
Cleaning Up in Public: Mother Art's Domestic Labor Performances, 1973–78

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In a photograph taken in 1977, a baby wrapped in a white blanket lies on its stomach atop a mustard-colored laundry-folding table (fig. 1). Arms outstretched, head lifted, the child fixes his or her gaze on a gridded black-and-white photographic artwork hanging from a laundry line. The infant was among the audience members present at a performance from the series *Laundry Works*, which was staged in laundromats across Los Angeles that year by the collective Mother Art. Founded at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in 1973, Mother Art brought together a group of women artists struggling to balance the demands of parenting with artistic practice. Helen Million-Ruby, Suzanne Siegel, Laura Silagi, and Christine (Christie) Kruse were the founding members, but additional participants joined and departed over the course of two decades. During this time, Mother Art collaboratively produced installations, organized exhibitions, and staged performances that drew attention to the invisible labor of women and caregivers while engaging with issues surrounding public space and access.

Although their exuberant performances and site-specific artworks attracted local interest and attention from prominent critics such as Lucy Lippard, toward the end of the 1970s Mother Art became a scapegoat for politicians eager to cut public funding to the arts and other social services deemed wasteful. These heated reactions, which dominated the news across California, emerged in the wake of a landmark referendum in 1978 that lowered property taxes, thus decreasing state revenue. The strong response to *Laundry Works* and its reliance on a California Arts Council grant contributed to an impassioned, city- and state-wide debate about the value of art in public life. Staged during the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s, which catalyzed the dismantling of the postwar welfare state, *Laundry Works* and the events and performances that Mother Art organized in its aftermath raise urgent questions that resonate today in light of the Trump administration's recent attacks on funding for art, research, and education.¹ Among them: How do gendered social-value systems inform access to public resources, including support for art? How does state funding legitimize certain artistic practices and sites while marginalizing others? And how do feminist artistic methodologies contribute to shaping the welfare state?



FIG. 1. — **Mother Art (US American, founded 1973)**. Infant audience member at the performance *Laundry Works*, 1977, Los Angeles, color slide (detail), 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60. Photograph by Mother Art.

In this article, I reconstruct Mother Art's most famous project, *Laundry Works*, and the backlash that it faced for its use of public funding. I argue that by performing domestic labor in public spaces, Mother Art highlighted the interdependent relationship between private care and public infrastructure, revealing how both are fueled by women's unpaid and underpaid work. The collective's performances underscore capitalism's reliance on social reproduction—the labor involved in maintaining human life and social relations across generations—a responsibility that has historically fallen primarily on women.² My research builds on historian Michelle Moravec's narrative chronology of Mother Art's twenty years of operation and arts researcher Elena Cologni's recent interview with Mother Art, which explores the collective's experiences at the Woman's Building through the ethics of care.³ Like Moravec and Cologni, I draw from original and published interviews with the artists. However, my study is primarily rooted in archival materials donated by Mother Art to the Getty Research Institute alongside documents held in the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art and at Bishopsgate Institute in London. Through close analysis of these records—including photographs, printed ephemera, press clippings, and newsletters—I trace Mother Art's political commitments, artistic process, and the contemporaneous reception of their work, including the controversy it confronted. These documents situate Mother Art's work within a wider historical context in which the social and economic value of women's labor was hotly contested. The intense yet underexamined media furor surrounding *Laundry Works* illuminates how debates about

public resources, art, gender, and labor were intersecting during the period shortly preceding and following Ronald Reagan's presidential victory, an event that accelerated the neoliberalization of American life.

Laundry Works and the discussions that engulfed it reveal deeply gendered tensions between individualism and community and the challenges of making room for difference in the public sphere. While all of Mother Art's members were white, some came from working-class backgrounds, several were single mothers, and at least two identified as lesbians. These intersecting identities informed the way Mother Art experienced the art world, the urban environment, and its members' roles as caregivers and creative practitioners. In my analysis, I position Mother Art's output within a tradition of politicized second-wave feminist performance art exploring domestic work, which raised public awareness of how divisions of labor are gendered, classed, racialized, and informed by sexual orientation.⁴ Artists performing domestic labor sought to challenge social reproduction's marginality by rendering this work visible and material in public spaces. During the same period, feminists and labor activists were similarly contesting the devaluation of women's work, and thus I read Mother Art's performances in dialogue with the welfare rights movement and the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Placing the collective's work within this wider sociopolitical context discloses how feminist artworks intervened in debates about gendered labor and the social and economic value of reproductive work. With their emphasis on the interconnections between art, work, care, and citizenry, Mother Art's domestic labor performances illustrate the reverberant political impact of feminist art presented in public.

Making Space at the Woman's Building

Mother Art members met as participants in the first Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), an extra-institutional educational program designed to train women artists in an environment free from male influence. Initiated in 1973, the FSW was a continuation of artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's Feminist Art Program, which ran from 1970 to 1971 at Fresno State College and from 1971 to 1975 at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).⁵ The Feminist Art Program was a groundbreaking experiment in offering a women-only curriculum in a higher-educational setting, and it yielded the landmark feminist installation *Womanhouse* (1972), created collectively by Chicago, Schapiro, and their students in a dilapidated East Hollywood Victorian mansion. However, Chicago soon grew disillusioned with the male-dominated environment at CalArts and sought an independent space where her program could operate autonomously. In partnership with graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and art historian Arlene Raven, Chicago cofounded the Woman's Building, a multifunctional center for feminist art initiatives, including educational workshops, galleries, and a bookstore. The organization operated from 1973 to 1991, occupying a warehouse in an industrial area near Chinatown for the majority of that period. In her study of gender and

neighborhood planning, historian Dolores Hayden enthusiastically describes the Woman's Building as a site "designed to create a political and cultural bridge between public and private life," thus complicating gendered divisions of labor.⁶ For artists working at the Woman's Building, this approach was foundational to feminist praxis, whose proponents heralded the slogan, "The personal is political." Many groups, including Mother Art, treated the organization as an operational center for a range of activities branching out into the city's urban sprawl.⁷

Although publicly accessible and open to new members, the Woman's Building was often viewed by outsiders as an enclave, and its focus on "women's culture" was fiercely contested by feminists into the 1980s, with certain factions arguing that such separatist projects sacrificed political action in favor of lifestyle.⁸ Nonetheless, the mission of the Woman's Building was rooted in the belief that ending patriarchy would not be possible without a feminist "cultural revolution," as Raven described it, with artistic production playing a key role.⁹ For organizers of the FSW, the curriculum presented an opportunity to fuse feminist politics with artistic methodology. Students met weekly in small consciousness-raising groups, where they learned to connect their personal experiences to societal systems of oppression.¹⁰ The effect of consciousness raising on students was twofold, according to instructor Ruth Iskin, who explains that group discussion "frees the women to do work and provides material from which work is made," thus becoming a "technique" of feminist artmaking.¹¹ For members of the Woman's Building, artistic practice and political action were inextricable, and creative self-expression represented a crucial channel for communicating women's experiences of oppression.

