Making Something From Nothing: A reflective essay

This is a reflective paper written for Making Something From Nothing; a participatory practiceresearch project which aims to amplify the lived experiences of single mothers in the context of the global Covid-19 Pandemic. Making Something From Nothing acted as both the research concept and methodology; the aim being to draw attention to the invisibility of the single mothers' voices, and in turn subvert the negative social stigma associated with single motherhood. The project outcome; fifteen sheets of handmade paper made from the discarded domestic materials of eight participants, acts as a symbolic 'white paper' for a post-pandemic society that cares for single mothers. The participant criteria chosen was 'single mothers' (women or non-binary folks with sole caring responsibilities), rather than 'single parents' and specifically excluded single fathers. This was not only due to 90% of the 1.8 million single parents in the UK being mothers (Gingerbread 2021), but also as will be explored throughout this paper, it being single mothers rather than fathers who have been victim to negative social constructions and who face additional gender discrimination in their roles as parents. Although the majority of academic literature prefers to use the term 'lone mother' (as the focus being on their role as sole carer rather than their relationship status), this paper will use the term 'single mother' as this is more commonly used in public discourse.

The socio-economic disadvantage, social exclusion and stigmatisation faced by single mothers has been well documented in recent years, (Duncan & Edwards 1997; Rowlingson & McKay 2005; Thane & Evans 2012; Nawaz 2016, Jun 2019), and with a recent report finding that 80% of single parents have experienced discrimination within the areas of employment, government benefits, access to housing, fees and charges, and more recently, Covid-19 restrictions (Single Parents Rights Campaign 2021), the challenges faced by single mothers are wide ranging. Despite this, the voices of single mothers themselves remain strikingly absent from public discourse (May 2010, Carroll 2017). It has been reported that socio-economically disadvantaged people are more likely to experience poorer mental health and wellbeing, lower life satisfaction and feelings of loneliness as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Scottish Government 2020). Women have also been disproportionately affected (Badri 2020, Rigby 2021) with the United Nations (2020) warning that without action now, women's rights could be set back by fifty years. When looking specifically at the impacts of Covid-19 on single mothers, the future looks rather bleak:

"Women are also the vast majority of lone parents who, before COVID, were much more likely to be in debt and/or financially vulnerable. Evidence suggests that they are one of the groups on which the economic effects of this crisis are falling disproportionately....Many more lone parents may be pushed into poverty in coming years." (Scottish Government 2020 p6).

It is no wonder then when asked to write about their experiences over the past year, five out of seven of the project's participants mentioned money and finances as being a major concern. Despite the fact that the overarching purpose of socially engaged practice is to increase access to art, create social change and advance cultural democracy (Matarasso 2019), there is a severe lack of engagement with single mothers in the arts despite their status as a socially excluded group. Making Something From Nothing is an attempt to highlight this, by signalling their invisibility, and presenting a blank page for a future yet to be written.

Approaching the research between constructivist and critical epistemological positions and situated within a feminist methodology, the original research proposal aimed to use reflexive and dialectical methods in order to offer up a radical narrative that challenges the prevailing image of the research group (Cruickshank 2003). Feminist methodologies pay attention to power dynamics within the research process and aim to produce "critical discourse about (related) issues and practices such as voice, authority, disclosure, representation and reflexivity" (Leavy 2009 p8). The research methods therefore were attentive to the context of discovery as well as the context of representation. In this sense, an arts-based method was used as the entire methodology from data collection, analysis, interpretation and representation, and all data gathered from participants was through information they voluntarily chose to share. This method was particularly important given the attention paid in the research process to single mothers' lack of voice, and from an ethical standpoint encouraged a sense of co-creation and agency over their participation. Feminist researchers also recognise the distinct way in which the researcher is positioned within the research (Letherby & Jackson 2003) and therefore my own position as a single mother influenced the methods used to conduct the research. I too had to make something from nothing, and my own experience of stigmatisation, social exclusion and socio-economic hardship, allowed me to empathise with and better understand their marginality. As Hooks (1984) suggests; the marginalised can somehow better understand the 'whole' as they can see from both the margin and the centre, the margin being a radical perspective from which to imagine alternatives. It should be noted however that my position as researcher was from the perspective of a white, heterosexual, able-bodied woman. Whilst May (2010) emphasises the importance of studying 'lone motherhood' as a category of practice, critiques of feminism suggest that by unifying a social group, other factors of oppression (such as race, sexuality,

