

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> York St John University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 32 Art & Design: Theory, History, Practice		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Creative Strategies for the transformative experiences of pregnancy, maternity and paternity		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2007 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Vanessa Corby	Associate Professor	2006 - present
Lucy O'Donnell	Senior lecturer	2013 - present
Sally Taylor	Senior lecturer	2013 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2018 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>This case study presents the first phase of a new arts-based project that gives practical support and creative inspiration to professionals and the wider public as they approach and negotiate the life changing impacts of pregnancy, maternity and paternity. Through the dissemination of publications to NHS clients via the British Infertility Counselling Association, workshops and events, it creates spaces in which to address the expectations, uncertainty and sometimes traumatic nature of child-bearing and rearing. In so doing it seeks to support the well-being of individuals, affirm the significance of those experiences, and challenge the divide between work and the family.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning Research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The research imperatives that underpin this impact case study emerged through the feminist, art historical and practice-based investigations of <b>Corby [3.3; 3.4; 3.5; 3.6]</b>, <b>O'Donnell [3.1]</b>, and <b>Taylor [3.2]</b>. In philosophy parenthood has been cast as an impediment to intellectual work from classical antiquity to Rousseau. The Western canon of art, built on this foundation, presents a succession of heroic, isolated artists who are masters of their materials and subject matter. As a consequence, creativity has been aligned with masculinity and art that engages with motherhood is rarely accorded major cultural significance. Emboldened by the Unit's inclusive approach to equality and diversity, however, our researchers have openly shared and interrogated the impact of miscarriage and parenthood on their work as thinkers, makers and educators, developing collaborations and new insights into the lived experience of gender.</p> <p>Historically, the authenticity of an artist's work and identity has been legitimated by the ability to be immersed in studio practice. Nominated for the Jerwood Drawing Prize (2017) and Trinity Buoy Wharf Prize (2019), the drawings produced during <b>Taylor's Arts Council England funded project, <i>Mentoring for Professional Development</i> (2014-19 [3.2])</b>, actively challenged this convention. She investigated the impact of maternity on her practice, not via literal representations of motherhood or children, but first by rejecting materials synonymous with high art, incorporating resources and motifs that her children brought into the studio. Second, by embracing a working pattern that doesn't assume the incompatibility of serious artistic/academic labour and motherhood/children, developing alternative strategies to sustain artistic identity by exploring the power of mentorship and professional collaboration with Professor Anita Taylor (Dundee; Director of the Jerwood) and Kate Brindley, chief curator of Chatsworth House.</p>		

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In *Sitting with Uncertainty* (2019 [3.1]) O'Donnell pursued a course of practice-based research in collaboration with the Museum of Motherhood (Florida), the Birth Rites Collection, (Kings College London), British Infertility Counselling Association, Reflect Pregnancy Choice & Loss and Support, UK and the Miscarriage Association. First developed at a performance for the Drawing Matters Symposium (YSJU; 2017) and disseminated through exhibition in the University of Newcastle Gallery, New South Wales, Australia, article in the TRACEY journal (2021, delayed due to covid), and an artist's book (2019) this powerful body of work makes visible the grief and trauma of miscarriage revealing the shame, sorrow and sense of failure of this seldom represented experience.

Corby's interrogation of the representation of maternal experience and motherhood within the history and criticism of art (2007 [3.6]; 2010, [3.5]) catalysed a dialogue with O'Donnell and Taylor; leading to essays illuminating the originality and of *Sitting with Uncertainty* (2019 [3.4]) and *Mentoring for Professional Development* (2017 [3.3]). This critical lens was instrumental to Corby's critique of the gap between the maternal body as phenomenological metaphor for knowledge production through painting and the lived experience of mothers who paint (in print April 2021). Disseminated as an invited paper at 'A Feminist Space at Leeds: Looking Back to Think Forward' (Leeds, 2017), convened by Holberg Prize Winner Griselda Pollock, this body of work led to the public engagement workshop entitled the Republic of Parenthood at the 108<sup>th</sup> College Art Association Annual Conference Chicago (Feb 2020).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Practice-Based Multicomponent Outputs

[3.1] O'Donnell, L., (2019-21 (delayed by Covid) *Sitting with Uncertainty*, artefact and exhibition; peer-review journal publication 'All the thoughts I ever had', *TRACEY: Drawing, Visualisation, Research* (2021) DOI pending [Listed in REF2]

[3.2] Taylor, S., (2014-19), *That Head That Head*, body of work (drawing), exhibitions, and catalogue (2017) with essays by Kate Brindley, Chief Curator Chatsworth House, Vanessa Corby (YSJU), and Professor Anita Taylor (Dundee). Funded by Arts Council England under project title *Mentoring for Professional Development* (£9,235). [Listed in REF2]

Standard Outputs

[3.3] Corby, V. (2017), 'Going along together: drawing and the curation of the work of Sally Taylor', ACE funded exhibition catalogue essay, Platform A Gallery, Middlesbrough. [Mentor Essay 27.09.2017.pdf \(yorksj.ac.uk\)](#)