While many participants found the Woman's Building to be a transformative and generative space, Mother Art member Million-Ruby recalls feeling alienated by its dismissal of mothers and care work. She remembers a particularly painful critique with Chicago in which the artist told Million-Ruby that the only way in which the latter would succeed as an artist would be by abandoning her husband and children, moving to a loft downtown, and working on her own.¹² It is unclear whether Chicago's advice, as recalled by Million-Ruby, was intended as a personal instruction or a more general evaluation of the art world's professional realities. In any case, this recommendation reflects statements that Chicago has herself made about her own experience, including in her autobiography *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* of 1975, where she admits: "I felt convinced that the only way to make any progress in the art world was to remain unmarried, without children, live in a large loft, and present myself in such a way that I would have to be taken seriously."¹³ Here, Chicago echoes the era's prejudice that, unlike artmaking, motherhood could not be counted as a serious activity. This stereotype led many women to feel they had just two choices: forsake family life or drop out of the art world.

According to Mother Art, this binary mentality was reinforced at the Woman's Building, where they claim that children were not always welcome. Million-Ruby, Siegel, Silagi, and Kruse each remembered an FSW policy that permitted dogs in



FIG. 2. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). *Rainbow Playground*, 1974. Woman's Building, Los Angeles, color slide (detail), 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60. Photograph by Mother Art.

individual artist studios but not children, who were considered too disruptive.¹⁴ In response, Mother Art drew up plans for a playground in the abandoned lot facing the building. Working collectively with each other and their children, the artists used heavy machinery to fabricate a structure made of recycled wooden cable spools, on which they painted brightly colored circular patterns (fig. 2). The interactive installation, titled *Rainbow Playground* (1974), carved out physical space where artists and community members could gather with their families. Situated close to the Woman's Building yet noticeably separate from it, the monumental construction made visible in vibrant hues the exclusion of mothers from the art center. Within the Woman's Building, children were expected to follow a strict code of conduct, including not touching artworks. In contrast, outside of the building's imposing walls, *Rainbow Playground* invited visitors of all ages to interact with the installation, blurring the boundaries between artistic practice and care work, form and function, and intellectual pursuit and leisure.

The same lack of consideration for mothers and children shown by the Woman's Building has long characterized the urban design of Los Angeles and many other cities, as noted by feminist geographers including Hayden, Linda McDowell, Winifred Curran, and Leslie Kern, among others.¹⁵ Responsive at once to the Woman's Building and the city's larger urban context, *Rainbow Playground* was a utopian exercise in modeling the kind of support infrastructure Mother Art wished existed in Los Angeles and its arts institutions.¹⁶ The playground intervened into public space in an industrial warehouse

district near downtown Los Angeles, a part of the city that most would not have associated with childcare.

Film and photographic documentation shows that the production process was a collaborative effort involving the artists' children, who were present while their mothers operated the forklift, drilled cable spools together, and painted. In contrast to many works of site-specific sculpture created in early 1970s Los Angeles, *Rainbow Playground* was constructed according to the needs of an unconventional primary audience: young children. With its immediate utility, the installation diverged from male-dominated traditions of art in public space, which typically failed to challenge the gender inequalities built into the urban fabric.¹⁷ Reflecting on the spatial experiments of women artists in the latter half of the twentieth century, art historian Pamela Lee notes that images of Los Angeles "tend to repress or marginalize alternative visions of space produced by its female inhabitants conventionally left out of the official narratives of the city's history."¹⁸ Surrounded by concrete and fabricated from discarded materials, *Rainbow Playground* appears unmonumental, installed in a sand pit flanked by parking lots (see fig. 2). If the Woman's Building represented an infrastructural effort by feminists to challenge women's exclusion from the artistic profession, *Rainbow Playground* went further, questioning the very definition of the artist's purpose and identity as an urban citizen.

When they joined the FSW, Mother Art's members had hoped to find a space where care responsibilities and creative practice were intertwined, performed alongside one another rather than rigidly separated. In reality, they were faced with an arts center that ultimately differed little from the city's more established cultural institutions, which typically positioned artmaking as disconnected from the socially reproductive work integral to so many women's lives. The lack of inclusion that Mother Art members faced at traditional and alternative arts spaces led the collective to seek opportunities in the wider urban context beyond the gallery.

During the Wash and Dry Cycles

After producing *Rainbow Playground* and curating several motherhood-themed exhibitions at the Woman's Building, Mother Art embarked on a new project proposed by Million-Ruby: a series of public performances staged in laundromats across the city. Although Million-Ruby found washing clothes to be "the most boring thing in the world," dreading her visits to the laundromat, she recognized it as an important gathering space for women, particularly those from working-class backgrounds.¹⁹ Mother Art saw an opportunity to access wider audiences by situating their work in an overlooked space associated with women's household labor. They decided to align the content of their individual artworks with the site, focusing on cleaning and washing to "make the invisible traditional domestic tasks visible," as Silagi recalls.²⁰ Million-Ruby submitted a funding request to the California Arts Council, which granted the project \$700, and the collective began preparing.²¹

Between 3 November and 1 December 1977, the group mounted performances at five laundromats in lower- or mixed-income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods spread throughout Los Angeles.²² The artists selected laundromats that they regularly used in their own neighborhoods, seeking permission in advance from managers. This siting, across the city's urban sprawl, was rooted in the artists' intimate relationships with their own neighborhoods and activated what performance scholar Meiling Cheng describes as the "multicentric" character of Los Angeles. Analyzing the city's histories of performance art, Cheng argues: "The concept of multicentricity subverts the existing power structure, which takes for granted the boundary between the 'majority' and the 'minority,' between 'dominant' cultures and 'marginal' others. The multicentric paradigm consequently has the potential to become a resistant strategy for those who are involuntarily relegated to the margins by the existing power structure."²³ While the performance series certainly did not extend to the city's expansive boundaries, its dispersed unfolding reached some of the neighborhoods and communities often left out of the city's professional arts ecosystem. In this way, the work functioned as an exercise in remapping Los Angeles's creative hubs through spaces associated with menial—rather than artistic—labor.

