



Where are the media artist mothers (and other parents)? Embracing Intersectional Feminist Perspectives in Media Art

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Assuming the rare presence of mothering/parenting related subjects in the media art field, this paper introduces key elements to start a fruitful discussion on the complexity around the topic and possible improvements in this specific art environment. By means of intertwining an analysis of selected media artworks related to mother/parenthood with partial results of an ongoing online survey, the discussion sheds light into how the artistic expressions relate to contemporary feminist perspectives, even if their starting points and creative processes are not directly referring to feminist theoretical frameworks. In order to address the historically constructed gender gap in the technology environment which is also mirrored in the media art field, the paper proposes visibility as the first step to promote the significant, required and urgent changes, followed by initiatives on technological aesthetic education for under-represented groups, including mothers, and more collective approaches to the problem.

1. Introduction

To a certain extent, it is possible to deduce that the rare presence of motherhood as a topic in media artworks mirrors the gender gap observed in the technology environment until today. Even in more privileged societies of the Global North, the still existing occupational stereotypes point to gender and race segregation in both the tech and the creative industries, prevailing traditional patriarchal spatial divisions and gendered labour (Negrey and Rauch 2009; NACGW 2021). Understanding technology as the “result from a series of specific decisions made by particular groups of people in particular places at particular times for their own purposes” (Wajcmann 1991, 22), the feminist literature relating gender dimension with scientific and a technological production is relatively recent.

According to Rosi Braidotti (2022), feminist technoscience studies emerged in the 1970s primarily within the medical and biology fields. The focus was on bodies, reproductive health, and sexualities, beginning with reference to women’s and LGBTQ+ people’s bodies and progressing towards non-human ones. The movement included a reaction against obstetric and other types of violence against female and gender non-conforming bodies. The inquiries included how biomedical sciences produce ‘normal’ bodies based on deterministic anatomical, physiological, genetic, hormonal, neurological, behavioural, and other characteristics.

Later in the late 1980’s with the new paradigms of communication and expressions enabled by the electronic and digital media cultures, it pops up a variety of experiments with feminist technobodies, boosted

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1. We understand the distinction between the terms 'motherhood' and 'mothering' according to the reflections by Adrienne Rich, referring the first to the (patriarchal) institution and the later to the subjective experiences of those self-identified as mother (Rich 1978).

in the 1990's with the popularization of the internet and discussions on cyberspace (Gibson 1984), cyborg (Haraway 1985) and cyberfeminism (1997). As iconic examples of this movement we can mention the Australian art collective VNS Matrix, who published *The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) (Munder 2019), and the First Cyberfeminist International held in Kassel, Germany. The later circumscribed cyberfeminism as a "fresh ideology" that "creates a space for women to invent, dissect and alter the trajectories of the new technological and information era" (First Cyberfeminist International 1997). Problematized since the beginning of its history, the term cyberfeminism is plural, however grounded in "the idea of creating a new comprehensive label for an interdisciplinary gender-related discourse on the net" (Sollfrank undated).

Since then, the exponentially expanded potential of digital media for network initiatives triggered a plurality of technofeminist expressions. Nevertheless, in this context, the technofeminist discussions around motherhood/mothering¹ is often affected by both phenomena: either to consider motherhood/mothering as a burden and barrier for emancipation and therefore not relevant – following some feminist voices (Liss 2009; Vivas 2021), or to overlook the ethnic and class aspects of it (hooks 1978; Vivas 2021). In this regard, the ongoing research also investigates counterexamples of these phenomena, making efforts to approach the intersectionality of the selected and analysed media artworks and artists. This is not an easy task, once as we shall see, the dominance of examples stems from quite privileged contexts concerning the access to scientific thinking and to technological tools – which can be questioned as domineering knowledge production paradigm, however it represents a crucial weapon for survival and self-defence in the technocratic environment most of us are living.

In addition, when it comes to the variety of profiles of female media artists, it is often the case that they delegate the technical development of their artwork to male colleagues and partners, and technofeminism is not necessarily an issue for their creative challenges. Despite the significant changes of the last decades, there are still a series of facts and taboos that artist mothers face when they decide to have a child/children and option for the challenges of finding a balance between child care work and the professional occupation (Liss 2008; Judah 2022). These challenges may manifest in various ways, spanning both practical and psychological dimensions. For instance, the typical timing of exhibition openings (which frequently coincides with the time when children require need to be fed, bathed and put to bed) can be a source of difficulty. Additionally, the inflexibility of residency programmes can pose challenges for those seeking to combine parenting with their artistic pursuits. Furthermore, the perception that a career in art is untenable for those who choose to have children is a prevalent concern, reinforced also by art school professors. In order to bring about awareness among the agents of the art system of the discriminatory *modus operandi* of their institutions, art critic Hettie Judah and a group of artist mothers wrote and published online *How not to exclude Artist Parents - Some Guidelines for Institutions and Residencies* (Judah et al. 2021).