[3.4] Corby, V. (2019) 'Turning the Material: Miscarriage, Not Knowing and Matter', in O'Donnell, *Sitting with Uncertainty*, (Artist's Book). [Can be Supplied by the HEI upon Request]

[3.5] Corby, V. (2010) *Eva Hesse: Longing, Belonging and Displacement*, London, I B Tauris. [Can be Supplied by the HEI upon Request]

[3.6] Corby, V. (2007) 'Something to Show for It? Preliminary Notes on Termination and Creativity in the Work of Tracey Emin,' in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, Griselda Pollock & Victoria Turvey - Sauron eds., London, I B Tauris. [Can be Supplied by the HEI upon Request]

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

1. In undergraduate and postgraduate arts courses the content and form of the Western canon has been supplemented by feminist, LGBTQ and postcolonial criticism. Within this same scholarly economy, the voice of the mother remains illegitimate, however; derided as a signifier of excessive motherly pastoral care and/or threat to academic rigour. In art at YSJU 95% of our undergraduates and postgraduates are female. Given that 82% of women born in 1971 became mothers (ONS [most recent dataset](#)), the Unit's research poses a vital

question about this cycle of exclusion and silence can be broken by changing attitudes and behaviour.

To test the benefits of the research **Corby** and **Taylor** presented it to over 200 students as part of the Unit's annual Practice as Research Week (2018; 2019) which sits outside our standard curriculum. Through lectures and studio discussions we created opportunities for young women to consider the challenges of working parenthood and offer critical tools to affirm the benefits of that experience for professional practice. Our introduction to 'female artists who managed the juggle of professional, creative and domestic lives to forge a professional career as an artist' offered mature students a new lens through to 'see myself' [5.4].

From this positive beginning, our first step towards a sustainable programme of events and community was to develop a brand that would cut through the sea of parenting information. We collaborated with graphic designer Andrew **Byrom** to create *The Republic of Parenthood* (2019, Appendix A) which plays on Liz Berry's collection of poems, *The Republic of Motherhood* (2018).

This brand framed our workshop at CAA, Chicago, (25 participant artists and curators from across the US and Canada). Participants were 'excited to even see it as an offering [at CAA, Chicago] because I feel it's a hidden/not talked about part of this field's experience' [5.5]. They discussed how 'becoming a parent has completely transformed my art practice and my relationship to the field' [5.5]. It revealed the impact of expectations of professionalism and gender roles for men and women; as a graduate student with a 2.5 year old noted 'I've wrestled with work life balance. *It seems that to be successful is not to be present as a father*' [5.5].

The participants felt the workshop was important because it broke down the sense of isolation felt by parents; 'I'm not alone. The more we talk about it, the more being an artist and parent will be normalised' [5.5]. It enabled life and work to be 'proudly put together' [5.5] and 'open up new directions in my work – rather than being prohibitive of studio work practice' [5.5].

2. *Sitting with Uncertainty* continues this process of openness and has begun to create benefits for service users in counselling [5.2] and clinical practice in the NHS by creatively articulating the experience of miscarriage. As the curator of the Museum of Motherhood notes in her contribution to O'Donnell's book;

'frequently identified as a woman's failure, or the failure of her body to do its job, miscarriage can be a topic that elicits sorrow and shame. This can be especially true when navigating medical, as well as social, environments unequipped to deal with the highly emotional terrain of bereavement. When the incomplete work of the pregnant body leaves women devastated, there are few outlets to share this sense of sorrow' (2019 [5.3]).

**O'Donnell** hosted Baby Loss Awareness Week for staff and students on behalf of the charity Sands (YSJU 2018). Through this process miscarriage shifted from the undeclared subtext of her practice, to a conscious desire to develop strategies to support others as they navigated the grief of pregnancy without life. As Laura Seftel, (*Grief Unseen*, Kingsley, 2006), states in her contribution to *Sitting with Uncertainty*, O'Donnell shows 'immeasurable courage' by allowing her experience and practice to 'converge and openly tackle 'the often taboo topic of pregnancy loss'. The artist's book which disseminates this research is now supporting clinicians in the NHS. As chair of the British Infertility Counselling Association states [5.1], for 'bereaved women and couples, being able to see and read [*Sitting with Uncertainty*] is very valuable providing them with the knowledge and the reassurance there is material that exists and they are not "alone", that there are others who have faced a

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similar experience of loss which helps to name and normalise their grief as they begin to process their loss and find a way forward”.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**[5.1]** Testimonial: Senior Specialist Fertility Counsellor (AMBICA) - Leeds fertility and Chair British Infertility Counselling Association and Deputy-Chair BICA Accreditation Board

**[5.2]** Testimonial: Fertility Counsellor & Information Officer BICA, Centre for Reproductive Medicine, University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust Clifford Bridge Road, Coventry, CV2 2DX Letter and Review of ‘Sitting with Uncertainty’ in BICA Journal.

**[5.3]** Testimonial: Curator and Director, Museum of Motherhood (M.O.M), St. Petersburg, Florida, USA

**[5.4]** Report: Republic of Parenthood, YSJU Feedback.

**[5.5]** Report: Republic of Parenthood Workshop feedback from the 108<sup>th</sup> College Art Association Annual Conference Chicago