To advertise the series, Mother Art listed the full schedule of performances on a black-and-white poster featuring a close-up photograph of a washing machine and basket of laundry on grassy terrain (fig. 3). The household apparatus installed at the center of a bucolic scene absent of evident power outlets is at once humorous and confounding. Dislocated from the domestic environment and all possibilities of functionality, the appliance becomes sculptural, recalling the industrial aesthetic of minimalist art. Hung up in public spaces around the city, the poster's unusual composition would have likely piqued the interest of passersby uncertain of what was being marketed. Mother Art members recall, however, that they primarily relied on friends, neighbors, and fellow artists to publicize the event by word of mouth.²⁴

On the day of each performance, the group showed up shortly before the official start time with artworks stashed in wicker laundry hampers. As performances were tied to the single wash and dry cycle, this limited the artists to a short window of time ranging from between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. When the Mother Art members arrived at the laundromat, they would start a load of wash, then jump onto the machines, string up the clothesline, hang their work, interact with visitors, and pass out their informational brochure before taking everything down again after the dry cycle ended. Often they remained at the laundromat following the performance to continue conversing with their audience, which sometimes numbered 150 people.²⁵

Due to these spatial and conceptual constraints, the artworks were modest in scale and easily transportable. Silagi printed photographs of the ocean on diaphanous white fabric, which she dipped in water and pinned up to dry in situ. Million-Ruby took photographs of women doing laundry and placed them alongside images of the objects laundered. Gesturing toward the repetitive and draining experience of washing laundry, Siegel created a portrait of herself as a washerwoman that she faded by

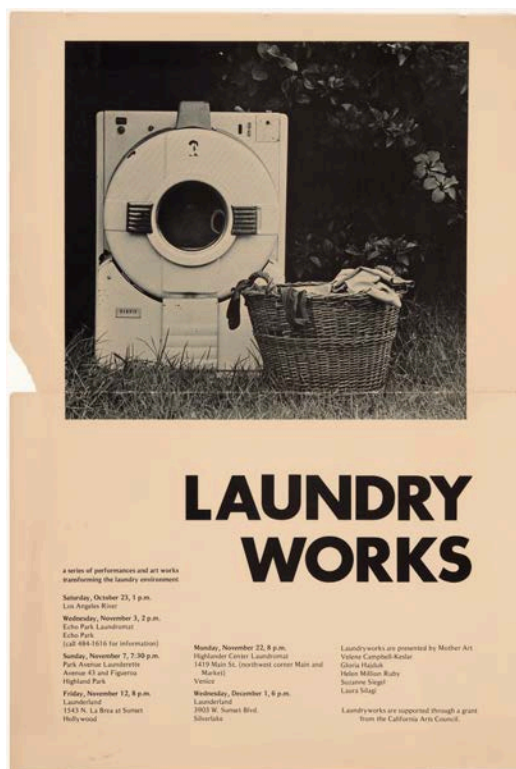


FIG. 3. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). Poster publicizing *Laundry Works*, 1977, 28 cm × 41.1 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

xeroxing it into oblivion. In a sculptural installation, member Gloria Hajduk juxtaposed towel collages with stuffed nylon stockings on which she printed clichéd sayings about women and cleaning. And writer and member Velene Campbell-Keslar stenciled lines of poetry onto pillowcases, which she allowed audience members to select and hang themselves, thereby producing unexpected combinations of text. Most of the works were designed to be pinned up along a clothesline that zigzagged across the laundromat, transforming the already compact space into a labyrinthine environment (fig. 4). Chaotic and improvisational, the performative installation rejected the organizational logic of the white-cube gallery space. Instead, *Laundry Works* fostered a dynamic, convivial atmosphere in which artists, audience members, and launderers orbited close to the art.

Formally, the works on view were intimate in scale. They were accumulative, individually created for the collective installation. Most of the artists began with objects associated with the domestic environment, including pillowcases, fabric sheets, towels, and nylon stockings. By employing textile materials, the artists created an immediate relation between the artistic form and the site of its reception. Contrasted with the industrial materials of minimalist sculpture, which often referenced blue-collar factory work, the objects produced by Mother Art incorporated the softer materials of domestic labor and the home.



FIG. 4. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). View of the performance *Laundry Works*, Highlander Center Laundromat, Los Angeles, 22 November 1977, color slide (detail), 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60. Photograph by Mother Art.

Similarly, the collective's artworks were not designed for a distanced, contemplative gaze but were handled like everyday household textiles. The artists pulled their work out of a laundry hamper, pinned the pieces up, took them down again, and folded them away in a process that mirrored the actual labor of laundering. The timing of the wash-and-dry cycle structured each performance with a kind of score attuned to the rhythms of housework. *Laundry Works* was staged at a time when artists, including many engaging with feminist politics, were producing performative artworks that experimented with duration, repetition, and boredom. This artistic centering of process has been widely understood as a reaction to the commodification of the art object in a postwar economy driven by consumer capitalism. Feminist artists such as Mother Art and their colleagues at the Woman's Building were exploring process through the lens of gendered temporal experiences and labor practices, such as performing household work.²⁶

In light of the public context in which *Laundry Works* was presented, Mother Art endeavored to make the series as accessible as possible to the laundromats' unsuspecting clientele. The artists produced a multipage brochure with a short introduction to the project in English and Spanish in which they described the performances as an exploration of "woman's role in the community."²⁷ The brochure's center spread featured concise individual statements from each of the artists, coupled with images playfully hung along a hand-drawn clothesline (fig. 5). While Siegel estimates that the majority of audience members were there specifically to witness the performance, at least a quarter of those present were just washing their clothes.²⁸

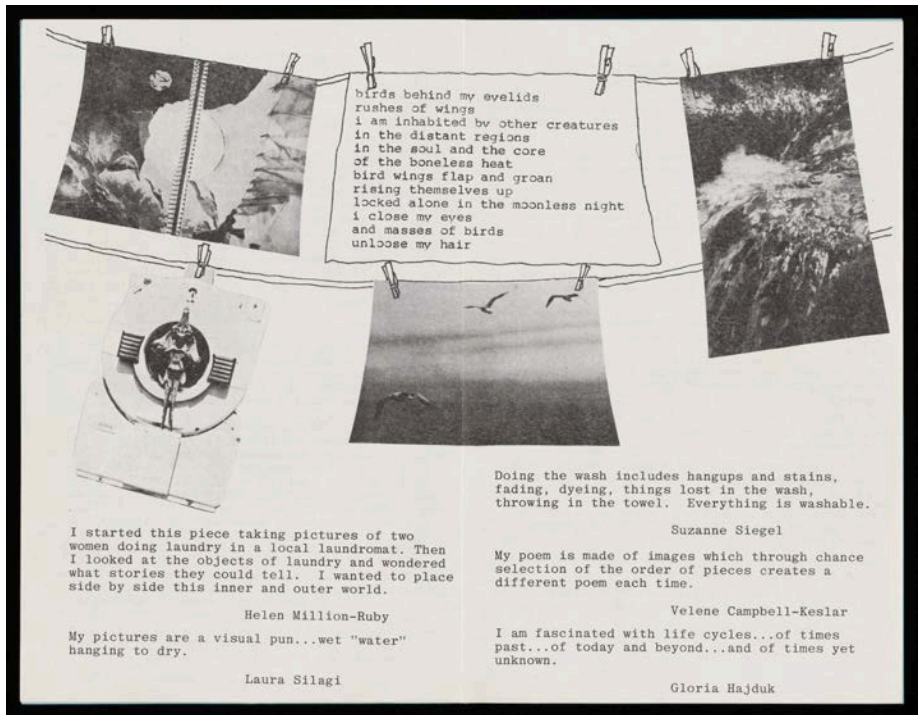


FIG. 5. — **Mother Art (US American, founded 1973).** Interior spread of the brochure from *Laundry Works*, 1977, 21.6 × 28 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