class, disability) that shape their lives fail to be considered and represented (Leavy 2009). Although some diversity was achieved, recruiting a participant group reflecting a true diversity of the single mother experience presented a challenge, and in order for any future research to reflect diversity, specific efforts would need to be made in the recruitment process to achieve this (suggestions for how this might be achieved are set out in portfolio page 38). Whilst critically analysing the category of single motherhood is important when studying the effects of stigmatisation and social exclusion (May 2010), Allers (2016) writes; "I learned that there is a hierarchy to single motherhood, one that has been historically constructed by societal norms and patriarchal influences but still rules with a tyrannical hold today....glorifying some while demonizing others, mostly across racial and socioeconomic lines." Although social stigmatisation of single mothers varies within different cultural contexts, this research was conducted and participants recruited within the geographical boundaries of central Scotland, and the negative social stigmas the project aimed to subvert, were those based on a Western cultural discourse, particularly rooted in UK and US media and political rhetoric.

In Western political discourse, single mothers have long been considered a 'social threat' or 'social problem' (Duncan & Edwards 1997) an attitude that was particularly fuelled by the 'underclass' debates during the 1990s (Rowlingson & McKay 2005, May 2010, Carroll 2017). The breakdown of marriages had spurred worries of moral decline, increased crime and reliance on welfare by young families (MacDonald 1995).

"Politicians constructed a moral rhetoric of 'family values' that was amplified by the media into a panic about single mothers 'choosing' to bring up children alone...this discourse demonised mothers who, in the notorious terms of a BBC Panorama investigation were producing 'Babies on Benefit." (MacDonald 1995 p136)

Official rhetoric promoting marriage as the "better method to heal a 'Broken Britain'" (DWP 2012 cited in Jun 2019) has continued to be perpetuated by the Conservative governments and fuelled by the media through 'poverty porn' television and tabloid articles (Jun 2019). Even Prime Minister Boris Johnson has perpetuated a stigmatising rhetoric of single mothers who according to his comments in 1995 produce children who are "ill-raised, aggressive and illegitimate" (Sharman 2019) echoing a wider moral rhetoric which constructed single mothers as unable to adequately raise children alone (Wallbank 2001). This rhetoric has constructed a stereotype of the single mother who is inadequate, undeserving and poses a threat to the social order of the nuclear family. According to MacDonald (1995 p13) "when the group being stereotyped is already in a disadvantaged position, the stereotype intensifies the offence" and when looking at the myths and stereotypes of women in particular, notes that "the aberrant

mother is the most dreaded of all the monstrous feminine symbols" MacDonald (1995 p152). Not only do single mothers have to navigate a "triple bind" of inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policy (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonaldo 2018), they have also had to cope with the stereotype of being inadequate themselves. This stigmatisation has encouraged a public attitude of "social disgust" toward single mothers resulting in an internalised shame, embarrassment and social isolation (Jun 2019). Despite this rhetoric of the undeserving single mother raising 'benefit babies', the reality is that the vast majority of single mothers are in paid work (Office for National statistics 2019). The Making Something From Nothing participant data also reflects this; despite their financial worries, every participant was working in some capacity outside of the home, whether as employees, studying for qualifications or running their own businesses, each striving for a better life for themselves and their children.

