imother
Creating in Chaos, Living with Screens

Heather Yip

BDES, University of Alberta, 1998

A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN 2020

Table of Contents

Abstract

The body of work presented within this document is wide-ranging, sometimes performative, material based or ephemeral. Although I discuss my use of traditional media like painting, drawing and video, I also describe how I expanded the very notion of the 'tool' for making art by working with domestic objects. At the heart of my practice is the evolution of my children as 'cooperators' and finally, a re-making of myself into a 'cyborg-artist-mother,' an alter-ego who I call *imother*. My research explores the relationship between humans and technology through the lens of my concerns as a parent. This is within the context of the significant changes occurring in the ontology of social machine learning which is fuelled by the development of highly controversial, albeit effective algorithms that allow social media applications (and others developed to share media) to exploit our highly consumptive human behaviour.

This thesis does not endorse a luddite politics. Instead, I describe how my practice evolved from painting into an inquiry about connectivity — a connectivity between my art practice and parenting and during the recent Covid-19 pandemic more widely, realizing the importance of creating a 'cyborg-artist-parent' community. Throughout my discussion, I draw attention to the problems I see emerging from my children's dependence on digital technology, social media and apps for entertainment and play. My discussion therefore hones in on how I 'queered' the space of play through my art practice, first through the medium of painting, and then evolving into interventions in online gaming.

Acknowledgements

List of Images

Introduction

Figure 1. Eric Pickersgill, *Grant,* from the Removed Series. photographs created in the United States from 2014-present ©

"We live in compromised times, within which the fantasy of an uncompromised self is isolationist, privileged, and dangerous. Global, ecological and economic collapse are discussed with alarming regularity in the newspapers and news feeds that surround us, and there are no clear answers for how to move forward unless, perhaps, we take seriously a politics and ethics of care, and especially care and intra-action, care that makes and remakes us rather than care as something we do to or for others." [1](Loveless, 2019)

---

[1] This quote is from Natalie Loveless' essay "Maternal Mattering: The Performance and Politics of the Maternal in Contemporary Art"; I chose to include it because it speaks to the overall experience I had in re-making my art practice alongside and in parallel with performing careful research into my concerns as a mother raising children in a dysfunctional system that destroys the earth to produce technological devices which ironically can be used as tools to create cyborgs out of us and perhaps repair the broken relationships we have with each other and remake humanity.

Within the experience of the MFA I have found an 'open' opportunity to explore my concerns through a variety of materials and experiences; my existence as an artist and a mother is embedded in the struggle of post-modern parenting, with new technology available to us and our children at every corner all while having to police their usage of it. I decided not to limit myself to my painting practice in studio but to explore, in many varied and exciting ways how to work through my research concerns. As a child considers her play in all its ways important work, I also transformed my art practice into a mode of playful exploration.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BtailmzHYJV/?utm_source=ig_embed

Figure 2. Boman Irani, Figure removed due to copyright restrictions, The information removed is a photograph from Instagram. Feb 2019 depicting several young children taking a selfie using a flip-flop sandal

Ironically enough, I have been on a collision course within the scaffolding of my research to make kin with the technologies that cause me so much anguish. In my conclusion you will see that I have found ways to work playfully within the network of the internet, using screen based devices and their applications as tools and finding ways to harness their productive value. I have done this work to show my children that technology must not simply be seen as a neutral space but also questioned and harnessed in productive ways through a human interaction with it.

Has our participation in a system of neoliberalism and advanced capitalism made us so frustrated and out of touch with ourselves and with each other that we have created handheld devices to soothe our feelings of loneliness and disconnection? I see this behaviour in the micro-

cosm of my home everyday when I look at my children unsupervised using smartphones, tablets and video game consoles (devices). In choosing to bring children into the world I feel that I must teach and inspire them to remain in touch with their ability to play without technology and not give themselves over completely to it. Play in this case means open ended fun, involving the imagination, the outcome of daydreaming, boredom and pretending. According to Miguel Sicart in his book *Play Matters,* "Play is the force that pulls us together. It is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves. Play is expressing ourselves — who we want to be, or who we don't want to be. Play is what we do when we are human" (6).

My position draws from the supposition that in creating a critical practice of art making and parenting that questions technology I can inspire my kids to question their own use of it. My aim is to explore non-digital modes of play through my art practice to help them express and discover themselves in alternate ways. Take for instance the *Removed Series,* a photo project by Erik Pickersgill (*Fig. 1*). In the picture we can see that the children are sitting alone in their living room and although their devices have been removed from the photograph we can observe that the children are fully engrossed in the missing objects. It is this void that concerns me as an artist and a parent, and it is through the creative activity of my art practice and my research alongside it that I intend to address this problem.

In a photograph that I saw online (*Fig. 2*) showing children pretending to take a selfie[2] with a sandal, the sandal playfully stands in as a mediation of the children's understanding of what the device is used for. The sandal is a kind of satirical irony mocking the smart phone (and those who use it) but they are using their imaginations and having fun. This image is a metaphor

_____

[2]Selfie: an image that includes oneself (often with another person or as part of a group) and is taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks (Mirriam Webster, web).

of sorts for my own art practice and research for my MFA. I have been struck by how my parenting and art practices have merged in many ways recently and because I have always found it reassuring to retreat into my studio and create, I am drawing on my art practice as research to help my children develop their creative thinking. However, in this moment of Covid 19, it has taken on a new relevance in helping my family get through these trying times.

An artist and mother whose work that I have turned to several times in my research is the American artist Ree Morton (1936-1977). Morton pursued a formal art career after beginning her nursing degree in the 1960s. She was already married and had three children, but she left her family to further her artistic career, after completing her BFA and MFA mid life. Sadly, she passed away in 1977 at the age of only forty years. According to critic and writer Alice Gregory, in reviewing her work for a recent retrospective, "Her iconography was composed of the very clichés — bright, almost childlike colours; the presence of playground objects like seesaws — that critics might have used to condemn her, as they were those associated with a wife and mother, already in her 30s, who had domestic duties and a parochial life." (web) I understand in looking at Morton's practice and life that I do not want my own practice to be a source of alienation or resentment between me and my children. Especially as my studio is currently located in my home. This is an additional reason why I have chosen to try to include my kids.

I am not alone; the collaborative artist team of Stephan Hillerbrand and Mary Magsamen (and sometimes their children), make work because of their own similar concerns. They describe a wider problem: In *No. 148 A Device to Spend Less Time on Social Media* (*Fig. 3*) Hillerbrand & Magsamen express the concern that their family is spending too much time on devices. As they say in their artist statement,

"We are overwhelmed with the world we live in: crazy politics, Hurricane Harvey, school shootings, our parents declining health and death, and our children growing older and leaving home. Feeling the enormity of our lives, we wish for an app, tool or device to fix things. We have decided to make our own." (web)

Figure 3. Hillerbrand & Magsamen, *No. 148 A Device to spend less time on Social Media*, from The Devices Project, 2018

Similarly, my children exist within a society consumed with digital gadgets, screens have been around them since birth, to pacify and occupy them and I have slowly seen the world change not only in how we interact with each other "off-line" but in how we parent through and with these screen driven devices.

The aim of my research for the MFA, is to address the problem of letting screen use take over my life or the lives of my partner and children, by experimenting with creative alternatives to online play. We must hold each other accountable and part of my labour as a parent now includes managing and monitoring my kids screen use, whether it is on phones, tablets or video games. The basis of my interest in exploring a variety of artistic media is to stimulate my children's imaginations and for me to perform play through the act of making art. This includes working with materials such as video, assemblage, painting, making simple machines with household objects; finding intersections where media and technological artifacts collide with the meaning and value of play.

Part 1
Material Transformations

New adventures in the studio often start off with the impulse to be curious, pretend and play! Of particular interest to me is the space that surrounds our electronic devices when they are at rest and away from our bodies. They continue, especially for children, to distract in ways I wanted to question further. I made the assemblage piece *Weighty Transmission (Fig. 4)* as a response to many instances where I observed in my home as well as friends' homes the entire family's devices being recharged all piled in the same location. The nests of wires and screens stacked together provided me with a visual cue to the emotional concerns I have drawn from these objects.

In Martin Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology," he diligently explores its essence. He wants the reader to truly understand technology's existence. I have read his essay several times now as well as other literature explaining his thoughts (Lovitt, Zuern). It occurred to me in writing this thesis and thinking through my own connection to modern technology how complicated our human attachment to it really is. A few passages from his essay became important in my research, especially where he talks about humanity's use of the earth's natural resources, we no longer care for and work in partnership with the earth, we simply extract all that we need at will. As he says,

"The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging[3], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such. But

---

[3] In this case the verb challenging is translated from the German word *Herausfordern,* which means to challenge, to call forth or summon to action, to demand positively, to provoke. It is composed of the verb fordern (to demand, to summon, to challenge) and the adverbial prefixes her- (hither) and aus- (out). The verb might be rendered very literally as to demand out hither." (*The Question concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Heidegger & Lovitt, 14)

does this not hold true for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the

wind; they are left entirely to the wind's blowing. But the windmill does not unlock

energy from the air currents in order to store it"(14).

In the following example Heidegger discusses the hydroelectric dam which occupies the Rhine

River. Here, the human-nature relationship is different, a further manipulation of nature occurs

and there is a disturbance of it in order to yield something for human consumption. By damming

up the river with human made technology nature is disturbed.