For those simply there to wash, the interpretive pamphlet helped contextualize the performance within a conversation about the forms of labor disproportionately performed by women and working-class people and everyday experience. Members of the collective handed out the texts themselves, as evidenced in photographs that capture Million-Ruby smiling and chatting with groups of individuals who hold pamphlets and bags of laundry.²⁹ These organic conversations, sparked by the artworks and the brochure, were integral to the performance, which sought to create discussion and solidarity.

Yet in a colorful review of the Venice performance, journalist Barry Brennan notes that “not everyone was impressed.”³⁰ He describes “a white robed swami” who ignored the performance and continued washing his clothes while “calling on his considerable powers of concentration to abstract himself from what had become, in effect, an art opening.”³¹ Brennan’s observation underlines the tension between the artists, the art-world audience, and the laundromat’s regular customers, particularly along lines of racialization and class. Although the performances took place in neighborhoods where the artists lived, the collective invited a predominantly white audience into spaces normally occupied by diverse community members, which sometimes resulted in misunderstandings. For example, the collective initially wore fantastical masks collaged with photographs of bones and clothespins (fig. 6). However, they retired the masks after patrons at the Echo Park Laundromat grew apprehensive, fearing the women were



FIG. 6. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). Mask worn during the performance of *Laundry Works*, Echo Park Laundromat, Los Angeles, 3 November 1977, black-and-white photograph, 28 × 35.5 cm. Photograph by Mother Art. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

planning to rob them. While the artists expressed a desire for wider public outreach and democratization of art, a power differential existed between them and the laundromat clientele that remained unresolved.

While most participants reported enjoying the lively atmosphere, the art objects were subject to criticism. In his review, Brennan expresses enthusiasm for Mother Art's intervention into public space but quickly clarifies that, "from a strictly esthetic point of view, 'Laundryworks' [sic] isn't impressive." He insists: "The imagery, while personal, doesn't rise above the derivative to achieve the universal."³² Brennan's review is, ironically, derivative itself, parroting one of the most repeated critiques of women's artwork during the 1970s: that it was lacking in quality. Like many male critics of the time, he offers no definition of the "the universal," a concept that women and artists of color were actively contesting for its normalization of a masculine, middle-class, European and US American worldview. Whose work is considered "universal" is deeply gendered, as art historian Anna Chave construes in her analysis of minimalist art and biography.³³ Chave argues that in the 1960s, the predominant critical paradigm shifted to deemphasize the artist as an individual—yet this only applied to men's work. In the rare instances that women artists received critical attention, their work was interpreted as autobiographical—the kind of "personal" content that critics such as Brennan considered lesser than, or "derivative."

In fact, Mother Art arguably did see their work as manifesting a kind of universality, although one arguably different from that espoused by Brennan and other formalist critics. In response to the survey question “What is feminist art?” that curators Iskin, Lippard, and Raven circulated to hundreds of women artists as part of their 1976 exhibition of the same name at the Woman’s Building, the collective wrote: “As Mother Art we remove the mask of invisibility, wipe away the strained smile of forced roles. . . . We insist upon the extraordinariness of the ordinary, the magic in the commonplace. We invent our own myths of motherhood which universally connect us to the past, the present and the future through birth, growth, and death.”³⁴

Even at the time, this mission statement would likely have elicited accusations of essentialism from members of the feminist art community who considered celebratory explorations of embodiment—including pregnancy and motherhood—regressive. While some feminist artists of the era were addressing female experience through the figure of the primordial fertility goddess, many others were deeply critical of embracing any concept of so-called universal experience or values, especially through figures and processes that rooted female identity in the biological sense.³⁵ As many feminists have pointed out, women and mothers are not interchangeable categories. Still, art historian Rosemary Betterton argues, “The maternal body is a symbolic construct with enormous cultural resonance, systematically shaped and produced through competing discourses and practices, yet at the same time curiously unacknowledged in terms of its visual history.”³⁶ For Mother Art, motherhood served as a site for problematizing the universal and exposing how this concept had been historically mobilized to normalize a masculine worldview. At the time of *Laundry Works*, definitions of motherhood would have necessarily excluded men. For this reason, the collective’s reference to the universal in their artist statement is provocative and perhaps laced with irony, revealing the limits of the claims to universality that critics such as Brennan employed as legitimizing discourse.

It is evident that Mother Art also considered motherhood a broadly accessible entry point for confronting systemic inequalities, including the devaluation of socially reproductive labor. As an experience shared by billions across the world and throughout history, motherhood presented an opportunity to produce affinities crossing boundaries of class, race, sexual orientation, and national identity. In *Laundry Works*, the artists and attendees met in the laundromat as fellow mothers but also as fellow workers. The artists emphasized this point in their brochure, which featured a questionnaire designed to spark conversation. The list ended with a question evocative of a workers’ inquiry or management survey, asking audience members: “Do you feel lonely, irritated, satisfied doing this job?”³⁷ Here, Mother Art encouraged their audience to view laundering, a household chore, as labor. This provocation reinforces arguments by social reproduction theorists such as International Wages for Housework Campaign cofounder Silvia Federici, who maintains that recognizing and valuing domestic labor as work—rather than as a selfless act of love—is a precondition for resisting exploitative conditions.³⁸ With *Laundry Works*, Mother Art insisted upon the arguably universal

truth that women's care work has always fueled the world, and, under capitalism, has been denied visibility as labor.³⁹ By siting their performances in locations connected to household work, Mother Art highlighted how the overlooked spaces of gendered labor are essential to the functioning of both public life and the private sector.

