayness of parenting was largely conspicuous by its absence<sup>6</sup>.

Discussions about this circle around the photographic medium itself - is it inevitable that photography will glamorize its subject? I keep thinking back to the photographs of Anna in their sitting room surrounded by damp washing. I hesitate to use the term 'real' because of its psychoanalytical connotations, but the photographs capture something identifiable and familiar, turning a moment of everyday domesticity into something slightly strange: something that is more akin to the examples of the urban everyday cited above than to the representations of domesticity in *Home Truths*. What becomes clear about Townley and Bradby's processes is how their self-criticality enables them to produce something believable and beautiful whilst avoiding any sense of sentimentality or self-indulgence.

Round the kitchen table and on the train, punctuated by relevant and irrelevant input from H, M and C, we mull over the domestic and the everyday as we try to find an appropriate language for what Townley and Bradby's practice is, or is not. We pull apart my proposition that the everyday is dominated by the male and urban and attempt to think of examples of the domestic everyday outside of the feminist context filled by Mary Kelly. We dismiss Lawrence's suggestion that the still life genre might be domestic on the grounds that the focus for Cezanne, for example, was the apples rather than the family.

Ironically, it seems that Townley & Bradby's anxiety about their work is what makes it effective. Conscious of the sentimentality surrounding the parent (especially maternal)/child relationship, they are rigorously self-critical and this creates a curious detachment in the work. What their practice also does, because of the direct involvement of the whole family, is initiate long overdue and unresolved discussions about the nature of parenting and the nature of work. After all, as H observed, "all art is just chatting."

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<sup>1</sup> Mulvey, Laura, 'Post-Partum Document by Mary Kelly', in *Framing Feminism: Art & the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, ed. R Parker & G. Pollock, (London: Pandora, 1987), 203.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous artist in Judith Stewart *Objects of Exchange: The Role of the Artwork and the Artist in the Context of Social Inclusion*, (PhD Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007), 114.

<sup>3</sup> This feeling is not removed until our trip to London

<sup>4</sup> Clause Four, established in 2013, critiques the means by which art is distributed and exchanged. Artists invited to join the collection are those whose work contributes to a critical discourse in contemporary art and who are interested in developing alternative modes of distribution. Its inaugural exhibition, *Clause Four At Home*, took place in July 2013. For further information see [www.facebook.com/pages/Clause-Four/11739302184020?ref=ts&fref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Clause-Four/11739302184020?ref=ts&fref=ts)

<sup>5</sup> Press release for Home Truths, 17 July 2013,  
[www.thephotographersgallery.org.uk/photography-motherhood-and-identity](http://www.thephotographersgallery.org.uk/photography-motherhood-and-identity)

<sup>6</sup> The one exception to this was Katie Murray's video performance work *Gazelle* (2012).