"It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning.

This turning sets those machines in motion whose thrust sets going the electric current for

which the long-distance power station and its network of cables are set up to dispatch

electricity. In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly

Figure 4. Heather Yip, *Weighty Transmission*, assemblage, wood, paint, marker, stones, string, wool, dimensions variable, 2019

Figure 5. Heather Yip, Photograph of Device Charging Area, My Home, 2019

disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command"(16).

How do I explain to my children that their devices are useless without batteries, or power from a source? That these devices are products of a system that is destroying the earth. As Jussi Parikka points out in his book *A Geology of Media; "*it is the earth that provides for media and enables it: the minerals, materials of(f) the ground, the affordances of its geophysical reality that make technical media happen. Besides the logic of ordering, we have the materiality of the un-contained, and the providing, that is constantly in tension with the operations of framing"(13).

The idea of mining and the politics of abusing the natural world for resource extraction related to technological tools very obviously intersects with my work and is worthy of a future investigation. However, in the research presented here I am more interested in the social and con-temporary state of motherhood as it intersects with my children's use of digital media consump-tion related to play in the real world and in online spaces.

Heidegger encourages his reader to be patient with technology for it is itself a "mode of re-vealing"(13), mostly in conjunction with humanity's bond to it. For him what is always already true is humanity's part in the cycle of what he calls "the challenging setting-upon through which what we call the real is revealed as standing-reserve"(18). Here, I think he means that people will exploit nature and destroy it in order to draw from it as a commodity to make things. But, we never truly know how those objects and systems themselves will function in the end. Our own essence as humans in this cycle is important (and revealed) and we have to decide how to suc-

cessfully exist with(in) it. This theory is important in my research as I am trying look at technol-
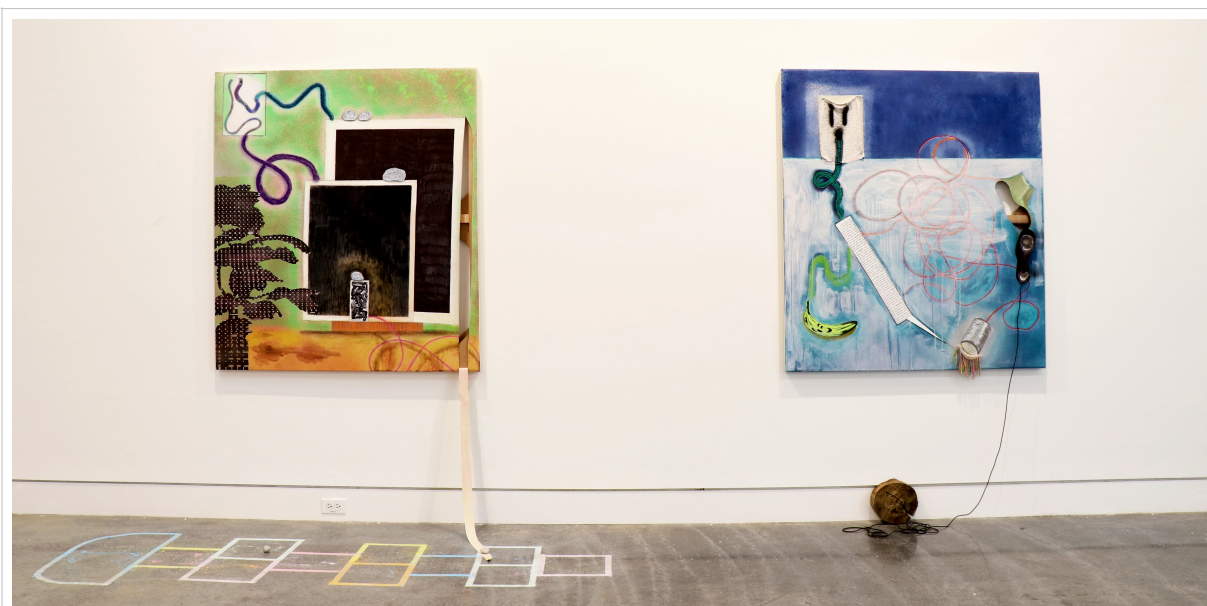
Figure 6. Heather Yip, *Bounce Back* & *Whisper Game*, paint, ink, marker on canvas & found materials, dimensions variable, 2019

ogy and its modern developments with a more open mind and not always as a concerned parent.

These are some of the ideas I had in mind when I made the artwork *Weighty Transmission (Fig. 4),* the wooden pieces stacked one in front of the other, inspired by how I had seen people pile their tablets and phones near an outlet in their home. I drilled a few holes in one block of wood and attached it to the wall, protruding from the holes were thick pieces of wool which I attached to the flat pieces as if they were electrical cords. Stacked on top of each of the flat pieces of wood were a few stones of various sizes and shapes. I placed them on top of the wooden "devices" to show a sense of burden, perhaps as a reminder of the stress we place on nature and the power grid with all of our machines.

I have watched as my children's friends have retreated indoors to commune with their X-Box, Nintendo or PlayStation, choosing to interact with their favourite machine over playing outdoors. At a lecture on play, recently given by psychiatrist Stuart Brown;

> "[O]ne woman asked (Brown) how her children will learn to trust, empathize and socialize when their most frequent playing is done online. Brown told her that while video games do have some play value, a true sense of ''interpersonal nuance'' can be achieved only by a child who is engaging all five senses by playing in the three-dimensional world" (Marantz Henig, web).

I see evidence of this when I look at my kids interacting with digital devices; scrolling away on a screen, their eyes glazed over, waiting for whatever is coming next. Unfortunately, for parents, many of these online platforms are designed so that the algorithms that keep kids interested go on forever. Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist and author, discusses such algorithms in his recent manifesto, *Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now.* He says,

> *"*The algorithm is trying to capture the perfect parameters for manipulating a brain, while the brain, in order to seek out deeper meaning, is changing in response to the algorithm's experiments. Because the stimuli from the algorithm doesn't mean anything, because they genuinely are random, the brain isn't responding to anything real, but to a fiction. That process " of becoming hooked on an elusive mirage" *is* addiction"(15).

Guy Debord discussed a concern for a society mediated by images. In his book *Society and the Spectacle,* thesis no. 24 says, mass media-"seems to be invading society in the shape of a mere apparatus, it should be remembered that this apparatus has nothing neutral about it, and that

it answers precisely to the needs of the spectacle's internal dynamics"(19). When we simply consume media even in analogue forms we are at its mercy however, new technologies which have internal artificial intelligence capabilities (algorithms) are more difficult to moderate as parents because the tool itself is learning to manipulate our children and without any intervention dependence occurs (Heitner, Lanier, Turkle)

Growing up I had a fascination with machines, simple ones I could take apart and put back together. Examples included my mother's kitchen clock, a blender, a toaster and a lamp. My father also taught me to change the oil in my 1988 Ford Escort and I could change the tires too. I was prompted to remember this as I reflected more on my interest in modern smart phones and screen based devices and the problems they were causing my family. However, I would never attempt to disassemble one for re-use, nor can I even fathom how they truly function. Most of us use these very complex devices to perform mundane tasks, tell the time, save appointments to a calendar, or find the location of a restaurant we want to eat at. And yet, they steal our attention for sometimes hours, often creating communication silos between device and operator.

My research aims to question why they distract us from socializing with the people in our vicinity, and often times with our children or avoiding spending time alone. One reason could be that besides their practical applications as miniature computers, they have advanced capacity, for example social media applications. These applications obviously connect us to other human beings through shared interfaces making us 'cyborgs'(Haraway), further enhancing networked capabilities that already existed via the internet. My curiosity with technological devices became further directed at my children and their usage of such interfaces. Could I apply more of this kind of irony to my art making practice? The theory is that these machines both connect us and create

distance between us, as Haraway constructs her image of a 'cyborg' she allows us to imagine a future where these contemporary technologies are used to advance us together as a 'networked' society.

Thinking further through this duality of the screen based device, I continued to observe these objects especially while at rest or, plugged in to an outlet. This curiosity became the subject of two large painting-assemblages (*Fig. 6*) I made for our interim exhibit in 2019. In these paintings which came not too long after I made the assemblage *Weighty Transmission* (*fig. 4)* I was thinking more about how our devices do not perform properly without, at some point, being connected to an outlet, in order to receive a battery charge so that we can continue to use them. Observing devices in this way and (similarly) in other people's homes allowed me to think about

Figure 7. David Hammons (left) and Joan Miró (right) at Nahmad Contemporary, New York 2018
Joan Miró Artworks © Successió Miró / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris 2018.
Photographs by Tom Powel Imaging

what kinds of "off-line" social encounters might be going on while their electronic devices were at "rest".

For example, was little Johnny outside playing hopscotch with his sister? Were Mom and Dad playing scrabble at the kitchen table? These thoughts are trivial, but they were a gateway back into my own childhood when I did play those games. Handheld screen based devices did not exist and were not at the forefront of our minds when we needed something to occupy our time. We were outside playing hopscotch! Or, tying two tin cans together with a string to play the whisper game[4], riding our bicycles to the park or to the neighbour's back yard to play in their sandbox.