In this context, the maternal ambivalences (Rich 1978; Parker 2005; Vivas 2021) – the coexisting feelings of love and hate in maternal subjectivity – combined with the demands of the art field within precarious working conditions, clearly reveal the unjust structure denounced by

2. Available since 2022 at the link shorturl.at/gnuxY. Accessed Feb 6 2024.

the scholar and feminist activist Silvia Federici (2017) in her body of work, especially her critical perspective on Marxist theory in relation to reproductive labour.

Given such scenario, it is impressive that the profound impact that getting pregnant and becoming a parent mean, a radical reinvention of being in the world in corporeal and social terms, is such an overlooked topic in the media art system, particularly considering the most transgressive and radical expressions within the field. Being a care giver demands continuous adaptations in so rapid and eventually even faster rhythm as technological environments require.

Just by introducing these few points it becomes clear how complex is the entanglement of subjects. To dig into the multiple facets of the problem, the ongoing postdoctoral research to which this paper belongs investigates representations and experiences related to motherhood/mothering within media art, by collecting and analysing media artworks from a specific profile of mothers/parents: artists that are also technologists, creating their proposals in the intersections between scientific and technological knowledge, whose artworks or performances reveal sorts of media thinking, investigative and/or critical approaches to technocultures and/or technofeminist perspectives.

Observing artworks, the context and the motivations of the media artists to produce influenced by and addressing the experience of parenthood, the research aims to give more visibility to these actors in their symbolic and social struggles. In this sense, it is part of the global effort to enrich the art and technology environment with higher variability of imaginaries, with the specific challenge to highlight how contemporary media art production is shaping post-human motherhoods/mothering experiences.

As a tiny fragment of the aforementioned research, this paper is structured in three parts. Primarily it introduces the ongoing online survey *Where are the media artist mothers (and other parents)?*². In the sequence, it presents a few media artworks carefully selected to feed the discussion around the mother-related operationalities, the maternal ambivalence and mother-offspring relationships, as well as to the appropriation of the mother concept beyond humanness. The paper concludes addressing the possibility of handling an intersectional feminist approach in relation to the discussed media artworks and pointing possible further developments to enhance the presence and conceptual freedom of media artist mothers in the production system.

2. Towards visibility and networking

2.1 Online survey: Where are the media artist mothers (and other parents)?

As part of the research activities, since 2022, I collect information about media artists and their artworks that emerged from their experience while becoming a parent through the online survey *Where are the media artist mothers (and other parents)?* The questions were formulated around the profile of the parent, their perception of their relation to technological tools and how this influenced their process of becoming a parent,

as well as how this experience influence their artistic production and career.

The online survey has been disseminated in conferences, newsletters of institutions and initiatives related to media art and motherhood (e.g. ARS ELECTRONICA Center and *Mehr Mütter für die Kunst*) and through direct requests by the author per email and conversations.

Until May, 3rd only 33 artists have contributed to the survey and the profiles are diverse concerning geographical (mostly from Europe and USA) and cultural backgrounds. Despite the plurality of responders, the reduced variety of identities from four continents clearly evinces the lack of representatives of the Global South: 9% from Latin America and no representative from African countries.

The richness of the references provided by the participants were essential to amplify our perspective in the sense of observing how differently people are affected by the experience of becoming a parent, reflecting, on the one hand, the intersectionality of the profiles, and on the other hand, a common concern related to still to-be-developed structures that better accommodates media artist mothers while balancing their activities as caregivers and artists.

2.2 Possible further development

The partial analysis of the collected data demonstrates the need to find strategies to disseminate the survey in other continents still under represented among the participants. Comparing the proportion between the huge amount of female representatives of the Ars Electronica's archive *Women in media arts*, it is known that much less women are media artists in the Global South, however, we are aware that they exist and are potentially the target audience of this ongoing research.

