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## Reclaiming the Appropriated Space Through Care

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Reclaiming the Appropriated Space Through Care

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Masters of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

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## Abstract

Reclaiming the Appropriated Space Through Care

By William Glaser Wilson, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2022

Committee Chair: Paul Thulin, Assistant Professor, Photography and Film

This thesis navigates the complex and (at times) frustrating experience of balancing caregiving and art making while attempting to converge both practices into one. The collaboration of caregiving and art making serves as a potential solution for those that struggle with the seemingly unreconcilable stratification of both activities.

## Introduction

The birth of a child, the global covid pandemic, and graduate school. The culmination of these events contributed to a complete shift in my artistic practice and forced me to reconsider the value of children's literature and reexamine my relationship to the materials I utilize in my art practice. I quickly came to realize early in my time as a graduate student that seismic changes had to be made in order to have a sustainable practice. This led me to explore the histories, artworks, and conceptual underpinnings of women artists whose entire practice was also greatly affected by their choice in having children. Balancing the new responsibilities and efforts of being a parent while being exposed to the radical work of artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Carmen Winant, and writer Maggie Nelson intensified my material investigations and looking back upon my own childhood. This exploration of artists and creatives outside the realm of photography created a desire in myself to go beyond the photographic space and experiment with a multitude of mediums until finally settling with painting and drawing. If this tumultuous time has taught me anything, it is that my practice, family, and life are inseparable.

## Image Reproduction via Children's Literature

Reencountering Walter Benjamin's heavily cited text "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" during my time as a parent was surprisingly relevant with regard to the tradition of materials and books that are passed on within families. For example, it's possible for one to hold onto their favorite toys, books, and clothes from their youth, and then gift the same objects to their children when they become a parent. This recycling of ephemera is incredibly interesting not for its utilitarian purpose, but for the one gifting to reflect upon their ownership of the book, clothing, etc. Children's books also occupy a rarified space of being both crucial objects in one's educational development, and have the ability to show worlds, people, places, etc. that go beyond the lived experience of the infant (I will discuss later that children's books, or illustrations, act as a playbook, or manual, for the world and its innumerable complex systems and forms of being i.e. gravity, color, kinds of matter, etc.). What first intrigued me about children's literature was its ubiquitous cultural relevancy. Even though one may not have read, or looked at a children's book for years, one could recognize what a children's book "looks like". Simultaneously, it could act as a catalyst for one to recall and/or reflect their own childhood memories. While it may be difficult, even impossible, to penetrate, or encounter the aura of a children's book at an older age, I believe one has access to the aura of a children's book at a young(er) age before the images, morals, and language in children's literature have worn thin through due to the complexity of our modern world. Benjamin's critique of artworks reproduction is presumed to be approached through the experience of an individual who has the ability



to understand the reproducibility of a book, and realize that the book is a mass produced object; fit for consumption by millions of potential readers. However, the child has no concept of the reproducibility of an object. Even a reproduced object is seen as a unique object; meaning the book is meant for the child, not for *any* child. Benjamin writes:

“One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind.”<sup>1</sup>

Counter to Benjamin’s thesis, the child’s encounter with each object is a potentially transformative one, as the child does not have the facilities, or experience, to understand the object’s purpose, value, and reproducibility. Taking this as a radical gesture to experiment with imagery within literature that could be considered “dead,” drenched in platitude, or lack the complexity of our modern age, I began to reexamine the books and objects that fascinated my child. However, this investigation and eventual materialization of the energized form within children’s literature had the potential risk of being completely conceptually and aesthetically flattened via a post-modern execution where one could consider my work as a fetish of surface, artifice, and the pitfalls of reproduction similar to how the artist Wade Guyton pushes the capabilities of printers and material to create works that self-reflectively comment on the state of technology

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A Underwood (Harlow, England: Penguin Books, 2008).



(fig.1)

and the artifice of reproduction. To unpack Guyton's process is to unpack the post-modern response of withholding the hand to focus on the materials deployed and how materials react when stressed to their limits. Guyton prints onto various paper and canvas types via printers that have technical "glitches" (i.e., running low on ink, a broken printer head, etc.) that causes unique and obscure effects onto said paper and/or canvas. In essence, the slick, 'clean' technological distortion, or glitch artifact, is the