Bounce Back and *Whisper Game* (*Fig. 6*) illustrated the tension between my experiences of childhood play and those of my children. The cords, wires and attachments that devices use to charge their batteries are like umbilical cords stretching from mother to fetus and form an undeniable connection with our built environment and domestic spaces. During these times, while connected to our home from outlets we can turn away from technology, and human bonding can take place. The interactions families perform while their devices are at rest is important in my research, for my art making and also as a mother. The decision to add cutouts and other dimensional materials, a hopscotch course (interventions) to the paintings, *Bounce Back* and *Whisper Game* was done to express these ideas. In addition, the interventions operated as a vehicle to address the idea of free play, which is also what I observed in the photo *Sandal Selfie* (*Fig. 2*).

---

[4] **Getting Started.** Players must sit in a circle or stand in a straight line. They need to be close enough that whispering is possible, but not so close that players can hear each other whisper.

    1.   **Begin the Game.** The first person in the line or circle whispers a word or phrase into the ear of the person sitting or standing to their right.

    2.   **The Game Continues.** Players whisper the phrase to their neighbours until it reaches the last player in line.

    3.   **The Conclusion.** The last player says the word or phrase out loud so everyone can hear how much it has changed from the first whisper at the beginning of the circle or line. (icebreakerideas.com, web)

During a critique, I was asked why I felt the need to cut into the paintings. I think that is because, for me a frustration with making paintings as a material practice in relation to this research was beginning to unfold. The two dimensional fixed world of a painting, I feel, tends to separate object from viewer. Similar to the way screen based devices can operate in that they can create a passive user. My work and research is an attempt to ensure human agency while operating a device and to inspire my children to use these tools playfully.

For me, the problem surfacing with making a "traditional painting"[5], similar to the surface of the screen, is that there is a difficulty in knowing the process that occurred in the making of the work. There is a frustration in making a painting where the absence of "real world" physical play that I was trying to bring to my children's attention, got lost. This was especially concerning because I would ask them to give up their screens and go outside, yet here I was in my studio making a "serious" painting. Just as most users of modern digital devices do not know how they operate (internal functionality) generally most people who appreciate a painted surface do not necessarily know the particular process involved in its making. As I pushed forward in trying to make paintings while addressing the ideas and concerns I had about my children's involvement with digital screens, I began to interrogate and breakdown my painting practice (in its traditional sense).

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines painting as "the expression of ideas and emotions, with the creation of certain aesthetic qualities, in a two-dimensional visual language. The elements of this language—its shapes, lines, colours, tones, and textures—are used in various ways to produce sensations of volume, space, movement, and light on a flat surface"(web). Referenc-

_____

5 In this case I mean paint applied to a solid two dimensional surface or painted support.

ing the work of art historian and critic Isabell Graw, who questions the notion of painting in her book *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium,* says, "[the] canvas stretched over the frame may be described as a firm, smooth and impenetrable coat that, like the commodity fetish, quite literally covers up its social conditions"(321). In my case, the conditions being covered up by that canvas surface were a reminder of the physical presence of the flat digital screen, the objects of my apprehension. The uncovering of the painting even in subtle ways to both reveal a structure underneath as well as to tie into the real world allowed me an opportunity to do what I could not do with the screen based objects. To bring attention to the idea of the absence of play, to transform a painting into a "play-thing" was an exciting discovery for me.

I considered other artists who had performed operations on their paintings of slashing, cutting and tearing and wondered why. In *The Love of Painting*, Graw references historically important examples such as the artists Lucio Fontana and David Hammons (specifically Hammons's tarp paintings 2009-present) and of these two artists she says, "The selective destruction of the support medium brings what lies 'behind' it (the conditions of its production, its social dimension) into play in a variety of figurations"(322). An inquiry into the historical analysis of the works where Fontana is slashing or ripping into the canvas reveal similar concerns, and that both artists were looking for a way to escape the flat surface as well as the traditional aesthetics of painting. At stake for me as an artist/mother with children obsessed with screens are concerns far beyond colour, composition and two dimensionality.

In exploring the work and career of American artist David Hammons (b. 1943), especially the period that Graw references(2000s-present), I found out that he too was experimenting conceptually with a rejection of painting in its traditional format. In a recent exhibition

(*(UN)COVERED*.Nahmad Contemporary.2018) of some of his tarp paintings which drape and cover painted canvases with large perforated and torn plastic tarps, the catalogue says;

> "Palpably rejecting the canon of postwar painting, his ongoing *Tarp* series, created in his Harlem, NY studio, consist of painted canvases shrouded with frayed and tattered industrial fabrics that he found in the streets. Only through the tears and holes of these dilapidated materials, such as in *Untitled* (2015), or through the rumpled meshed cloth, seen in *Untitled* (from Dirty Money series) (2014), does Hammons allow glimpses of painterly brush strokes underneath. He defies the hierarchical preciousness of the medium, covering that which is traditionally exposed and elevating as the focus that which is [sic] normally discarded. Similar to Miró upending the principals of painting, Hammons quite literally denies the canon its traditional viewership"
>
> (Nahmad Contemporary, web).

Joan Miró's *Sobreteixims* (1972-73) which were paired with Hammons's work in this show and similar to Hammons, "Miro democratized his method of construction to defy the canon's notion of the individual 'artist genius'. Precociously postmodern, his *Sobreteixims* signify the process of their creation through incorporation of the objects used to produce them: brooms, buckets, or skeins of string" (Nahmad Contemporary, web).

I will discuss this idea of using unconventional objects as tools more fully in part four, when I describe my use of household gadgets in the making of my artworks. However for now, I want to draw attention to the limitations I was uncovering regarding the painted and digital surface. As a result of what I felt were limitations of the painted surface for me to facilitate social

interactions through play, I began making work where I included my kids. In the artwork *Blanket*

Tent = Protected Space (*Fig. 8)* you can see that I have cut into a large painting and transformed

it into a type of sheltered space where my children were allowed to paint and draw freely on my

studio wall. The location of the support structure became a protected ground for their creative

experiments. In a second example, *Hold You* (*Fig. 9)* I stretched one of my son's shirts over a

painting frame and attached it to the wall, a second frame had one of my partner's shirts

stretched over it which I put on the floor. Between them I tied some bed sheets.

The material transformations which occurred within these projects struck me as having

similarities to the work of other artist/mothers such as Lise Haller-Baggesen, whose *Mothernist*

installation project (*Fig.10*) also imbeds props reminiscent of children's play including a tent

where "Crouching down, viewers could enter on their hands and knees, a playful, childlike ac-

tion that effectively stripped all who entered of age, social status, and power" (Hendrickson,

31-60). These are the kinds of experiences I aim to infuse in my work: shelter building and hav-

Figure 8. Heather Yip, *Blanket Tent = Protected Space*, painting on canvas, wall assemblage, dimensions variable, 2019

Figure 9. Heather Yip, *Hold You*, wall and floor assemblage, dimensions variable, 2019

ing fun without screens. Physical play and interaction allows us to have agency in the world in which we live, to experience joy and resilience in our everyday existence. Play space therefore is not neutral, it allows us to question our existence, our subjectivity and our position in the world.

Observing my children over the years and their ability to play with anything (from collecting sticks, rocks and bugs to making an imaginary campfire and assembling blankets into a fully formed play-home) is very exciting! As they grow older they are far less easily impressed, and find it far easier to just watch a screen. However, in their real world play they are questioning themselves too, by enacting their own social and political relations, gender roles, etc.; that is, "making and remaking"(Loveless) themselves through play. My current work is inspired by the potential for

Figure 10. Lise Haller-Baggesen, *Mothernism*, audio, installation, dimensions variable. running time: 75:00. installation view, 2013–ongoing

reinvigorating play for myself within my home and studio. "By playing we are withdrawn not only from our normal activity, but from the linear space-time dimension in which this takes place"(Play and Self-Reflection, Pugliese, 227). The space surrounding play for my kids with and without devices is readily available for me to observe. It also involves the aesthetics of human made environments which in turn also speaks to Nicholson's "Theory of Loose Parts". Nicholson talks about our built environments and in the following passage speaks specifically about the art gallery.

"We are beginning to realize that there are more ways to interact with art than to be solely

contemplative (i.e., there exists the possibility of more loose parts and 'variables' than via

visual perception alone) and that although it is fine to allow scientists and artists to invent

things, how about allowing everybody else to be creative and inventive also"(33).

Nicholson was Barbara Hepworth's[6] son and along with his brothers and sisters he was

present in her studio much of the time. When Hepworth's triplets were about a year old she made

her studio a place where she could work and also care for her children and other related domestic

duties. In this excerpt from the artist duo Susannah Wesley & Meredith Carruthers (together their

collaborative practice called *Leisure)* discussing recent work *Conversations with Magic Forms,*

which is about Hepworth's art practice intertwined with her ability to be present with her chil-

dren and to make art work, they say:

"[T]he work is informed by a series of sculptural forms undertaken by Hepworth after

the arrival of triplets (Simon, Rachel and Sarah) in 1934, and as an action is inspired by

the Loose Parts theory articulated by Nicholson - a text which advocates for freedom of

individuals (beginning with children!) to have agency over the shape of the environment

in which they live, work and play. In her visual autobiography Hepworth describes this

period as a new investigation of,… "Relationships in space, size, and texture and weight,

as well as in the tensions between the forms," all created within a studio she describes as,

a jumble of children, rocks, sculptures, trees, importunate flowers and washing"

(Wesley & Carruthers, 2017).