The roots of this stigmatisation and social exclusion can be traced back to the 19th Century, where patriarchy and capitalism produced an ideology of 'separate spheres' based on the notion of a natural division between the feminine sphere of unpaid domestic labour, and the masculine sphere of paid employment. For women, marriage was the only option to gain social status. Unmarried women were portrayed as 'spinsters'; a threat to the social order, feared by society and subject to "accusations of emotional, social and sexual incompleteness by church and state" (Chapman 2004 p159). This ideology of men as 'breadwinners' and women as 'homemakers' supported women's exclusion from the public world and constructed the private sphere as women's 'natural habitat' (Chambers 2001). This ideology also influenced the way in which parenting roles were defined with reproductive labour being assigned as 'unproductive labour' and relegated to the private sphere where its social importance was obscured (Gabrielsson 2016). According to Rich (1977) to "father" a child suggests the provision of sperm to fertilise the egg allowing 'fatherhood" to remain elusive and tangential, while to "mother" a child implies a lasting presence of many years. While stereotypes of fatherhood do exist, as MacDonald (1995 p15) suggests; "stereotypes of men may elicit negative emotions yet they do little to dent male authority." Again, current Prime Minister Boris Johnson provides a prime example, given he has fathered an "unknown" number of children with at least three different women (Edwards 2020) yet his political power remains intact.

Despite the persisting social pressure to marry, and the 'deviant' status of single women, towards the end of the 19th century, many women chose to remain unmarried. This defiance of the institution of marriage not only produced a negative social stigma, but as more unmarried women began to have children in the 20th Century, church and state enforced

another type of institution in order to deal with the 'problem' of unmarried mothers. Young and unmarried mothers who had defied this social order were being sent to the workhouses and the infamous Magdalene Laundries where they were not only separated from their children through forced adoption, but subjected to horrendous abuse (Thane & Evans 2012, Blakemore 2019). Despite the continued rhetoric of 'family values' by politicians, the reality is that women's rejection of marriage was less of a moral issue than an economic one (Meyer 2000, Chambers 2001, Rowlingson & McKay 2005, Gabrielsson 2016). As MacDonald (1995) suggests:

"The private sphere is at once valued as a peaceful sanctuary, and yet devalued as that non-public space which we worry about only when its aberrations filter through into the public arena." (MacDonald 1995 p48).

In other words, as single women and mothers rejected their position within the institution of marriage, their unpaid domestic and caregiving work suddenly became visible within the public sphere leading to a feminisation and devaluation of the caring role in society as a whole (Chambers 2001). Single mothers had to, and continue to, traverse both spheres, ultimately posing a threat to the patriarchy. Feminists have long recognised that paid work could not exist in the absence of housework and as Gabrielsson (2016) suggests; "if keeping the house clean, cooking and caring for children is providing freely for capitalism, the production of intimate values associated with the home are equally compromised". This devaluing of caregiving and mothering was very apparent in one project participant's writing:

"What about money as children get older? My money making options as a middle aged woman after 18 plus years of unpaid mothering. My skills not valued. No pension. No security. No reward. Hopefully my reward is 2 happy independent adults who can contribute to society." (Making Something From Nothing participant).

Meyer (2000) suggests, the very notion of 'caregiving' implies that the care is given freely, either at no cost or at a cost the giver is willing and able to shoulder. The true value of care however has become increasingly visible during the course of the pandemic as private and public worlds have collided like never before. Conversations around childcare have been forced into the spotlight, particularly fuelled by the fact that women have shouldered a disproportionate amount of that care (Adams 2020, Graves 2020). While Gabrielsson (2016) suggests "no society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long," MacDonald (1995 p133) notes that "the spiritual reverence for motherhood intensifies whenever the socio-economic conditions require it." One might therefore assume that just as

those NHS staff revered as 'key workers' have been denied a pay rise (Read 2021), mothers will continue to be expected to provide their care freely. Making Something From Nothing challenges this return to 'the new normal' and forces the question; who cares for single mothers? Surely now is the time to recognise the interdependent nature of care, and especially how men and the state have been depending on unpaid care work primarily driven by women's contributions (Jun 2019).