nucleus of Guyton's work. While the work is entrancing, it abstains itself from the heat of the artist's studio. It is decidedly calm, cool, and collected; uninterested in revealing anything but its technical genealogy. Therefore, I decided that in order to undo, or undermine, the mechanical reproduction of my inkjet print, I would paint, or draw on its surface. I felt this was an act of reclamation on the appropriated space, or an attempt to re-energize the surface uniformity of the reproduced object. However, coming from a photographic realm, the introduction of materials onto the surface in concert with displaying the work sans the confines of a frame could be considered (at the very least) a faux pas with regard to presentation and professionalism. Before the making of this work, in past projects I felt it was necessary to keep photographs clean, unobstructed, and contained in the protective bubble of a frame. This process pushed me outside the boundaries of the frame for a variety of reasons; the most pertinent being the want to showcase the materiality of the paper and to both conceptually and physically free the print from the confines of the frame. By framing the print behind glass, it cuts off the viewer from having a relationship with the work beyond that of a quasi-obscured gaze. The inability to smell, touch, even taste (if you so choose) the artwork seemed just as vital to the experience as seeing it. One could also argue that placing artwork in a frame automatically puts the artwork in a state of inaccessibility and coldness; pushing away the humanity of both the artist and the art to the state of a specimen. Opening the artwork up into the world without the protection of the frame asks the audience to protect the work. Asking the audience to perform an act of care creates a bond, or relational tie to the work itself, as opposed to having the work not requiring any care to sustain itself. I would liken the frame vs. non-frame comparison as asking someone if

they would like to take care of a plastic plant, or a “real” plant that can die if not properly taken care of. To care about an artwork, a child, or someone other than yourself is to understand that you are not the only “thing” that needs to be sustained or cared for. Furthermore, in order for the work to escape the age of reproducibility, and try to regain its Benjaminian aura, having the work exist in the open charged all aspects of the work I wanted to highlight and make apparent. I realized in time that I was affectively undoing or undermining the photograph the same way writer Maggie Nelson sees the process of parenting as a kind of undoing. Nelson writes:

“The mother of an adult child sees her work completed and undone at the same time.<sup>1</sup> If this holds true, I may have to withstand not only rage, but also my undoing. Can one prepare for one's undoing? How has my mother withstood mine? Why do I continue to undo her, when what I want to express above all else is that I love her very much?”<sup>2</sup>

Before one becomes a parent, you have expectations, or a vague idea of what to expect. You develop plans of action, even read books on “what to expect”, and yet, nobody is truly ready, or has their plans executed to their fullest extent. There is always a negotiation, reconciliation, crisis, mistake, fall, spill, that undermines the plan. You learn to become more comfortable with the imperfect, and the wild strangeness of letting a person you created become their own being, outside of your control and purview. The photograph made material and finalized via the inkjet print, stood as a testament to the idealized, perfected object protected behind glass that would never age or be touched. However, just like the process and execution of being a parent, its freedom (i.e. painting and drawing on the print without a frame) reinstates its autonomy and independence from its idealized formality and perfection.

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<sup>2</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2015).

The artist that epitomized this feeling of autonomy from the formality of the institution and brought forth the heat of the studio for me was artist Carmen Winant, a photographer that makes collage-based works on paper, sculptures, and installations that explores female radicality, pleasure, and histories utilizing archival imagery. I first came to Winant's work at the Museum of Modern Art's 'New Photography' exhibition in 2018 where I was greeted by thousands of small ("3"x3", 4"x4", etc.), photographs cut out from what seemed to be medical textbooks, magazines, personal photographs, homeopathic texts, and others alike all taped onto the wall with blue painters tape.



(fig. 2)

The work was arranged in such a way that each photograph complimented one other not only for its subject matter (woman giving birth in a range of stages from early contractions to the child just having emerged from their mother's vagina) but how they

were arranged, with each image coming together like a puzzle piece. The images themselves were not perfectly cut but had the nuance of hand sheers being brought to task with determination. As visitors passed by the installation, the images fluttered ever so slightly. From an archivist point of view, it could be described as a nightmare. The photographs were held with non-archival painter's tape, no glass or any sort of protection available, and the photographs themselves were in the process of aging in



(fig. 3)

the same way old texts fade over time. However, the work itself was clearly effective and poignant, and was noted as a highlight of the show at the time. How, and why, were thousands of small, cut out photographs of women giving birth taped to the walls of the Museum of Modern Art so successful and powerful, in relation to other works displayed



behind glass, printed on glossy paper, perfectly bound up in their formality? I argue this is due to the other photographs being sanitized of their maker's mark, or the artist being overpowered by the vast number of systems and machines at their disposal; bulldozing over the rough edges, false starts, failures, and processes each work underwent to its final form. Photographs may have reference points to the materiality of their inception or the conceptual genealogy of which they stemmed, but an editioned print of five cannot showcase the journey to its current form. As soon as a photograph sits behind glass, and/or becomes a rarified object when it leaves the printer, it has much more in common with an Egyptian coffin on display in a museum than a painting or sculpture might on a wall. This isn't to say that painting or sculpture never succumbs to the sanitization of modernity, but photography's primary footprint and vehicle (i.e., Instagram) is, in and of itself, a container for which all senses become dulled and packaged within the palm of your hand. I now realize that what I was responding to in Winant's work was this sense of the undoing, or the artists' hand failing to meet the execution of modernity, a presence made so clear with comparison to the rest of the pieces in the Museum of Modern Art. Winant showed me in that moment one need not sweep up their mistakes, clean up their process, or make only glossy prints at scale in order to be taken seriously. One could bring forth the messiness, suspend control, showcase the marks of intuition, and all the baggage that came with it right from the studio to the world without fear. Its raw energy in contention with the airtight prints buttressing it only furthered this sense of the work leading the artist, not the other way around.