---

6 Barbara Hepworth was a British sculptor, who was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire in 1903. She was a leading figure in the international art scene throughout a career spanning five decades. (Tate,web).

Further, Nicholson's "Theory of Loose Parts," states, "in early childhood there is no difference between play and work, art and science, recreation and education-the either/or classifications normally applied by adults to a child's environment"(30). For me, these slippages between work and play, art and play and lastly education and play are key components to my practice. This made my home vital as a place of research and my children my 'cooperators'.

I would like to call my children 'cooperators' rather than collaborators as they are sometimes not directly involved in making the work. However, if they are not involved in person, they are sharing their space and sometimes their toys and play experiences with me in my research and art making. I make this distinction in reference to Tom Finkelpearl's work in his book *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation;* in it he says;

> "First, in art criticism *collaboration* often refers to teams such as Gilbert and George or collectives such as Group Material. It implies a shared initiation of the art, and a start-to-finish co-authorship. [However,] collaboration is simply too far reaching a claim to make; not all of the participants are equally authors of these projects, especially in the initiation and conceptualization. *Cooperation*, on the other hand, simply implies that people have worked together on a project" (my italics, 6).

Figure 11. A photograph of my daughter building a fire in the snow shelter we built, *Snow Fortress*, 2019

Figure 12. Heather Yip, *Building Blanket Shelters in the Yard*, vacuum series, mixed media on paper, 24" x 18", 2020

Part 2
Producing physical play & what bothers me about my children's technology addiction

My twelve year old daughter continuously references things she has seen online as she is

scrolling through her social media accounts, she interrupts me (to show me something), when I

am busy with one task or another. I don't understand why she finds these events (real or made

up) interesting. I can't help but recoil thinking it's all a huge waste of time. I try to avoid nagging

her or arguing about the obsession she has over watching other people capitalize on themselves

using social media platforms or worse, formulating ways to exploit herself. My son (9 yrs)

watches gamers[7] content to find out how to play a video game more effectively. Both of these

behaviours cause me anxiety and stress as I worry that they have developed an addiction to these

online activities. Both of them are becoming less interested in physical play which engages them

with other human beings and the real world.

However, as I write, the social world has fallen into crisis; the Covid-19 virus has every-

one quarantined in some way. Schools have closed and people are meant to socially distance

from one-another, and in many cases screen technology has become a lifeline to work, school,

friends and families. Now, more than ever, I feel that we (as a society) are meant to exist with

these digital devices. The question I now find myself asking is how can I teach my children that

---

[7]**YouTube Gaming** is an offshoot of **YouTube** that features both live and on-demand video game content. The new platform curates **YouTube's** existing **gaming** videos, allowing you to more easily find your favourite Call of Duty highlight reel without accidentally stumbling onto a Beyoncé video. (tomsguide.com, web)

these tools are useful for some things but must also be put away so that we can remember how to exist without them. In my studio, I search for creative ways to introduce this idea to my kids.

One of the ways author Richard Louv advocates for off-screen play in his book *Last child in the Woods,* is an increased access to the outdoors. What Louv labels as the "nature deficit disorder" is what "describes the human costs of alienation from nature […]" (36) this is in plain sight to me when I have to almost always personally guide my children outdoors to play. In order to address this problem in some of my research driven efforts, I involved my children in building outdoor structures so that I could show them how much fun could be had fabricating and playing in them. I called one of them *Snow Fortress,* I wanted this project to entice my children to experience making a large object with snow and to be creative and ground themselves in their bodies. They helped me build and adorn the exterior with some home-made food colouring spray paint, and the finished work lasted several weeks due to the cold temperatures. As a result of the project, *Snow Fortress* I noticed some changes in my children's behaviour. For example, on one chilly January evening both of them took blankets, flashlights, snacks and supplies to make a small fire inside the snow shelter we had built. They were out there for hours and my partner and I took turns spying on them from the bedroom window. I followed this experience with my own work in studio, creating the multi-media piece *Building Blanket Shelters in the Yard (Fig. 12).* In making this artwork I thought a lot about how my worries regarding my children's access to technology are not uniquely mine and that other mothers (or parents) must find raising kids with the labour of mediating their access to gadgets difficult too.

A text that has been instrumental in understanding my own subjectivity as a mother faced with the task of finding ways to exist positively with modern technology is Shelley Park's book

Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood. In it Park brilliantly points out a difference between mothers who view technology as a problem and those who adapt to it. She makes an important distinction between 'techno moms' and 'cyborg mothers'. She says;

> "Technomoms view technology—including communication technology—merely as a tool with which to carry out their preassigned domestic and familial duties. Cyborg mothers, on the other hand, are aware of technology's potential to open new social spaces that help reconstitute our maternal subjectivity" (177-78).

This brings to mind Haraway's desire to be a cyborg rather than a goddess, as we are always able to shape the conditions of our own existence. In her essay "The Cyborg Manifesto" Haraway outlines a dichotomy between a cyborg and a goddess; instead of visualizing the cyborg as an instrument for military and industrial control she sees the cyborg as having the potential to perform new social constructs among people and economies. A sense of alienation occurs for the 'technomom' as she feels she cannot actively participate in the same device media driven world as her children. Therefore she aims to control it by limiting her children's time and access to screen technology in order to help them become more well rounded citizens. A 'technomom' also views these devices as tools to perform labour and not as doors and windows opening to new possibilities. Contrast that with 'cyborg mothers' who are willing to take part in the ever-evolving digital spaces that these devices create without fear and simply deciding to occupy them willingly.

My decision to become a 'cyborg mother' has to do with having free will over technology and not a consumption relationship to it. I hope that this will also help me guide my children in creating a more production oriented relationship to technology as well. Further, I come to the

conclusion that my role is as a 'cyborg-artist-mother' in order to filter and understand what this new device driven world is presenting to my children and how they can further question it, take breaks from it and exist successfully in tandem with it.

Armed with this new perspective of 'cyborg-artist-mother,' I continued incorporating the idea of play into the research portion of my art practice. For example, I now prioritize using/ leveraging technology to perform more playfully with my children as a mode of inquiry. As Miguel Sicart describes in his book *Play Matters*;

> "[W]e need to think about play matters and reclaim play as a way of expression, a way of engaging with the world-not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of pro-duction. Like literature, art, song, and dance; like politics and love and math, play is a way of engaging and expressing our way of being in the world. In fact, play is a funda-mental part of our moral well-being, of the healthy and mature complete human life […]
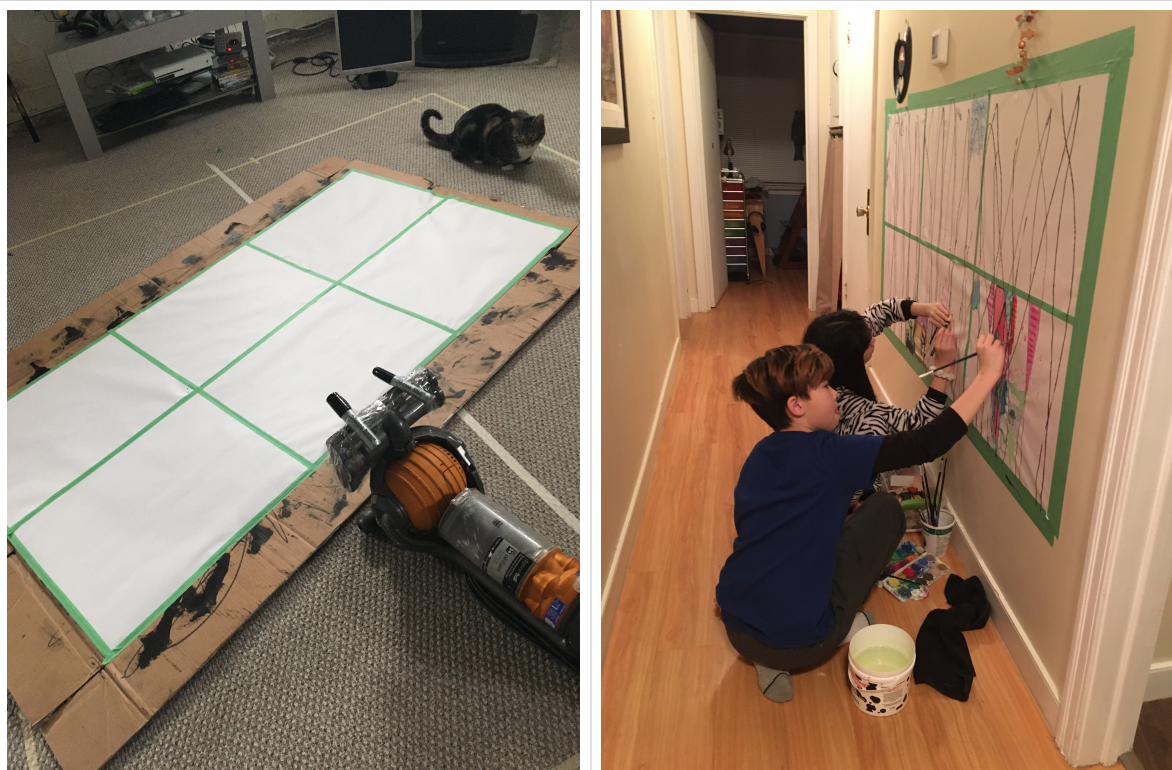

Figure 13. Heather Yip, Creating Vacuum Line Drawings for "*A Mural at Home,*" 2019

Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so

they become more than mindless habits" (5).