A “Boondoggle” in the State Budget

Nearly half a year after Mother Art closed their final performance of *Laundry Works*, the project became the focus of delayed public attention beyond any of the artists' expectations. In June 1978, California voters passed a referendum that promised to drastically cut property taxes, with enormous repercussions for the state budget. Widely considered one of the most influential US American referenda of the twentieth century, Proposition 13 won 65 percent of the vote in a seismic “tax revolt” that rippled across the country.⁴⁰ Political sociologist Isaac William Martin argues that the referendum's success was part of a larger social movement that portended Reagan's landslide victory in the 1980 presidential election, with effects felt to the present day.⁴¹ Although popular with the state's voting public, the proposition inspired intense debate, with opponents—including unions, teachers, the Democratic Party, and the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board—warning of devastating impacts on social services. Once the referendum passed, state legislators were forced to find ways to reduce spending, and Mother Art became a target.

A little over a week after Proposition 13 was approved, journalist W. B. Rood published an article in the *Los Angeles Times* describing the need to “cut fat” in the state budget. Rood lists a number of “wasteful” expenditures as examples, including *Laundry Works*, which he sneeringly describes as an attempt at “providing a little culture for housewives.”⁴² These condescending remarks are rooted in a longer history of discrediting mothers who claim public financial support, with attacks frequently articulated in classist and racist terms.⁴³ Rood's criticisms appeared at the same time as the stigmatizing “welfare queen” stereotype was gaining traction in the 1970s mass media. In response to these kinds of derogatory judgments, welfare recipients—especially women of color—publicly advocated for themselves, forming grassroots groups such as the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO).⁴⁴ One of its leaders was the Los Angeles-based former laundry worker Johnnie Tillmon, who compared welfare to an abusive, controlling marriage in an influential 1972 article published in the mainstream feminist movement's flagship magazine *Ms.*⁴⁵ Directing her message at the periodical's middle-class readership, Tillmon challenges the framing of welfare claimants as dependents of the state and instead situates their underappreciated, often invisible work inside and outside of the home as indispensable to the functioning of society. Tillmon makes the case for a system that might today be described as universal basic income, a proposition that later feminist campaigns such as International Wages for Housework would continue to develop.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in a newsletter of 1977, the Los Angeles Wages for Housework Committee (LAWFHC) expressed disapproval of

both higher property taxes and cuts to public infrastructure, arguing that the home is a workplace for women and, as such, should not be taxed at a higher rate than businesses. It contended: “The government is trying to make us pay—either through higher taxes or cuts in services or both. By dividing us into homeowners, renters, welfare mothers, suburban housewives and city housewives, it has divided our struggle and turned us against each other. While some of us are fighting to cut the budget, others of us fight to increase social services. We refuse to be divided against ourselves! We are all housewives.”⁴⁷

The LAWFHC considered the debate around Proposition 13 polarizing, splintering women as a political class. Instead, the group advocated for increased taxes on corporations, which they believed directly benefited from women’s work performed in the private home and the public sector. When Rood dismissed Mother Art and their audience as “housewives,” he ironically reinforced the LAWFHC’s subversive claim that “we are all housewives,” which the group treated as a feminist rallying cry. The LAWFHC considered the housewife a symbol of women’s oppression under capitalism, using the oft-belittled figure to advocate for a diverse coalition of women and working-class subjects united through the unpaid and underpaid domestic labor they perform with little recognition. *Laundry Works* sought to bring together this broad base of community in physical space through a performative intervention into the sphere of domestic labor, a project critics such as Rood deemed insignificant.

While feminists including Mother Art envisioned a united coalition of reproductive workers, they often overlooked issues related to race. This oversight led International Wages for Housework Campaign activists to form the subgroup Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWWFH), which maintained close ties to the welfare rights movement. In her history of the Wages for Housework campaign, historian Emily Callaci argues that BWWFH organizers considered their movement a continuation of the Black freedom struggle, with leader Wilmette Brown arguing that Black welfare mothers demanded wages for housework “as damages; as back pay for all the unpaid and unwaged work of plantation and domestic slavery; as reparations.”⁴⁸ As white women, Mother Art’s members would not have been the primary targets of the “welfare queen” stereotype and the state’s most violent and racialized policies, but they were nonetheless implicated in the demonization of women who deviated from the heterosexual nuclear family model, particularly the collective’s members who were queer and/or single parents. Mother Art members understood that an attack directed at *Laundry Works* was an attack leveled at all who performed low-status care and survival work.

The media scapegoating of Mother Art had longevity, and references to the group appear in news articles into the early 1980s. Art historian Larne Abse Gogarty argues that the backlash over *Laundry Works* illustrates how “the New Deal consensus over the necessity for welfare and public spending was largely diminished by the end of the 1970s, with art positioned as especially wasteful when it sought to address social need.”⁴⁹ The controversy arguably reached its zenith when former California Governor Reagan referenced Mother Art on a radio commentary titled “Waste” in late 1978.⁵⁰

Reagan apparently mentioned the collective again shortly following his presidential inauguration in 1981, according to an article by *Los Angeles Times* theater critic Dan Sullivan, who detailed a phone conversation he had had with Reagan. In the call, Sullivan recounts valiantly defending the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) while conceding that public funding of Mother Art represented a budgetary “boondoggle.”⁵¹ Sullivan refers to *Laundry Works* as “silly stuff” and “a flaky project” while printing factual errors about the work, including overstating the grant amount by more than double and failing to clarify that the project was supported by the California Arts Council (CAC), not the NEA.⁵² Alongside Reagan, Sullivan joins the chorus of ill-informed critics who made no effort to learn more about the work, instead quickly dismissing it as a “waste” of time and resources, not even worth properly researching.

While they represented a frequent target in the firestorm surrounding Proposition 13, the members of Mother Art were not the only artists affected by discussions around funding. In a state senate debate of 1978, Republican representative Dennis Carpenter ripped into the CAC for supporting artists whom he generalized as “the underbelly of society,” producers of “trash” that “normal people” would not consider art.⁵³ This kind of inflammatory language inspired Mother Art to join forces with a group of other artists and cultural leaders to co-organize an event they described as “an evening of open dialogue about the arts.”⁵⁴ On 27 August 1978 a group gathered in the courtyard of the Los Angeles City Hall for a convening called Art for Public Consumption, which included music, performances, a group dinner, and speeches by Million-Ruby and artists Judy Baca, Suzanne Jackson, Allan Kaprow, Leslie Labowitz, and John Outterbridge, among others (fig. 7). The flyer promised a “unique gastronomical and intellectual event” and featured a black-and-white graphic of a hand pointing up to touch the base of a heart and flanked on either side by a fork and a paintbrush, suggesting that art, like food, provides essential nourishment (fig. 8). The program was covered for the *Los Angeles Times* by Suzanne Muchnic, an art critic who was also listed in the program as a speaker. Muchnic describes a relaxed and convivial atmosphere, which is reflected in photographs of the event; she also recounts participants engaging in serious debate about art’s role in society.⁵⁵ According to Muchnic’s account, Kaprow entreated his fellow artists not to beg for handouts, which he considered “demeaning,” while critic Peter Plagens professed that, in artmaking, “public outcry is part of the territory,” instructing his audience not to compromise their artistic vision when faced with public pressure.⁵⁶ Presenting a slightly more optimistic perspective, Hugh Stevenson, aide to Councilman Joel Wachs, suggested that the uproar surrounding Proposition 13 could present a starting point for further discussion and encouraged artists to educate public officials about their work. Even when confronting the defamatory characterization of their work as waste, Los Angeles artists responded by bringing their community together in dialogue and solidarity. While legislators and critics in the press accused them of squandering public funds, Mother Art treated Art for Public Consumption as an opportunity to defend the social value of creative and reproductive labor while protesting the structural inequalities that underpin the distribution of public funds.