## Research as Care, or Care as Research

For several weeks after Oly was born, I tried to re-compartmentalize various aspects of my life as “work”, “research”, “time with my child”, “time with my partner”, etc. as a way to divide what I thought to be clear delineations in my life and practice. Before Oly, I had a very strict and set methodology of working. In essence, my practice at that time was stemming from a “post-studio” practice best understood through the work of Jeff Wall and Stan Douglas. I staged photographs that came from a mixture of my memory and imagination; hiring models to reenact the image I had in my head to best represent moments I have witnessed (or dreamt). This process was incredibly time intensive, and relied upon hours of production, scanning, scouting, post-production, in addition to a significant amount of money spent on photographic film. After Oly was born, it was nearly impossible to split my time between “work” and my home, due to our inability to secure childcare for various reasons (financial, pandemic) and the fact that Julia (my spouse) had a remote job to support our family. After recognizing the impracticality and irresponsibility of leaving our home to conduct shoots that lasted hours, I decided to focus my artistic energy on what I spent the most time with, Oly. This initial decision to forgo my previous photographic practice in pursuit of a more flexible, open approach that did not necessarily have to result in a polished negative at the end of the shoot was so freeing that it induced a low-grade sense of suspicion. It was as if I had removed the yoke of photographic baggage (i.e., the precision required, the weight of the camera, having to perform light meter readings, etc.) from my responsibility, but my puritanical work ethic innately demanded more. What use could there be in considering the time I spent with my child looking over children’s literature “research”? Shouldn’t “research” be



far more serious, studious? Is it dangerous to not have any boundaries? My fixed, elitist notion of what constituted research and the execution of said research clouded my understanding of how I would define research; a dedication of time and/or materials towards reaching new, unique conclusions. Framed in this way, it opened a world of opportunity that included the time I spent with my daughter as a potential site for expanding my breadth of knowledge about her psychological and physical development and how it could manifest aesthetically. Moreover, instead of just reading child psychology texts and other related works, I could actually see all of these adjustments and maturing happening in real time. I didn't need to sneak away to read Melanie Klein or D.W. Winnicott; I could experience everything they were talking about and more by just being present, and in turn not feel the anxiety of having to conduct "research" or make art that reflected such solemnity. Of course, I did read Klein, Winnicott, etc. once Oly went to bed, but it released the burden of feeling like I had to be doing "work" when I was spending time with her.

The more I played, read, and had my life (more or less) revolve around Oly's daily maintenance, I started to feel the possibility of each act, performed with deliberation, to contain the potential for something more than what it seemed. How does the creative emerge from these acts of daily maintenance? Could the act of maintenance itself contain all that is necessary for art? It felt with so much of my time being devoted to the maintenance of the home and Oly that an essence of my work be traced back to the cleaning of floors, chopping of fruit, mending of books, changing of diapers, etc. that took up a significant portion of my day. In time, the daily maintenance

that surrounded my life acted as a liminal space between the time I spent in the studio, and the time I spent not in the studio. In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott writes:

The creative impulse is therefore something that can be looked at as a thing in itself, something that of course is necessary if an artist is to produce a work of art, but also as something that is present when anyone - baby, child, adolescent, adult, old man or woman - looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately, such as making a mess with faeces or prolonging the act of crying to enjoy a musical sound. It is present as much in the moment-by-moment living of a backward child who is enjoying breathing as it is in the inspiration of an architect who suddenly knows what it is that he wishes to construct, and who is thinking in terms of material that can actually be used so that his creative impulse may take form and shape, and the world may witness.<sup>3</sup>

Even though my chores may not be considered “art”, it was an incredibly generative space to reflect on my works in progress and intensified my interest in being present when performing these duties. Carrying out these acts opened up the ability to create new associations that were previously hidden and in essence, provided the ability to improvise and revisit previously settled aesthetic and theoretical decisions in my work that appeared stable. Through abstract means, the daily labor of keeping a child safe, entertained, and healthy funneled into art making via spontaneity, curiosity, and the love of exploration.

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<sup>3</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2017).

## Conclusion

Raising a child in the midst of a pandemic and graduate school created a vortex to revisit and rewrite all the rules and regulations I had made for myself since becoming an artist. The sheen and perfection of my photography became increasingly uninteresting and bland; requiring the need for a way to both invigorate my photographic style and bring forth my chaotic life into the work. Through loosening, and in some instances completely abandoning, the mechanization of photography, I was able to create a space in which I could both use my photographic background and embark upon a more complicated journey into drawing and painting.

## Works Cited

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