Based on the survey, it would be welcome to organize an online platform to publish the results of this initial mapping, open to be continuously updated. The platform could also function as a hub of support for media artists' parents, sharing themes, discussions and tools to be constructed collaboratively by the community. Exhibitions and publications could emerge from the self-organized articulations of the participants, moderated by the more active members. To achieve this ambitious (or perhaps utopic) goal, it would be important to contact other already existing organizations of artist mothers and related profiles, and to apply for additional exclusive funding.

3. Motherhood/mothering related media artworks

In this session I present selected media artworks relating and problematizing motherhood, including pieces mentioned by those who answered the survey. They are samples to foster the discussion in three main axes: one that considers mother/mothering throughout the abstraction of their operationalities (e.g. fertilization, pregnancy, birth giving, care work, among others), a second one that approaches the mother-offspring relationships, and a third axis that addresses the transposition of the concept of motherhood to non-human contexts.

3. The term “in posse” derives from Medieval Latin, meaning “not in actuality, having a potential to exist”. In collaboration with FutureFest, Charlotte Jarvis made a film version of the project available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sg_NKJaets0 Accessed Feb 8 2024.

Fig.1. Female semen half way through being made and fresh out the fridge. Photo credit: Miha Godec. Source: Jarvis’ website.

3.1 Mother/parenthood operationalities: fertility and pregnancy

I start with the intriguing *In Posse* (since 2019)³, by British artist Charlotte Jarvis in collaboration with professor Susana Chuva de Sousa Lopes, Kapelica Gallery / Kersnikova Institute and MU Hybrid Art House Eindhoven. The art project sharply reviews historical hierarchies established on the human reproduction by means of creating viable semen genetically modified from her own cells. According to Jarvis, the project comprised three parts: (1) to grow spermatozoa (sperm cells), (2) develop a female form of seminal plasma (the fluid part of semen) using material donated by multiple women, transgender and non-binary people, and finally, (3) the “female” semen was used in a series of re-enactments of Thesmophoria, the ancient Greek women-only festival.



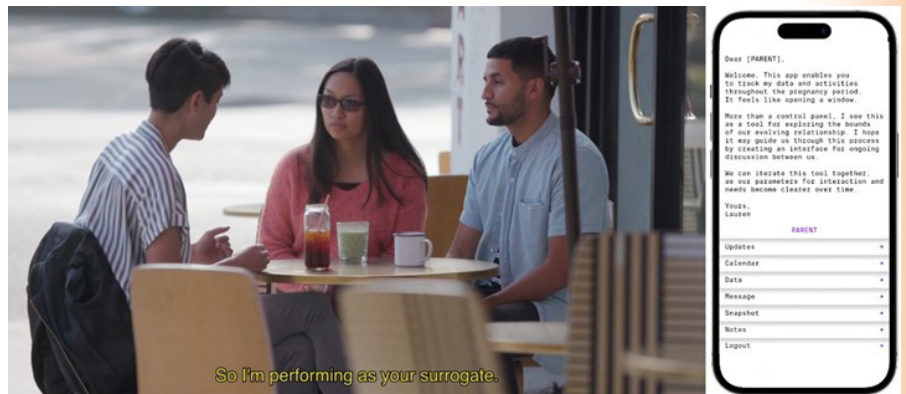
The project cleverly addresses the core of human fertility and blurs the border between gender and sex, commonly challenged in theoretical frameworks of gender studies (Butler 1999) but hardly dissolved when it comes to the very concrete material and cultural constraints one is subjected to in everyday life. In an ideal art and science collaboration, the steps of the project stimulated new relevant scientific questions towards new findings related to human fertility. In the video-documentation of the project Jarvis states: “At every point our experiment stops working one of the mechanisms by which sperm is made is revealed, and equally one of the ways in which people can be infertile is discovered.” (Jarvis 2021: 10’40”-10’50”).

Another intriguing art project relating technological solutions for human reproduction issues is the ongoing *Surrogate works* (since 2022), by Chinese-US American artist Lauren Lee McCarthy. It consists of a series of intriguing and provoking initiatives encompassing a series of films, sculptures, installations, publications, and a live performance. The starting point is that the artist becomes a surrogate mother, offering not only her own body to host the offspring of an infertile person or a homosexual couple who wish to become parents, but also the possibility for them to control each of her actions during the pregnancy through an application.