Helping my children to transform their boredom into creative play is at the heart of my

project *Vacuum Line Drawings for a Mural at Home* (*fig.13)*. In this work I made a large abstract

line drawing by attaching markers to my vacuum cleaner and then attached it to a wall in my

home. Next to it I laid out watercolour paints, crayons and other art making materials which my

children used to complete the work. We talked about how I made the line drawing with the vacu-

um (a technological tool) and how we could use it in a fun a creative way, skewing the intended

purpose of the machine and how it is meant to be used. This conversation opened up new ways

of thinking about technological tools for all of us. This work stayed up on the wall for many

months and was a "go to" place for when my kids were bored and needed something to occupy

their time. I have taken cues from observing and engaging with them and using these moments as

a conduit for my art making process.

However, in my home my children continue to be full time consumers of online media,

barely having an inkling of what to do when they are not in front of some kind of screen. They

struggle with their attraction to interactive screen based technology and are always ready to con-

sume it. Despite my earlier attempts to coax them to play "off-line" they claim boredom and lack

the skill and experience of using their ennui to access their imaginative creativity or just be with

themselves. Nicholson's ideas about allowing "involvement and interaction" with one's envi-

ronment, allows me to view the technologies that are accessible to me in my home as tools with

which to playfully explore integrating them into my art practice as well as guide me in my un-

derstanding of how to be a 'cyborg-artist-mother'. The aim was to explore within my art practice

some of the digital devices and applications that I am apprehensive about in a more playful way,

providing me with an opportunity to make work with my children in an effort to understand

where we are headed - and of course, to break the pattern of boredom for my children. As Mark

Kingwell discusses in his book *Wish I Were Here: Boredom and the Interface*, "Insofar as we

concentrate on banishing boredom, or sublimating it into creativity or further consumption, we

merely postpone — perhaps indefinitely — a confrontation with self that is essential to

self" (125). If there is one thing I remember most about my childhood, it is all of the time I spent

simply drifting off into daydreams and the fun projects and play that it inspired me to take on.

While my children are cooperators in my work and research, my goal is to show them

within the context and process of making something that exciting things are possible. For exam-

ple, in the video performance piece, *Minecraft Experiment* (*Fig.14*) I drew inspiration from a
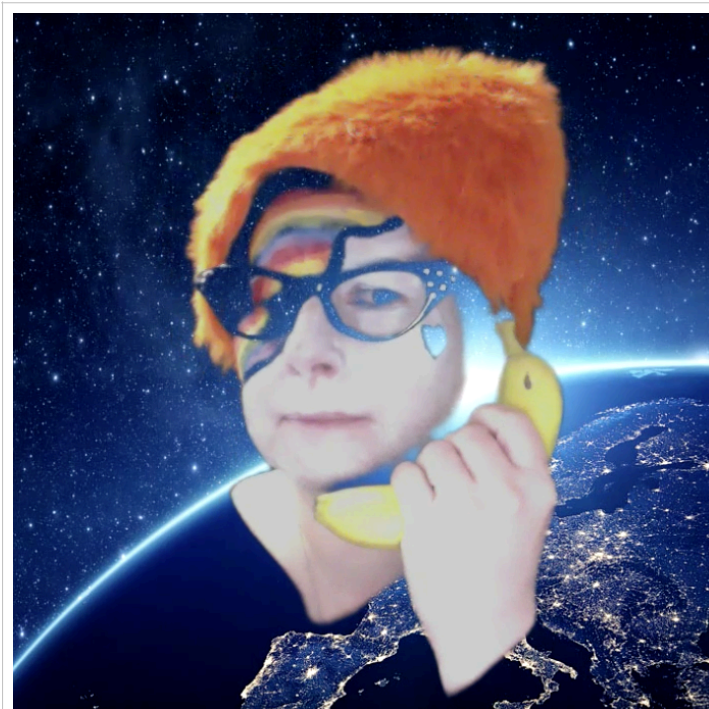

Figure 14. Heather Yip, *Minecraft Experiment,* video perfor-
mance, 4 min, 2020
https://vimeo.com/420743378

recording (I made) of my children playing an online video game with a friend. The video game players became characters for my performance and an attempt to further engage with my children in experimental play as well as a space for a mutual understanding of a video game they enjoy. After I recorded the script which consisted of three characters and props (a banana, a shoe and a tin can phone), which were elements drawn from my earlier paintings *Bounce Back* and *Whisper Game* (*Fig.6*). In *Minecraft Experiment* these objects worked as stand-in's for gaming controllers, smartphones and other current technology. I recorded the script as a performance with me acting as each gamer. In this artwork I wanted to highlight for my children through satirical play, the actions and sounds of gaming and what that might look like from another perspective. When I showed the completed work to them we all laughed and had great discussions about the video game. These discussions were important and helped me understand the game and what occurs within it, especially the creativity and play which I had not been aware of.

In her article, "Play and Self-Reflection Eugene Fink's Phenomenological Anthropology" Alice Pugliese says of Fink's theories on play that, "[…] play highlights the human capacity to act into this living dimension."(227) This statement strikes me as being similar to Kingwell's analysis of boredom in that they are both modalities that ground us into the present and our own bodies. Within the *Minecraft Experiment* project as well as in creating the vacuum line drawings for *A Mural at Home* and in our shelter building activities, I hope I created (for my children) a positive way to participate in my work and research. By playing and producing themselves they take on a more active role, hopefully noticing that scrolling or tapping through something someone else has created can be problematic.

There is an awakening that takes place when you produce something, even if it occurs through and in cooperation with a technological tool. Nature has sacrificed itself to bring forth the elements to create components in manufacturing these devices; therefore I believe people must be challenged to use technology in a productive way. These machines are an example that as cyborgs we can become a dynamic node creating, according to Haraway, "networks of connection among people on the planet [that] are unprecedentedly multiple, pregnant, and complex." (160)

Part 3
Re-Enactment an Intervention

The purpose of this section is to expand upon the discussion of my research based practice as a 'cyborg-artist-mother,' and to explain more fully how it came to be. So far during the course of the MFA my investigations have occurred through the use and interactions with more analogous types of technology. What followed was an inquiry into my understanding of the history of women and machine connection within the domestic sphere. I continually feel compelled to explore a more playful and embodied approach to making art work and as a way to research play.

In 2007, Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone, coincidentally and not long after, I also received my first "invitation" to join Facebook[8] a place where I might find my "friends". In the spring of that same year I had my first child. For me, these occurrences in technology, coupled with my new experiences as a mother, created an intersection of online life and "real world" existence that I was not yet familiar with. According to Park,

"[A] mother's reality may shift and change during her entire life. The process of becoming a mother is not a process with a definitive temporal (or instrumental) end. Because motherhood is a relational identity (as all assemblages are), the identity of a mother shifts as children grow from infants to toddlers to teenagers to adults and as our family configurations and life circumstances change—sometimes in response to our children's changing needs and sometimes for independent reasons" (179).

---

[8] **Facebook** is defined as an online social networking website where people can create profiles, share information such as photos and quotes about themselves, and respond or link to the information posted by others.(www.your-dictionary.com, web)

The ability to socialize and interact with my new cohort of parents through the ease of these portable hand-held devices coupled with newly popularized social media applications like Facebook (and many others to come) would morph into a tool that I and other parents would soon use to sooth, amuse and hold the attention of our offspring. What needs to be questioned here, is that if we are not careful these devices can also interrupt bonding experiences between a parent and their child. In his book *Hold on to Your Kids*, Gordon Neufeld discusses how new screen based technology, originally designed for seeking out information has instead turned into a way for us to seek out connections with our peers. I can't help but find it troubling to look at an image like the one constructed by Pickersgill (*see Fig.1*) and imagine that these children are mindlessly scrolling and tapping instead of socializing with each other. In capturing my own pedagogic role with my children I continue to value how art and creativity can be productive as a tool. There is also a guilty feeling as my partner and I have given our children access to the technology and gadgets that have caused us to become concerned.

According to French historian Phillippe Ariès modern childhood began in the 17th century resulting from the evolution of the modern family and a high importance placed on children and childhood. Influences on health and education by religious reformers and moralists which happened almost in conjunction with one another were imposed on parents and families. These in turn created a dissolving of the "vast polymorphous society to organize itself separately, in a homogeneous environment, among its families, in homes designed for privacy, in new districts kept free from all lower-class contamination" (Centuries of Childhood,415). In his book *Centuries of Childhood* he further points out,

"The modern family on the contrary, cuts itself off from the world and opposes to society

the isolated group of parents and children. All the energy of the group is expended on

helping children to rise in the world, individually and without any collective ambition:

the children rather than the family" (404).

Families no longer send their children to 'apprentice' or to serve with other families. The nuclear

family has been created where the mother (most often) is to cook, clean and raise the children

and the father goes off to work.