FIG. 7. — Documentation of Art for Public Consumption, an event co-organized by Mother Art, 27 August 1978, Los Angeles City Hall, black-and-white photograph, 12 × 9 cm. Photographer(s) not identified. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.



FIG. 8. — Flyer publicizing Art for Public Consumption, an event co-organized by Mother Art, Los Angeles City Hall, 27 August 1978, 22 × 35.6 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

Cleaning Up Real Waste

In addition to co-organizing Art for Public Consumption, Mother Art fired back at their critics through a 1978 performance work titled *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, instigated in response to Proposition 13 and the publication of Rood's *Los Angeles Times* article. The performance was the second in a series; the first, titled *Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks*, was produced in connection with the College Art Association Conference of 1978 and involved Mother Art members cleaning the facades of two financial institutions along Wilshire Boulevard. The second performance took place at City Hall; Siegel, Silagi, and Hajduk recall that it was primarily done for the purpose of documentation.⁵⁷ As in the earlier performance, Mother Art members brought an assortment of cleaning supplies and proceeded to sweep, mop, dust, and scrub the building's stately exterior. The performance pointed out the hypocrisy involved in singling out a low-budget performance as waste when arts funding accounted for only a miniscule portion of federal, state, and local budgets. Real waste, Mother Art's piece suggested, is generated by corporate greed and the legislators who back business interests over communities.

The photographs that capture the event highlight the inefficiency of the artists' efforts. In one image, Silagi dusts the ground, while Million-Ruby attempts to wash the building's towering facade with a mop (fig. 9). The women are dwarfed by the vast expanse of wall surrounding them, emphasizing the impossibility of their task. Armed with meager feather dusters and tiny buckets, Mother Art members clearly lack the appropriate tools to tackle the job. The artists appear to acknowledge the absurdity of their situation; in one photograph, the three women slump at a bench, with Million-Ruby and Silagi slouching over the cleaning equipment while Siegel stretches back on the seat, perhaps accepting defeat and indulging in a moment of rest (fig. 10). For Mother Art, the futility of these repetitive gestures was meant as a metaphor, symbolizing "the lack of power women have to affect [sic] changes in institutions."⁵⁸ Their seemingly pointless actions may also have served as a humorous riposte to critics who accused the artists of frivolity and flakiness. While undoubtedly satirical, Mother Art insists that "these were critical gestures" pointing to urgent political issues.⁵⁹ The performance served as a powerful reminder that when public spending is cut, additional unpaid labor falls largely on women, who take on formerly state-supported, socially reproductive work without compensation (for example, by volunteering at understaffed schools). Art historian Andrea Liss argues the performance was "simultaneously creating commentary on real fiscal waste and articulating the powerful bonds between women's domestic and public spaces."⁶⁰



FIG. 9. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). View of the performance *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, 1978, black-and-white photograph from contact sheet, 2.5 × 3.7 cm (image); 23.5 × 18 cm (sheet). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

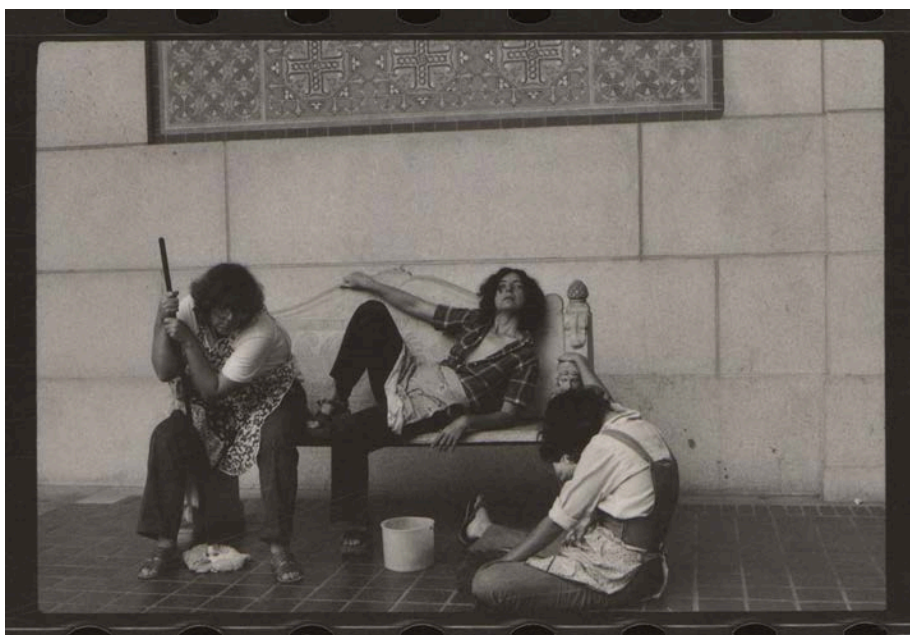


FIG. 10. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). View of the performance *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, 1978, black-and-white photograph from contact sheet, 2.5 × 3.7 cm (image); 23.5 × 18 cm (sheet). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

Driven by a desire to link labor performed in private and public spaces, Mother Art's work contributed to a larger movement of politicized feminist performance and institutional critique that challenged sexist value systems. In a fall 1978 issue of *High Performance*, the collective reflected on their *Cleans Up* performances, describing the series as "a verbal and a visual pun about the role of women as purifiers and domestic sanitation workers of the world."⁶¹ These comments situate Mother Art's engagement with local struggles within a broader, transnational context—or as the artists term it, the world. *Laundry Works* and the *Cleans Up* series align Mother Art with other second-wave feminist artists exploring gendered divisions of labor, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose landmark performances *Touch Sanitation* (1979–80) and *Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside* (1973) "address the unrecognized labor of domesticity and sanitation" (fig. 11).⁶² Ukeles is perhaps best known for coining the phrase "maintenance art" in a manifesto of 1969, in which she advocated an artistic practice eroding the binary split dividing productive and reproductive labor, or "development" and "maintenance," as she describes it, using the New York City Department of City Planning's terminology.⁶³