Mielre Laderman Ukeles' (1969) Manifesto for Maintenance Art aimed to expose these very disparities through what she termed "development" and "maintenance", where "development" is the creative practice of innovation traditionally privileged to men, and "maintenance" is the boring functional everyday work reserved for women. According to Ukeles (1969) development is only possible if someone shoulders the burden of maintenance, and maintenance work "takes up all the fucking time." Her manifesto proposed that this everyday maintenance work be flushed into public consciousness through a series of domestic actions she would carry out in public museums (such as mopping the museum floors, dusting etc). Ukeles, and several other feminist artists working during the 1960s and 70s, including Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, and Bobby Baker all recognised that elevating domestic life to the status of art, could challenge our perceptions of it (Barrett & Baker 2007). Writing specifically about Ukeles and Rosler, Lady Science suggests:

"Ukeles and Rosler remind us the invisible labor of women and marginalized people ensures that those permitted in the public sphere, white able-bodied men, are properly clothed and housed and supported and separated from waste so that they can innovate in comfort. By surfacing this labour and critiquing the ways in which it has been made invisible, Ukeles and Rosler prefigure scholarly critiques about the labor of women and marginalized people and the hidden histories of maintenance technology that support a culture of innovation. " (Lady Science 2017)

Ukeles' (1969) manifesto provided a crucial grounding for the developing research of this project, influencing the content of the Making Something From Nothing covering letter which included an update of Ukeles' infamous question; "after the revolution, who will pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" to "after the pandemic, who will clap for us on Monday morning?" By recontextualising Ukeles manifesto in this way, the aim is not only to re-present these concepts but to draw attention to how little has changed in our society for women and mothers since the 60s. As has been forewarned, the pandemic could no doubt set women's rights back to the 1960s, (United Nations 2020) and who did pick up the garbage? Key workers; council workers, NHS staff, shop assistants; low paid maintenance workers the majority of whom were women and other marginalised people.

Making Something From Nothing as a concept and methodology not only attempted to draw value and give voice to single mothers by transforming their everyday personal domestic materials into art but, it also became a statement on what is considered 'high art'. The ideology of capitalism and patriarchy not only influenced the way in which women are perceived, it also influenced our understanding of art. While the invention of fine art in the Enlightenment era increased art's importance as a value system, as Matarasso (2019) discusses; by valuing the artistic tastes of an anti-democratic elite, all other types of artistic practice, especially those rooted in everyday life, were relegated to a second-class status. Feminists and socially engaged artists however have long made a commitment to the everyday, disrupting these dominant value structures and asking us to pay attention to the uneventful or overlooked aspects of daily life. By making aspects of everyday life visible, we are simply stating 'here is value'. As Johnstone (2008) suggests:

"commitment to the everyday can also indicate the desire to give voice to those silenced by dominant discourses and ideologies – a commitment coupled with the everyday's transformative potential; for in this dialogue to notice the taken-for-granted conversation of others is the first step in irrevocably changing everyday life" (Johnstone 2008 p13).

Just as participatory artists have moved from the private sphere of the studio to the public sphere of communities, the feminist art movement brought forth aspects of women's everyday lives into the public sphere of the art world. Yet women's art continued to be devalued, their work branded as 'hobby art' and excluded from the male-dominated critical discourse (Lippard 1978). While many feminist artists were working in the expanded field of 'maintenance art', it has never been recognised as an artistic genre due to critics scolding their work as "ego-driven practices" (Jackson 2011 p88). As Lippard (1973 p62) so famously suggested; "if the first major Pop artists had been women, the movement might never have gotten out of the kitchen." However, maintenance artists such as Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, Bobby Baker and Ukeles continued to push conversations around domestic practices and understood the critical potential of housework as artwork (Gabrielsson 2016). The home is in fact a key social institution where women have power and influence, as Pink (2004 p41) suggests; "housework and the home might be seen as instances of women's agency (rather than oppression)."

Although many contemporary feminist artists have reclaimed traditional domestic practices such as embroidery, textiles, and cooking, there is often a failure to acknowledge that these practices are not only synonymous with women, but also with class. As Lippard (1978) discusses; it is working-class women who have always made something out of nothing. While middle-class women have always had access to culture outside of the home (theatres etc), working class women were more "locally and domestically focussed" (Lippard 1978 p136) and were forced to get creative outside of what was traditionally considered art. Remaking, renewing, recycling (patching up clothes, fixing broken objects etc) has always been the work of working-class women, a term Lippard (1978 p136) described as "positive fragmentation" – the mixing and matching of fragments to make a new whole. Given the aforementioned economic hardships faced by single mothers, the materials chosen to create the handmade paper and the project title aimed to make this specific point very clear; single mothers have no choice but to make something from nothing, and when we do, the results can be "beautiful", "interesting" "fragile" and "realistic" (portfolio page 18). These methods aimed to not only draw attention to the valuable everyday experiences of single mothers, but also allowed the participants to gain a sense of value over their own domestic work.