The modern family continued to take on a more isolationist and cloistered existence in-

side of their home throughout the industrial age. Coupled with the development of the telephone,

radio and television, families began by spending rare free time gathered around the radio and

then the television to take in their favourite programs together. In the early years of these techno-

logical advances there were few programs available to listen to or watch. Even in the 1980s

when I was growing up, I remember only watching *The Wonderful World of Walt Disney* on Sun-

day nights with my family, and perhaps a suite of Saturday morning cartoons and when I was a

bit older, some after school programming. We only had three or four channels at that time and it

seemed to be the norm for most of the kids in my circle. This string of occurrences and develop-

ments in media based technology set the stage for the passive consumptive viewer (McLuhan).

As I grew into an adult on-screen media offerings also grew up in new ways. One very

influential way was through the huge presence of news culture for my parents and their cohort.

For families who were already beginning to retreat indoors to enjoy larger quantities of screen

time they were also exposed to more news media than ever before. The same essence of fear that

was posited in the parental minds during the middle ages by the religious reformers had been in-

jected into these parental minds by modern news outlets. Says Louv, "[…] the stranger-snatcher epidemic [is] "an optical illusion" (Finklehor) caused by the generalized social anxiety, new co-ordination between law enforcement and the missing children groups and media excitability. In a five year study of local newscasts aired in Los Angeles in the 1990s, Frank Gillam, a professor of political science at UCLA and associate director of the Center for the Study of American Politics and Public Policy, found that local TV News is creating a powerful "crime script" in the public's mind-a distorted shorthand that we carry around in our heads" (128). We are now living in a world where parents are afraid to let their children go out and play on their own coupled with access to more media options than any other generation before.

These lingering fears, in addition to the saturation of the daily life of families by digital technology, present more challenges when it comes to raising children. In her book *Screenwise* Dr. Devorah Heitner further articulates this problem. She discusses a common term for this generation of children and their parents,

> "The term 'digital natives' was introduced by Marc Prensky in 2001 to describe young people who are growing up surrounded by digital technology. Thus when I use the term 'digital native,' I am referring to the touch screen generation that has grown up creating and sharing as well as consuming digital content. Today's kids are part of the content-on-demand, everyone is a producer generation. How can we help them become "screen-wise" in this new world?" (2)

In addition to being 'screen wise' parents must help their kids at being thoughtful in their screen-based productions. Pugliese says, "Activating the subject's possibility of constituting and trans-forming one's own time and space, play emerges as a radical re-appropriation of [sic]their own-

position in the world. The practical self reflection operated by playing assumes an anthropological significance that surpasses the psychological experience of individuals"(228). Through play, as with boredom, the individual questions their own existence, my role as the 'cyber-artist-mother' as a mediator is connecting the worlds my children occupy online and making sense of it. Making *Minecraft Experiment* for example, helped me to build a critique of gaming but through co-operating in a re-enactment of a game and in making an artwork. This experience informed me of how modern video games can function as play experiences in stark contrast to when my children are simply scrolling through social media applications or watching You Tube.

Minecraft Experiment as an art work was an attempt to create a portal for a 'digital immigrant' like myself to travel into the world of my 'digital native' children. In Park's discussion of the intricacies of cyber-motherhood she says;

> "Moreover, as our children themselves become technologically skilled (sometimes more so than ourselves), the social spaces in which we may play with various technologically mediated maternal identities are likely to be spaces co-inhabited by our children. As the mother of teenagers, I inhabit online spaces not to talk about my children, but to talk (and interact playfully in other ways) with them" (179).

With the *Minecraft Experiment* project I wanted my children to recognize and understand the difference between producing content (further thoughtful content) versus consuming it. I also want them to see perhaps through the lens of my art practice that together, we can more critically engage with modes of play, both with and without screens. I also need them know that I am attempting to engage with and understand the things they like when playing with technology. Heitner says, "The landscape is different now, and the rules are changing rapidly. Our kids need help,

even if they think they don't. Even if you think they don't. It's up to us as parents (and teachers) to ensure that we are helping our kids develop the skills they need to be "screenwise" (4).
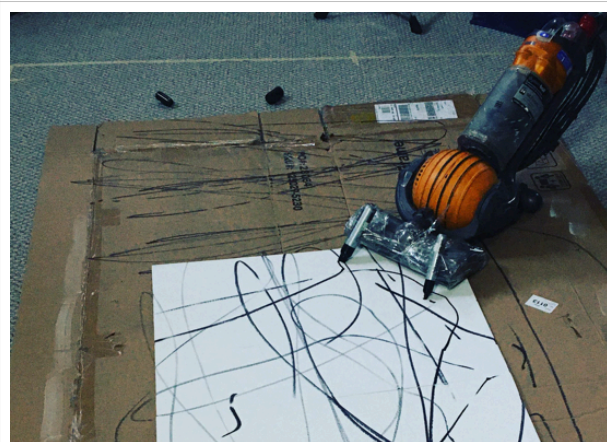

Figure 15. Heather Yip, mark making process with vacuum cleaner, 2020

Figure 16. Heather Yip, *Boobs and Belly*, vacuum series, mixed media on paper, 24" x 18", 2020

Part 4
Domestic Machines as
Art Making Tools

The artist, performer and educator Pattie-Belle Hastings writes in her essay "The Cyborg Mommy's User Manual" that, "The machine has extended the body of the mother for centuries as she tended the stove, cranked the washer, peddled the sewing machine, and vacuumed the house, but she hardly exists in discussions of technological culture, except as a consuming unit for manufacturing and advertising […]"(8). Reading this passage I am reminded of how we can see tools and technology shift when we play with them in different ways. I continue to be engaged in my home as a 'cyborg-artist-mother' and find spaces to perform my work and work through my concerns. I began to consider how the machines that my mother and grandmother also used, such as the vacuum, the mix-master and laundry appliances could be folded into the processes of my art making. I also learned that the very conditions of my domestic life — and its privileges — have a long history and are a subject of discussion in

Figure 17. Heather Yip, *REDO*, wall relief sculpture, dryer lint, hair, dust from my vacuum cleaner, 12" x 16", 2020

academic circles as well as for other historically important artists (Laderman-Ukeles, Kelly). For example Park references the work of Betty Friedan (1963).

> "As argued, the domestic gadgetry imported into suburban U.S. households in the mid-twentieth century produced (in addition to being produced by) new norms of good housekeeping and good mothering. As such, these tools played an important role in transforming (bourgeois) women's desires, goals, and identities. In this sense,[…]: Cyborg mothers, mothers whose agency can only be understood as inextricably intertwined with domestic technologies, have been around a long time" (178).

Excited by these new modalities of a 'cyber-artist-mother' existence and because I felt more closely connected to these domestic technological objects than my smartphone, I decided to attempt different art making performances with them.

The framework I was creating using these domestic tools for art making felt ironic and playful. In addition to the markers and paint rollers that I attached to these machines as described earlier, I further explored how these domestic tools could inform new modes of "play" through my art practice. For example on one occasion I took the lint out of the clothes dryer to make a rudimentary sculpture. With the help of some bleach, I found a way to inscribe the word *REDO* (*Fig. 16*) as a further act of whimsy and play. With these machine relationships I began to mediate my own desire to produce artwork that is playful. I started to become aware that I am more free and amused in my ability to create with them. "Playing" with these new tools felt strange at first, using them for purposes for which they were not intended. However, I was reminded of how I played with machines as a child, and more generally, how children have the ability to see

objects and surroundings as something other that what they are. The act of playing with the machines that I had been using for menial domestic work… (cleaning floors, making food, washing clothes etc.) were conceptually transformed through the very act of play. In the art works from the vacuum series; *Boobs and Belly*, *Stepping Out*, *Making Blanket Shelters in the Yard* as well as others I found a new freedom and space to make art work and to think about how technology can be used in so many unintended ways. But also, my identity as a "homemaker" was transformed too. As Park says,

Figure 18. Heather Yip, *Stepping Out*, Vacuum series, Sharpie marker, paint and a shoe with extra long laces on/in panel, 24.5" x 18.5" & floor dimensions variable, 2020

> "Mothering, like gender itself, is a technology (a social artifice produced by shifting power relations), not an essential identity tied to natural bodies. One way to see this is to recognize the ways in which technologies (machines) are integrated into the practices of mothering in ways that transform the maternal body, its location in time and space, and its engagement with others, making possible resistant forms of maternal agency"(173).

Performing playfully with these machines proved to be not only a subversive act - I was using these tools in untypical ways — but my understanding of mothering "as a technology" and as a way to create reminded me of what Duchamp did with his readymades. "[He] moves away from

what he described as 'retinal art' to 'conceptual art' in the service of the mind that would charac-

terize his artistic expression thereafter" (Weppler, 12). This disruption in my practice introduced

me to a new way of making artwork that seemed more on point with the concerns I had as a

mother. The marks I made with the Sharpie's[9] attached to my vacuum cleaner excited me, the

non-linear disorganized "messy" marks reminded me of a toddler's drawing. In my work titled

Stepping Out (*Fig. 18*) in which I created initial lines with markers attached to my vacuum pro-

duced new ways of seeing the flatness of a two dimensional work, two legs appeared in the

messy drawing, a hole was added into which I inserted a shoe.