FIG. 11. — Mierle Laderman Ukeles (US American, b. 1939). *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, 1973, performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Part of Ukeles's Maintenance Art performance series, 1973–74. Image © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

The feminist political investments articulated in performances by Ukeles and Mother Art are reflected in numerous artworks produced by women artists across different parts of the world, demonstrating that Mother Art was not alone in probing issues related to domestic labor and care. In France, Argentine artist Lea Lublin installed a nursery at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (City of Paris Museum of Modern Art), where her performance *Mon fils* (My son; 1968) involved publicly caring for her infant son in the gallery.⁶⁴ In Poland, Anna Kutera dipped a broom in black paint and swept it across a white canvas laid out on the floor of her studio, a work she called *Feminist Painting* (1973). In Spain, the feminist collective Les Nyakes scrubbed the floors at the Primeres Jornades Catalanes de la Dona (First Catalan Women's Conference) in 1976, organized in Barcelona shortly after dictator Francisco Franco's death. In Brazil, artist Letícia Parente filmed herself lying face down on an ironing board while her maid ran an iron over her body, a performance for the camera titled *Tarefa I* (Assignment I; 1982). Although these artists were not always aware of each other's work, transnational and transcultural exchanges did occur. Mexican artist Mónica Mayer, a student at the FSW, wrote about Mother Art in her master's thesis in 1980.⁶⁵ Three years later, Mayer went on to cofound the collective Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder) with artist Maris Bustamante in Mexico City, where they staged performances exploring the labor of mothering, positioning domestic labor as a political issue.⁶⁶ Individually and, even more so, collectively, these groundbreaking performances challenge perspectives that consider social reproduction to be women's biological destiny rather than labor that supports capitalist production. Through performative artworks often presented in public spaces, feminist artists became agents of societal transformation, working toward the as-yet-unrealized goal of ending labor exploitation governed by patriarchal oppression.

When making *Laundry Works* and *Cleans Up*, Mother Art was guided by an interest in questioning the very meaning of public art, asking how the siting of artwork in spaces of common use can inspire radical change to everyday life. In his review of *Laundry Works*, Brennan reassured his readers that the artists were not "wild-eyed art revolutionaries," yet his evaluation is belied by statements that the artists made at the time as well as later, which suggest that they saw their project as transgressive. In a 2005 interview, Mother Art reflected: "There was something absolutely, wonderfully material about dealing with the sheer transformation of dirty clothes—wet, dry and the cycle, the literal revolution—and the metaphors are ripe for connections with social revolution, perhaps even something unimagined, perhaps utopian."⁶⁷ The seismic societal shifts Mother Art envisioned and sought to enact through their work gesture toward a future in which care and community are prioritized, a future yet to be determined.

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Notes

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1. David Harvey argues that the “neoliberal turn” was already in motion during the early 1970s but acknowledges 1978–80 as a “revolutionary turning point” in world history with the elections of Deng Xiaoping in China, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan in the United States, coinciding with US Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker’s influence on monetary policy in this period. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

2. For more on the history of social reproduction in feminist theory and practice, see Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (Pluto Press, 2019); and Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017).

3. Michelle Moravec, “Mother Art: Feminism, Art and Activism,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 5, no. 1 (2003): 69–77; and Elena Cologni and Mother Art Collective, “Mother(ings): From the Home to the Planet. A Dialogue Between Mother Art Collective and Elena Cologni,” in *Art for the Sake of Care*, ed. Merel Visse and Elena Cologni special issue, *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 25, no. 1 (September 2024): <http://doi.org/10.26209/ije25si1.6>.

4. Here I build on art historical studies on the treatment of domestic labor in 1970s feminist performance, including Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (2000): 71–97; and Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

5. When Chicago resigned from CalArts in 1973 to found the Woman’s Building, Schapiro continued the Feminist Art Program until she left the school in 1975.

6. Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (W. W. Norton, 1984), 223.

7. Feminist Studio Workshop faculty member Suzanne Lacy and artist Leslie Labowitz formed Ariadne: A Social Art Network, an activist feminist group that advocated to end violence against women. While at the Woman’s Building, Lacy and Labowitz produced performances

protesting rape and gender-based violence, including *Three Weeks in May* (1977) and *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977). The performance collective The Waitresses, founded in 1977 by artists Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin, used their experiences in food service as a starting point for addressing feminist issues around working-class women’s labor.

8. For more on the criticisms of “cultural feminism,” see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019); and Andrea Long Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism,” *Differences* 30, no. 1 (2019): 63–81.

9. Arlene Raven, quoted in Ruth Iskin, “Feminist Education at the Feminist Studio Workshop,” in *Learning Our Way: Essays in Feminist Education*, ed. Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Pollack (The Crossing Press, 1983), 172.

10. For more on the influence of consciousness-raising on feminist artistic practice, see Amy Tobin, “I’ll Show You Mine, If You Show Me Yours: Collaboration, Consciousness-Raising and Feminist-Influenced Art in the 1970s,” *Tate Papers*, no. 25 (2016), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/25/i-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours>.

11. Iskin, “Feminist Education,” 174.

12. Laura Silagi, Deborah Krall, and Suzanne Siegel, dirs., *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 40 minutes, 2012, Vimeo video, 3:10. Motherart.org, <https://motherart.org/mother-art-tells-her-story-video/>.

13. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Anchor Books, 1975), 41.

14. Siegel, quoted in Moravec, “Mother Art,” 70; and Million-Ruby and Kruse, quoted in Laura Silagi, Deborah Krall, and Suzanne Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 1–2, 2011–13, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), Mother Art records, 1973–2017, 2017.M.60, box 1, folder 11. In an interview from 17 July 2024 conducted over e-mail with Siegel and Silagi, the artists confirmed their memories of this policy, which they state was collectively determined by women in the Feminist Studio Workshop, a majority of whom were younger and did not have children. Beyond the artists’ recollections, I have not located

documentation regarding specific rules about dogs or children at the FSW. In her memoir of the Woman's Building, artist Terry Wolverton describes debate erupting over male children being excluded from the building and dogs not being permitted in the dorms. Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building* (City Lights, 2002), 33.

15. See, for example, Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (MIT Press, 1982); Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Winifred Curran, *Gender and Gentrification* (Routledge, 2017); and Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (Verso, 2020).

16. Efforts to create care infrastructure in the urban environment echo earlier initiatives by US American women during the Progressive Era who saw the city as an extension of women's domain in the home. For more on this movement to improve public sanitation, health, and social welfare, which became known as municipal housekeeping, see Ann Oakley, *Women, Peace and Welfare: A Suppressed History of Social Reform, 1880–1920* (Policy Press, 2023).