Through asking participants to reflect on their experiences over the past year in the creative writing task (portfolio page 17), a process of narrative analysis was used to "extract an emerging theme from the fullness of lived experience presented in the data" (Leavy 2009 p28). Although this biographical approach unearthed a diverse set of narratives around participants' social identities, each was framed within the context of the single mother experience during the pandemic, and therefore single motherhood was given meaning in relation to a broader biographical perspective (May 2010). This method was particularly important when considering how a wider public audience would receive and respond to these narratives. Just as Ukeles' (1969) manifesto aimed to "flush these everyday maintenance activities into public consciousness," Making Something From Nothing aimed to flush into public consciousness the experiences of single mothers. Although Belfiore & Bennett (2010) suggest that storytelling can be disruptive to the social order, the goal of identity-based research is to communicate stories in a way which challenge stereotypes, build empathy, promote awareness and stimulate dialogue (Leavy 2009). Leavy (2009 p27-28) goes on to say that "narratives are constructed out of the data through a "reflexive, participatory, and aesthetic process" yet the participatory limitations of this project meant that further dialog and rapport between myself and the participants was not possible. For this reason, rather than using my position to retell the participant stories constructed in the form of a manifesto, I realised that there was more power in my role as an artist to present the blank page for a manifesto to be written upon. After all, true participation requires citizen control, (Arnstein 1969) and participatory artists must acknowledge their dominant position in the process of creation (Matarasso 2019). The decision to continue to 'repulp' their words into a blank paper was not an easy one, yet it presented an opportunity to question how best to present this rich and emotional data into a context that could be consumed by the audience in conjunction with the blank paper. Using poetic language can evoke new meanings as Leavy (2009 p63) suggests; "sensory scenes created with skilfully placed words and purposeful pauses, poems flush feelings to the forefront capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass." In this sense, the physical ingredients sent by participants were transformed into poetic performative actions in the process of contextualising the research. Onion peel became "chop the onions", hoover dust became "hoover the floor" and a prescription for iron deficiency became "check your iron levels" etc (portfolio page 33). These action verbs draw influence from Richard Serra's "Verb List Compilation: Actions to relate to oneself" (1967-1968) however while Serra's verbs are passive i.e., "to roll", "to fold" "to crease" etc and allude to the foundations of his sculptural practice, the verbs in Making Something From Nothing become active "(i.e., "chop the onions") to contain a sense of direction and participation between audience and art. What began as an attempt to publish a manifesto as a way of presenting the participant experience, became recontextualised as a cover letter aiming to give context to the project without seeming too close to propaganda (Belfiore & Bennett 2010). While the cover letter provides context, the 'white paper' is the starting point, a fresh start in order to collaboratively create a future manifesto where all single mothers' voices can be included.