At this point I feel more of a connection to my art practice and the reasons I undertake

making art work. I am now considering the process of making the work as being just as impor-

tant (or more) than the final product. How would the two function in the world? I had my con-

cerns and circled back to my "cut-out" paintings *Bounce Back* and *Whisper Game*. Referencing

Abstract Expressionism and the Action Painters of the 1960s I think the aim of these works is to

hold onto the pictorial plane not the "abstract actions" of an artist but the invisible labours of my

position in the world.

---

[9] **Sharpie** is a brand of permanent marker, it comes in various colours and thicknesses. It is not specifically used by artists and can be purchased in most grocery, stationary and drug stores.

Part 5
Making kin with the internet

The porosity of my practice enables me to make my work with materials that are close at hand, within my home and part of my own lived experience as a 'cyborg-artist-mother'. Concerns about the scope of learning and creating through play coupled with the (unknown) effects of too much screen time intersect in my material based explorations. What objects do my kids turn to when they are not on screens? What do screen objects look like when they are removed from my children? This journey into what has become a more process based practice and the concerns I face as a 'cyborg-artist-mother' have allowed me to examine how other artist-mothers understand both parenting and technology. Through my experimental art works and research with my coop-erators, I have been able to create an opening for myself where I am beginning to overcome my anxiety related to my children's dependancy on digital technology.

On one recent occasion, I was outside with my partner and my children. We were doing yard work and my daughter, (who had my iPhone at the time) began moving our outdoor furni-ture around the yard and filming herself in different poses. When I questioned her about what she was doing she replied "Mom, I'm making a TikTok!". She often makes and posts videos to this social media platform but this time I was intrigued with her creativity and the playful way she was going about making the video. We have (as a family) made a few Tik Tok videos together since and it is an interesting way to be creative in an intergenerational way. By comparison, Park tells of her own mothering experience through the internet. As someone who worked away from her family and was separated from her children, she was forced to find new ways to maintain bonds with them. As she says,

I grew up in a game-playing family; rarely did a holiday or visit from relatives pass

without a game of cards, a word game, or a board game. Playing games with my own

daughters also has been a primary place of connection for us. While living apart, my

younger daughter and I have frequently used the Internet as a space in which we can

playfully engage. Given the wide array of role-playing games on the Internet, this space

—unlike the card table—allows us to engage playfully with identities other than that of

mother and daughter. In the case of our "word challenge," for example, my fifteen-year-

old and I successfully worked through the identities of such per-sonas as "bankers," "teachers," "professors," and (the ultimate identi-ty category) "cyborgs"(177).
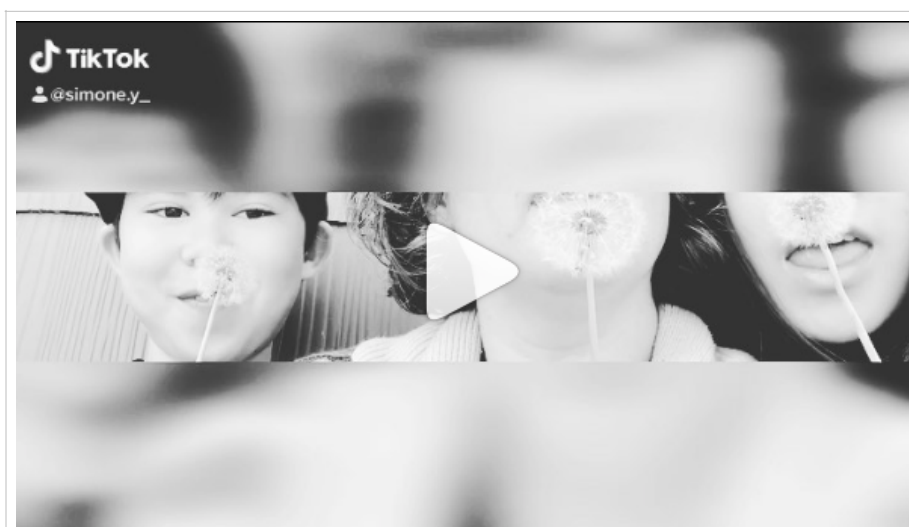
Figure 19. Heather, Simone & Chelsea Yip, *Blowing in the Wind,* Tik Tok video, 2020

This description of online play fascinates me as I had not previously thought much about

online space as a way to engage directly with my children, especially in play. In addition to

making the *Minecraft Experiment* which I have discussed at length in previous sections, coupled

with performing in TikTok videos with my kids I want to further open up space where I can in-

teract with my children online — as a 'cyber mother' (Park, Hastings). I now feel more com-

pelled to learn how to build a house in Minecraft[10], make more TikTok videos, Instagram posts and Internet memes.

Another way to think through my role as a 'cyborg-artist-mother' was through a wider generational lens. Recently on a Zoom call with my septuagenerian mother and father, my children, my partner and I played an online version of the television game *Jeopardy*. The Zoom application allowed me to 'share my screen' so we could all play easily. Although my parents did not understand how this was being done, they did know how to play *Jeopardy* and we all had a great time. However had the Zoom application not allowed me to mediate this experience several things could have gone wrong. My children were too excited to play the game with their grandparents to be able to 'host' and my parents who are new to the technology of online meetings through platforms like Zoom would not have been able to initiate such an experience in the first place. This process also involved some planning on my part,
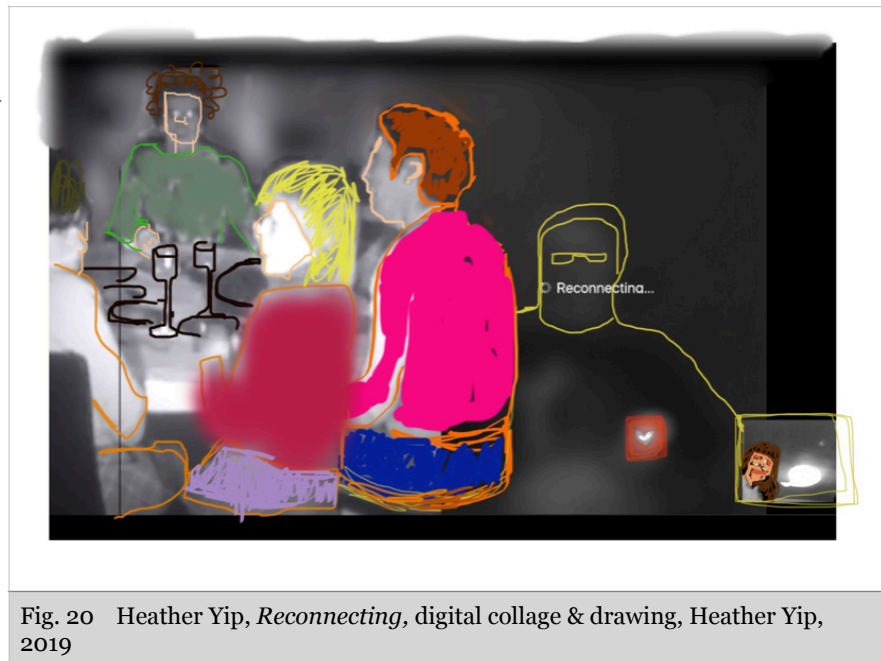
Fig. 20   Heather Yip, *Reconnecting,* digital collage & drawing, Heather Yip, 2019

asking all parties involved what time would work for them to play the game and then accessing and downloading the media involved.

---

[10] **Minecraft** is a Lego style adventure game which has massively increased in popularity since it was released two years ago. It now has more than 33 million users worldwide. The video game puts players in a randomly-generated world where they can create their own structures and contraptions out of textured cubes. (www.telegraph.co.uk, web)

 This experience led me to unpack the feeling that not only do I function as a cyber-artist-mother for my children but in some ways I must become a cyber-host of sorts to assist interactions between them and my parents. Seeing myself in this way inspired me to create my final and ongoing project called, *imother.mom* which is designed to be a supportive virtual (community) space for other 'cyborg-artist-parents'. Parent artists who are navigating similar spaces, facing circumstances of being nodes in-between two generations of internet users is a space that needs support and discussion. In this space I hope to create a dialogue between 'cyborg-artist-parents' that helps alleviate some of the anxiety that we face as we worry about what our children (and sometimes our own parents) are doing online.

Conclusion & Post Defence Reflections

While working towards my MFA I have used my art practice as a mode of inquiry to better understand my children's continual preoccupation with their digital devices and screen based electronics. The problem I felt was that they were losing their human agency to be playful, creative and have fun in the world and were becoming too attached to their electronic devices. Through my research, which I performed in my home with my children who often acted as cooperators, I discovered that opening up ways for them to think about my worries in turn functioned as praxis for them to put down their devices and go outside and/or play "off-line" in other ways.

  Although it was unexpected, my research led me to see that there are ways to perform creatively and produce play using technology. Important moments for me occurred when I made the video performance *Minecraft Experiment*. It allowed me to understand a video game my children love to play and how they play inside of that virtual space. Occupying this video game space in a satirical way through the artwork by 'queering' the video game, opened up meaningful conversation with my children about performing within the space of the game. Similar spaces where technology allows us to produce

Figure 21. Heather Yip, *imother*, augmented reality lens for Snapchat Camera, 2020
https://vimeo.com/user7895051

play exists on other platforms and I realized that co-investigating them benefited my relationship

with my children. These examinations along with my reading of authors like Park and Hastings

eventually led me to develop an alter-ego called *imother.* The ontology of our existence is chang-

ing with our increased usage of new technologies, besides continuing with different approaches

to show my children that they have agency as producers in their interactions with technology; I

want to further to engage with them on-line and in the spaces where they enjoy spending time.