Creating a multitude of storytelling fragments McCarthy invite us to reflect on old and unsolved issues such as surveillance and social control through technological means, on the energetic, symbolic and affective costs of reproduction work, on how surrogacy has been an option

for women in poor countries with precarious works conditions (Lewis 2019) and what does it mean to risk your own body in an apparently altruist act. The virtue of McCarthy's proposal lies not only in challenging the historical tradition that reproductive technology is delivered into men's hands (Wajcman 1991), but it inquires the complexity of reproduction work since the beginning on the preparation of getting pregnant, including the possibility of a self-subjected non-trivial condition.

Fig.2. Left: Extract from the video *Surrogate*: Conversation with intended parents. Right: Frame of the app. Source: McCarthy's website.



In a more sci-fi like direction, Spanish artist María Castellanos has been working on *Cyborg Genesis* since 2019, a series that envisions the future of human reproduction. The series includes a video artwork and a wearable machine capable of monitoring a posthuman uterus. Castellanos drew inspiration from Shulamith Firestone's *The dialect of sex* (1970), which encouraged women to take "control of human fertility, distinguishing between sex and reproduction" (Castellanos 2019). Speculatively, this project explores the potential for the development of an external and portable uterus which, in conjunction with other scientific and medical advances, could enable human reproduction beyond biological limits.

Fig. 3. Speculative design of a wearable machine capable of monitoring a posthuman uterus, by María Castellanos. Source: Castellanos' website.



Through their particular perspectives, the three aforementioned artworks problematize the complexity of two main operationalities

commonly related to the concept of a mother: getting pregnant and gestating.

Xenofeminist ideas about the potential to ‘change nature’ (Laboria Cuboniks 2015) are prevalent in the proposals of Jarvis and Castellanos. The former appears to be closer to achieving the artist’s desired function of art as a cultural artifact and process capable of transforming unequal biological and social contexts. McCarthy, in turn, who examines social relationships in the context of surveillance, automation, and algorithmic living, propose subverting control tools to review the relationship between surrogates and future parents. The common thread is a critical material examination of the *modus operandi* structuring human reproduction, both at the level of the body and in the geopolitical sphere.

3.2 Maternal ambivalence and mother-offspring relationship

Amidst the despair of how life would be after becoming a mother, Brazilian artist and technologist Lina Lopes developed *Cybaby* (2014), a performance based on the use of a neural helmet for newborns and a data visualization, exhibited in the context of *Hibrida: experimental prototyping of perception amplifiers* in São Paulo, curated by Paloma Oliveira. According to the artist’s own words “I was afraid of the next step in my life, being a mom, and tried to bring this to my comfort zone: a project in art and technology”, with the support of GIIG (Grupo Internacional e Interinstitucional de Pesquisa em Convergências entre Arte, Ciência e Tecnologia), an academic group at the University of the Estate of São Paulo (Unesp).

Fig. 4. Performance of *CyBaby*, by Lina Lopes and her daughter Diana Muggler Lopes Moreira, 2014. Photo credit: Fernanda Duarte. Source: Instagram profile of the artist @lilo.think. Accessed Feb 13 2024.



CyBaby was a project designed to monitor the electroencephalographic patterns (EEG) of newborns, which constitute a unique brain signature. The aim of *CyBaby* was to examine and record the first stimuli experienced by newborns, such as suckling, recognizing the faces and sounds of their parents’ voices, and feeling different textures. It was a poetic experiment that aimed to transform data collection and recording into tangible material through a digital performance. The project proposed a rudimentary transcoding of the thoughts of a newcomer to the world before she learns the language(s) of communication, and problematically, before she could consent to the use of her own biodata. Would the use of children’s biodata be handled differently in the artistic context than in the medical and entertainment contexts? A number of ethical issues are raised by this question, similarly to any case that involve children’s participation in the mother’s artworks.

4. Video documentation available at <https://vimeo.com/758939686> Accessed Feb 13 2024.

5. This piece is part of her previously mentioned series *The Cyborg Genesis*. Further information available at https://www.mariacastellanos.net/?/=seccion/projects/entrada/cyborg_placenta_eng Accessed Feb 13 2024.

6. <https://alvarezolmedo.wordpress.com/2021/04/26/genesis-dinamicas-de-organismos-artificiales-instalacion-robotica-interactiva-y-evolutiva-2016-2018/> Accessed Jan 30 2024.

