

Presentation for the Birth Rites Symposium in May 2011

By: Artist and academic Eti Wade

Title: The Maternal Subject in Photography

Sub title: Mirroring and Mothering in Contemporary Photographic Practices

Abstract: Maternal subjectivity is largely absented from culture, obscured by representational idealisation. Photographic maternal art practices are opening up new ways to articulate motherhood and represent the uniquely female experience.

'Artist mothers', or 'maternal photographers' make images that expose the maternal gaze, challenging and disrupting conventional ideas about maternity. This 'maternal gaze' is the photographic representation of maternal subjectivity shown through unconventional images of children and family.

Often, public dissemination of maternal gaze photographs attracts social unease and raises issues about familial power relations and parental authority. Indeed, it raises questions regarding the moral right of the mother to make the work. This is evidenced by the responses to Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* exhibition (1992), Tierney Gearon's work exhibited in the '*I am a Camera*' (2001) amongst others.

Analysis of the perception of the mother-photographer's work explores issues of maternal omnipotence, and the apprehension that the photographic maternal gaze disrupts Winnicottian mirroring. My presentation will offer an intersubjective interpretation of contemporary maternal photographers in which the mother articulates her maternal subjectivity while answering the child's need to be seen by her. We will look at the work of Ana Casas Broda, Katharina Bosse as well as my own work.

In discussing my photographic practice and my goal of articulating maternal subjectivity, I link my own experience of post-natal depression to the culturally prevalent and idealised maternal representation which inhibits and silences the subjective experience of motherhood.