17. See Rosalyn Deutsche's critique of urban geographers' universalizing analyses of the postmodern city and its visual representations: Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (MIT Press, 2002).

18. Pamela M. Lee, "Construction Sites: Women Artists in California and the Production of Space-Time," in *Art/Women/California, 1950–2000: Parallels and Intersections*, ed. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (University of California Press, 2002), 275.

19. Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 7, Mother Art records, GRI.

20. Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 7.

21. \$700 in 1977 would amount to approximately \$3,800 in 2024, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI (Consumer Price Index) Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

22. The series began on 23 October with a performance that involved washing clothing in the Los Angeles River, a 51-mile-long engineered waterway for storm runoff. The laundromat performances took place at Echo Park Laundromat (3 November), Park Avenue Launderette in Highland Park (7 November), Launderland in Hollywood (12 November),

Highlander Center Laundromat in Venice (22 November), and Launderland in Silverlake (1 December).

23. Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (University of California Press, 2002), 13.

24. Laura Silagi and Suzanne Siegel, e-mail interview with the author, 17 July 2024.

25. In his article for the *Evening Outlook*, Barry Brennan claims more than one hundred fifty people attended the Venice performance. Barry Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," *Evening Outlook*, 27 November 1976, 7A. In an unpublished letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* from 1978, Mother Art claims that one performance had an audience numbering two hundred. Gloria Hajduk et al., unpublished letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1978, Mother Art records, GRI, box 1, folder 5.

26. See Alexandra Juhasz, "A Process Archive: The Grand Circularity of Woman's Building Video," in *Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building*, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry, and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Ben Maltz Gallery; Otis College of Art and Design, 2012), 97–123.

27. Mother Art, *Laundry Works* brochure, 1977, n.p., Mother Art records, GRI, box 2, folder 7.

28. Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 9.

29. Still image in Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, *Mother Art Tells Her Story*.

30. Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," 7A.

31. Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," 7A.

32. Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," 7A.

33. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (2000): 149–63.

34. Mother Art, response to "What is Feminist Art?," ca. 1976–77, Woman's Building records, 1970–1992, Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, digital ID: 12899, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/mother-art-response-to-what-feminist-art-12899>.

35. "The Great Goddess Debate" of the 1970s and 80s epitomized a perceived schism in the feminist art community between an essentialist and social-constructivist approach to gendered experience. However, numerous art historians have criticized this binary as an oversimplification of more nuanced perspectives. See Molesworth,

"House Work and Art Work"; and Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 248–63.

36. Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* (Manchester University Press, 2014), 1.

37. Mother Art, *Laundry Works* brochure, n.p.

38. In her 1975 pamphlet *Wages Against Housework*, Federici writes: "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work." Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Falling Wall Press, 1975), 1.

39. Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman, "Without Reserves," in Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 43.

40. See Arthur O'Sullivan et al., *Property Taxes and Tax Revolts: The Legacy of Proposition 13* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Isaac William Martin, *The Permanent Tax Revolt: How the Property Tax Transformed American Politics* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

41. Martin, *The Permanent Tax Revolt*, 50.

42. W. B. Rood, "Legislators Seek Ways to Cut Fat, Don't Have Far to Look," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1978.

43. Perhaps the most infamous denunciation of mothers receiving welfare was politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* of 1965, prepared for the US Department of Labor's Office of Policy Planning and Review, in which Moynihan argued that single mothers were responsible for poverty and crime in Black communities. Even though his analysis received intense criticism, it had lasting impact on the perception of women welfare recipients, particularly mothers of color.

44. For more detailed histories of the welfare rights movement, see Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (Routledge, 2004); and Priya Kandaswamy, *Domestic Contradictions: Race and Gendered Citizenship from Reconstruction to Welfare Reform* (Duke University Press, 2021).

45. Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare Is a Woman's Issue," *Ms.*, Spring 1972, 111–16.

46. In an interview in 2019, *Wages for Housework* leader Selma James explicitly credits the welfare rights movement with inspiring *Wages for Housework*. Ron Agustin, "Beyond Boundaries: Selma James Interviewed by Ron Agustin," *Monthly Review* 71, no. 4 (September 2019): 64.

47. Los Angeles *Wages for Housework* Committee, "A View from the Kitchen: Property Taxes," *Wages for Housework Newsletter: National*

Edition, spring 1977, 3, London, Bishopsgate Institute, *Wages for Housework* Campaign Archive, 1970–2022, box 7.

48. Wilmette Brown, *Roots: Black Ghetto Ecology* (Housewives in Dialogue, 1986), 14, cited in Emily Callaci, *Wages for Housework: The Feminist Fight Against Unpaid Labor* (Seal Press, 2025), 199.

49. Larne Abse Gogarty, *Usable Pasts: Social Practice and State Formation in American Art* (Haymarket Books, 2023), 112.

50. Ronald Reagan, "Reprint of a radio program titled 'Waste,'" n.p., 29 November 1978, KABC Radio, Mother Art records, GRI, box 1, folder 11.

51. Dan Sullivan, "A Call from the President," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1981, clipping from Mother Art records, GRI, box 2.

52. Sullivan, "A Call from the President."

53. Larry Stammer, "Arts Council Under Fire in State Senate," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 1978, B12. Carpenter does not name specific artists, at least not according to Stammer's report.

54. Mother Art, program for "Art for Public Consumption," 27 August 1978, Mother Art records, GRI, box 2, folder 10.

55. Suzanne Muchnic, "Artists Take a Political Step," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1978, part 4, clipping from Mother Art records, GRI, box 2.

56. Muchnic, "Artists Take a Political Step."

57. Suzanne Siegel and Laura Silagi, e-mail to the author, 17 July 2024; and Gloria Hajduk, e-mail to the author, 25 August 2024.

58. Mother Art, "Mother Art," *High Performance* 1, no. 4 (December 1978): 32.

59. Hettie Judah, "Mother Art and Polvo de Gallina Negra in Conversation with Hettie Judah," *Luncheon*, no. 17 (2024): 133.

60. Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.

61. Mother Art, "Mother Art," 32.

62. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Routledge, 2011), 78.

63. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition 'Care,'" in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (MIT Press, 2011), 144–49.

64. See Catherine Spencer, "Acts of Displacement: Lea Lublin's *Mon Fils*, May '68, and Feminist Psychosocial Revolt," *Oxford Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (2017): 65–83.

65. Mónica P. Mayer Lucido, "Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool" (master's thesis, Goddard College, 1980).

66. See Alberto McKelligan Hernandez, "Representing Motherhood and Political Violence in Mexico: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of *Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad*

(*Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity*)," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 5 (2021): 38–56.

67. Mother Art, interview by Andrea Liss, Los Angeles, 5 November 2005, quoted in Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 2–3.