Continuously motivated by “the dialogue with someone with fresh thoughts about the world” (2023), a few years later, when her daughter already could speak, Lina Lopes also developed *Scribe bot* (2020)⁴, a project that evolved from the conversation between the artist and her daughter “-Mom, you’re not an artist, you don’t know how to draw!”/ “-But I can make a machine to draw for me..” (Lopes 2023)

Both artworks developed by Lopes insert the subject motherhood in the field of media art from a relational perspective, revealing the imaginary of a media artist mother shaped by the binomial relationship mother-offspring. Without appealing to political layers of the issues, Lopes uses her creative freedom in a situation where she has already secured her place as an artist and technologist.

Another approach to the mother-offspring relationship can be through the very materiality of the chemical exchanges through the placenta, the intermediate ephemerous organ. This is one of the entrances to the topic by the author through the conceptual artwork *Placenta: Interface* (2022) and *Abstracted placenta* (2023), praising the fascinating multiples roles that the organ plays along pregnancy, inclusive its welcoming analgesic properties for after birth. In addition, in *Cyborg placenta* (2023)⁵, by María Castellanos, the artist explores the possibility of preserving a placenta outside the womb while keeping it alive.

3.3 Beyond humanness

By means of abstracting the mother-related operationalities, it is interesting to observe the transposition of the concept to non-human contexts. Here we highlight two examples of “machinic motherhood”: The first is *Génesis: dinámicas de organismos artificiales* (2016), by Ana Laura Cantera, in collaboration with Leonardo Maddio y Daniel Alvarez Olmedo. In this piece, the artists symbolically recreate a gestation and birth of artificial organisms, in an equally artificial context of water, movement and light. The installation plays a critical role in the life cycle of robotic organisms, undergoing an evolutionary and non-cyclical process within spherical acrylic containers, exhibiting embryonic movements. The containers have biodegradable plastic openings that are gradually corroded by the organisms’ constant movement, leading to the organisms’ eventual emergence or ‘birth.’ The installation provides an immersive experience for visitors as they observe the dynamic interactions between the robotic entities and their environment.

Fig.5. *Génesis: Dinámicas de organismos artificiales*. 2016/2018
Source: Olmedo’s website⁶.



7. Further information available at <https://jennypickett.art/doku.php?id=motherplant> Accessed Jan 30 2024.

According to the documentation of the work at one of the artist's website, the installation draws inspiration from the symbolism of water as a source of life and regeneration, reminiscent of ancient mythologies that associate it with the amniotic fluid of the womb. The installation explores the fusion, tensions and mutual influences between nature and artificiality, envisioning the gestation of robotic organisms capable of engaging with the contemporary world marked by crisis and technological advancements. It reshapes the historically constructed narrative that set the natural and the constructed entities in dichotomous relationships, guided by the principles of science and art, stimulating social reflection around the poetic possibilities inherent to animated matter and the genesis of hybrid beings. According to the artists, the project aims to create a transformative interaction between the human body and robotic organisms, symbolizing a new cosmological narrative for our complex and rapidly changing world.

A second intriguing transposition of the concept of motherhood to electronic artefacts, suggesting a symbiotic relation between machinic and living organisms, is the installation *MotherPlant* (2015-2021), by Jenny Pickett and Julien Ottav (Art collective APO-33). The piece consists of a computational mycelium recycling network using dead motherboards from old computers. The artists turned them into a micro-farm land aiming to recycle the electronic components and to produce electrical current, envisioning to create an alternative open system for computational data exchange. According to the artists, *MotherPlant* proposed on the one hand the “re-creation of the fungal network as an electronic mutation”, and on the other hand, the creation of “a new form of electronic circuit that mutates with a primitive fungal network.”⁷

Fig. 6. Installation *MotherPlant*.
Source: Pickett, undated.



They add that *MotherPlant* emerged from a previous project on recycling electronic waste using plants, flowers, and mushrooms, and its conceptualization relies on the motherboard being one of the symbols of cyclical consumption and the artist's obsessions with digital speed. The idea was to produce electricity to power electronic circuits, so that they in turn could power a sound installation indefinitely. The artists explain that the dynamic process begins with a few spores settling down on a nutritious surface. When these spores wake up in close proximity to one another they start germinating at approximately the same time and grow outwards as thread-like cells (hyphae) at a similar rate. The electronics feed on both the sun and wet soil, pregnant with (DIY) myce-

lium growth. As an information superhighway the interactions between a large, diverse population of individuals speeds up. It allows individuals who may be separated to communicate and help each other out. It also allows them to commit new forms of communication.