As Sicart discusses in *Play Matters,*

> "We need more objects that allow us to be playful. We need to take the capacity of ap-
>
> propriation and make a world that does not resist it. At stake is more than our culture of
>
> leisure or the ideal of people's empowerment; at stake is the idea that technology is not a
>
> servant or a master but a source of expression, a way of being. These designs need to ex-
>
> ist so we can make technologies ours, and our being in the world a personal affair. Play-
>
> fulness allows us to extend the importance of play outside the boundaries of formalized,
>
> autotelic events, away from designed playthings like toys, or spaces like the playground
>
> or the stadium. It effectively allows seeing how play is a general attitude to life. Playful-
>
> ness expands the ecology of play and shows its actual importance not only in the making
>
> of culture but also in the very being of human, on how being playful and playing is what
>
> defines us. We are because we play, but also because we can be playful" (33).

According to Allucquère Rosanne Stone in her book *The War of Desire and Technology*

at the Close of the Mechanical Age "computers are arenas for social experience and dramatic in-

teraction, a type of media more like public theatre, and their output is used for qualitative interac-

tion, dialogue, and conversation. Inside the little box are other people"(16). As a 'cyborg-artist-

mother' I can use my practice to question technology and to help my kids understand what is a healthy interaction with it and what is not. In her book Stone further discusses our acclimatization to new technology as "a slow process of belief and acceptance"(16), much as my generation is accustomed to the television and the telephone. I would also include the vacuum, the washing machine and other domestic technologies.

Maintaining relationships with my kids inside new online platforms is important to me- and as Park says of 'technomoms' vs 'cyborg mothers,' "In this mode of being, (techno)mothers are characterized by a use of technology rooted in the maternal work ethic; we are not playful" (180). Honestly I experience this feeling too as I continually have conversations with my kids about the amount of time they spend on screens, even more now that we are living in the Covid 19 pandemic. Park further argues that

Figure 22. Heather Yip, *a reading of "Mud Pies" by Marjorie Winslow*, audio (49 sec) & digital drawing, imother.mom, 2020

"Technologies such as cell phones, texting, email, instant messaging, video-conferencing, and social networking extend and modify both the bodies of twenty-first-century teenagers and those of their parents. Thus, "real" mothering has, in the post-industrialized world,

become inextricably intertwined with technology. This form of mothering in queer space

and time—like other forms of inhabiting queer space and time—should be neither ro-

manticized nor demonized"(27).

This avatar, or virtual performer, that I have created will live mostly at "home" on the *imother.-*

mom website. The aim is to develop different aspects of the site that will host a community of

other 'cyborg-artist-parents'. So far there is a chat bot where you can "talk" to *imother*, there is a

virtual sensorium which has virtual experiences with the natural and built world, the first of

which is an audio piece which my son and I collaborated on (a reading of the recipe for making

mud pies from the book Mud Pies and Other Recipes a Book by Marjorie Winslow). In addition

imother.mom will have an evolving manifesto, perhaps a joke telling page, a recipe sharing page

and eventually events like 'cyber-artist-parent' karaoke night.

Sherry Turkle remarks in her book *Alone Together "*It is not uncommon for people who

spend a lot of time on Second Life and role-playing games to say that their online identities make

them feel more like themselves than they do in the physical real […] Historically there is nothing

new in […] *"*playing at being other." But in the past, such play was dependent on physical dis-

placement"(236).

I could not have arrived at the idea to create *imother.mom* without having had gone

through the experience of the MFA and the research I did cooperating with my children in my

home. I look forward to continually developing the virtual community for other 'cyborg-artist-

parents' as a fun and playful way to work through the serious concerns we all have with our chil-

dren's use of their electronic gadgets and hopefully a way to get through the pandemic and all the

time we spend online and on screens.

A further investigation I have been pursuing is a concern for environmental issues as the earth continues to be heavily mined for her resources related to screen based technology on most continents and to devastating effects. As my inquiry into mining and its impacts further develops I will continue to explore this area of concern more fully in my practice. I would like the aesthetic experience of my work to result in a questioning of human made technologies both extracted from and added to the earth's surface as disruption points in our natural existence. As we build on ways to make ourselves into cyborgs, even with implanted technology will we still also need vast data storage centres which occupy many square metres of physical space?

Works Cited

Ariès, Philippe, and Robert Baldick. *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life*.

      Vintage Books, 1965.

Debord, Guy. "Seperation Perfected." Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. *Society of the Spectacle*.

      Brooklyn, New York: MIT, 2006. 10-24. Print.

Finkelpearl, Tom. *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, Duke Univer-

      sity Press, 2013.electronic.

Gregory, Alice. "What Does It Mean to Be an Artist and a Mother?" *The New York Times*, The

      New York Times, 29 Aug. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/t-magazine/ree-morton-

      artist-mother.html.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the

      Late Twentieth Century," in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature

      (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

Hastings, Patti-Belle. "The Cyborg Mommy's User Manual."*Iris*. 2001: 8-13. Print.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." *The Question concerning Technolo-

      gy, and Other Essays*. By Martin Heidegger and William Lovitt. New York: Harper-

      Collins, 2013. 3-35. Print.

Heitner, Devorah. *SCREENWISE: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World*.

      Place of Publication Not Identified: ROUTLEDGE, 2018. Print.

Hendrickson, J. V. (2019). The Mother-Shaped Hole: Lise Haller Baggesen's Mothernism Inap-

    propriate Bodies . Demeter Press. Kindle Edition. In R. E. Buller & C. Reeve (Authors),

    Inappropriate bodies: Art, design, and maternity (pp. 31-60). Bradford, ON, Ontario:

    Demeter Press.

Hillerbrand, Stephan & Magsamen, Mary. *"Our Practice."* www.hillerbrandmagsamen.com/

    hillerbrandmagsamen. (web)

Kimmelman, Michael. "Sol LeWitt, Master of Conceptualism, Dies at 78." The New York Times,

    The New York Times, 9 Apr. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/04/09/arts/design/

    09lewitt.html.

Kingwell, M. (2019). *Wish I were here: Boredom and the interface*. Montreal, QC: McGill-
    Queen's University Press.

Lanier, Jaron. *Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now*

Leisureprojects. "Conversation with Magic Forms, 2017," Leisure, Tumblr, 13 Feb. 2018,

    leisureprojects.tumblr.com/post/170833666647/conversation-with-magic-

    forms-2017.accessed July 2019

Loveless, Natalie. "Maternal Mattering: The Performance and Politics of the Maternal in Con-

    temporary Art."Â *A Companion to Feminist Art*. By Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena

    Buszek. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2019. 475-92. Electronic.

Marantz Henig, R. (2008, February 17). "Taking Play Seriously." *New York Times*. Electronic

Nicholson, Simon. "How NOT to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts." Landscape

    Architecture, vol. 62, 1971, pp. 30-34.

Owen, Peter-D."Painting" https://www.britannica.com/contributor/Peter-D-Owen/2224. web

Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2015. Electronic.

Park, Shelley M. *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood : Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families*. State University of New York Press, 2013.

Pugliese, Alice. "Play and Self-Reflection. Eugen Fink's Phenomenological Anthropology." *Dialogue and Universalism*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2018, pp. 215-229., doi:10.5840/du201828464.

Robinson, Hilary, and Maria Elena Buszek. *A Companion to Feminist Art*. Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2019.

Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. The MIT Press, 2014. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=826633&site=eds-live. Electronic.

Stone, A. R. (1996). *The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Unknown Author, (UN)COVERED.Nahmad Contemporary, New York, United States| Wall Street International Magazine. 9 Nov. 2018, wsimag.com/art/45564-un-covered.web.

Unknown Author, "Who Is Barbara Hepworth?".*Tate*, www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/dame-barbara-hepworth-1274/who-is-barbara-hepworth.web.

Weppler, Mary. "The Archetype of the Trickster Examined through the Readymade Art of Marcel Duchamp." The International Journal of Arts Theory and History, vol. 13, no. 4, 2018, pp. 11-21., doi:10.18848/2326-9952/cgp/v13i04/11-21.

Works Referenced

Kunzru, Hari. "You Are Cyborg." *Wired.com*, 2 Jan. 1997, www.wired.com/1997/02/

    ffharaway/.web.

Loveless, Natalie S, and Sheena Wilson. "Overview." *New Maternalisms*, newmaternalisms.ca/

    colloquium-overview.

Lovitt, W. (1977). Introduction. In M. Heidegger & W. V. Lovitt (Authors), Â *The question con-*

    cerning technology and other essays (pp. Xiii-Xxxiv). New York, NY: Harper and Row.

McLuhan, Marshall,. UNDERSTANDING MEDIA. The New American Library, 1964.

Neufeld, Gordon, and Gabor Mate. Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More

    than Peers. Vintage Canada, 2013. Electronic.

Slifkin, R. "The Tragic Image: Action Painting Refigured."*Oxford Art Journal"* 34.2 (2011):

    227-46. Print.

Zuern, John-David. "Guide to The Question Concerning Technology." Critical Link.

    http:www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/index.html.web.