From this experiment began a combination of ideas about art, ecology, recycling and alternative energies sources. A whole range of subjects combined in a single cycle of sculpture or repetition of sculptural forms. The artists reflected on the coincidences of terms in organic and machinic environments, e.g., that the shape and layout of a motherboard is called form factor, which affects the placement of individual components and the shape of the computer case. Therefore, they proposed to design *MotherPlant* so that the traditional function of the motherboard disappears to produce a new type of computer, one that will become a receptacle for the growth of plants and spores, alluding to mother Earth and the reintegration of the electronic components.

Besides the environmental devastations of special metals mining (Parikka 2016), electronic waste is challenging to recycle: it requires significant amount of energy and often sacrifice part of the members of our human community. *MotherPlant* is a speculative exercise on a commitment to find sustainable solutions for the current anthropocentric devastation of “mother Earth”.

The non-human agency is the most obvious characteristic connecting conceptually *Génesis: dinámicas de organismos artificiales* and *MotherPlant*. However, it is interesting to observe how, in their particular ways, they merge technological aspects to eco-feminist ideas, a thinking thread systematized mainly by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in mid-1970's. The authors rescued ancient culture, merging the creative (generative) and spiritual values of maternity, associating the biological roles of a mother to that of earth and, per extension, of Earth planet. Later reviews of ecofeminist thinking in the 1990's adopted social-constructivist approaches (rather than the former essentialist and spiritual ones), being “critical of the separation of nature from culture and the hierarchical binary distinction that were built upon it.” (Braidotti 2022:74)

4. Final considerations: Embracing intersectional feminist perspectives

This paper explores the intersectionality of feminist perspectives within the realm of media art, with a particular focus on the underrepresented topic of motherhood and parenting. Through examining media artworks and conducting an online survey, we aim to explore the complexity surrounding these themes and their relationship to contemporary feminist discourse, fostering a review on the concept of mother and parenting.

Our exploration highlights the historical gender gap prevalent not only in the technology sector but also in the creative industries, reflecting traditional patriarchal structures and gendered labor divisions. Despite the progress made in feminist technoscience studies and the emergence of cyberfeminism in the late 20th century, the intersection of technology and motherhood remains a relatively unexplored area within media art.

The examination of media artworks has revealed diverse perspectives on motherhood, ranging from explorations of reproductive technologies to symbolic representations of maternal relationships. They

interrogate the intersections of gender, technology, and control, provoking critical reflection on the social, ethical, and political implications of reproductive technologies. It is a starting point to reconsider power dynamics and agency within the realm of motherhood and media, even if they do not directly address the dual challenges faced by media artist mothers, who must balance the demands of caregiving and artistic production in a predominantly male-dominated field.

The complex negotiation of identity and creative expression within the context of motherhood is exemplified in the media artist mothers and their artworks brought into discussion, who managed to articulate this maternal ambivalence into the symbolic and aesthetic layers of their artistic practice. Therefore, the discussed media artworks can be considered as cultural artefacts that witness significant transformations in women's access to technological means as a form of expression, however, they also denounce the long path still to be paved to dissolve the culturally constructed oppressive structures that affect the figure of the mother and how much could be done drawing attention to ethical aspects behind reproduction technologies.

In addition, the discussed artworks with posthuman approaches emphasize the ongoing efforts to blur the boundaries between nature and technology, challenging patriarchal and anthropocentric perspectives on reproduction and ecology. They echo the overlapping of technofeminism and its nuances, showcasing technologically empowered women, and eco-feminist principles of interconnectedness and care.

Given that contemporary art and the intersection of art, science and technology is often a non-mass-market sector of the cultural industry, it is important to recognise the need for grassroots aesthetic education initiatives that provide access to technology, code and art for those who have historically been under-represented in these fields, including mothers. Through collaborative efforts and support networks, we can work towards a future where motherhood/parenthood is celebrated as a source of inspiration and innovation within media arts, enriching our understanding of technology, culture and society.

In conclusion, our examination of media artworks and ongoing research highlights the need for greater visibility, recognition and structural change in access for media artist mothers within the media arts field. By adopting an intersectional feminist approach, we can challenge dominant narratives and amplify the voices of complex identities. After visibility, these and other mother-related media artworks deserve a more accurate critical perspective to broaden and enrich the discussion.

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