When questioning the role of art in society and the distinction between what art is good for us, and what is not, Belfiore & Bennett (2010) suggest that 'low art' such as media and mass culture is a poison and 'high art' is a tonic. If mass media and political rhetoric has been the poison to single mothers, then perhaps only art can provide the tonic? Art has the potential to provide a powerful social weapon, and as a consequence be politically dangerous (Belfiore & Bennett 2010) therefore when deciding on whom the final white paper should be sent to, it was media and politics that became the first targets. By posting the white paper directly to those who have perpetuated these negative stigmatisations, we 'pass the buck' back to those who hold the power, and could potentially provide wider dissemination of the message. It was during this process of exploring the function of the audience that the project title itself transformed. What was originally a direct statement in; "You're Making Something Out Of Nothing" became "Making Something From Nothing" to encourage a sense of collective social and cultural responsibility. The role of the audience in works of 'social sculpture' is crucial; it is the audience that creates the change, not the artist (Jordan 2013). While this crucial audience engagement was lacking during the research process, the potential for wider participation with single mothers is ample; particularly given the lack of opportunity in the arts thus far. In the same decade as the UK government were perpetuating rhetoric demonising single mothers as a socially excluded group, New Labour was also deploying a rhetoric which promoted participation in the arts to encourage social inclusion (Bishop 2012). Yet Bishop (2012 p14) suggests that these tactics were "less about repairing the social bond than a mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state." Despite the attention paid to single mothers in the 'social exclusion' rhetoric, little attention was paid by artists and cultural organisations. Although some socially engaged projects have made positive impacts on the lives of single mothers such as the Young Mothers' Program instigated as part of Project Row Houses (Leerkamp et al. 2014), and Another Single Mother (Ford 2017), engagement with single mothers tends to be a by-product of working within the wider community. While the ideas and methods of participatory artists have become central to education programmes in cultural organisations, their community focus tends to be on young people and schools; another by-product of New Labour's rhetoric promoting art as a tool to develop resilience for a future workforce (Bishop 2012). Again, single mothers were excluded from these agendas due to their lack of economic value and their position situated firmly in the private sphere of caregiving.

While Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) presented a theory whereby the oppressed must first recognise their oppression in order to be liberated, I would argue that single mothers are already well aware of their oppression. Not only does the Making Something From Nothing participant data reflect this, but 90% of single parents think that 'single parent' should be added as a protected characteristic on the Equality Act (Single Parents Right Campaign 2021). Perhaps this lack of officially recognised marginalised status may also contribute to the lack of inclusion of single mothers on cultural organisations' diversity and accessibility agendas. The issue then becomes a sort of chicken and egg scenario; in order to encourage their participation, we need to amplify their voice, yet in order to amplify their voice, we must encourage their participation. I would argue that there is the possibility for Making Something From Nothing to do both. This research project, which started as a pilot project for continued research and engagement on the question of how can we (collectively) create a postpandemic society that cares for single mothers, has uncovered a new set of questions; who holds the power to change these negative perceptions, and how do we change them? Whilst single mothers may be aware of the discrimination they face, this doesn't stop the negative effects of this discrimination from seeping into their self-belief systems, as illustrated by participants using words such as "undeserving" and "invisible" (portfolio page 20). Freire's (1970) 'problem-posing' method of education would therefore present an opportunity for dialogical relations between single mothers who "posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire 1970 p81). In other words, Making Something For Nothing group workshops (portfolio pages 48-49) could provide the space for critical co-investigation, where single mothers can feel empowered to create a manifesto for liberation. Whilst Freire suggests that banking methods of domination (such as propaganda, slogans etc) cannot be used in the name of liberation, BAVO (2007) suggests that artistic resistance can be achieved by overidentifying with the dominant order itself. In this sense, a manifesto could provide a counterrhetoric, by amplifying the voices of single mothers and issuing a set of demands for a society to listen, value and care for us. The question then comes back to issues of power; if a Making Something From Nothing manifesto is co-created, where does it need to be presented? Although media and politics were the recipients of the white paper, perhaps a more suitable target would be the institutions of the art world? If museums have a validating role in society (Belfiore 2002) but in the struggle against inequality are the main enemy (Groys 2007), then perhaps museums and cultural organisations are where the voices of single mothers might echo furthest? According to Belfiore (2002 p102) museums "reflect the social exclusion of certain groups, but also, by promoting a unilateral cultural perspective, reinforce the prejudices and discriminatory practices diffused in wider society." If museums are to play their part in shaping positive social change, then perhaps just as museums were the hosts of Ukeles' (1969) maintenance art performances, they could be the host of a Making Something From Nothing manifesto, where the voices and presence of single mothers can be made visible to a public audience. After all, participation between artists and audience is where there is great power to implement social change, and as Matarasso (2019) suggests:

"At its best, participatory art creates a space in which all can speak and be heard, where our pain and our hopes can be shared, where we can build common ground and ways of working together, where our creativity and empathy might find better ways of living. And in doing that, it might be specially valuable in places too small or weak to be noticed by power. In communities left more and more to their own devices, participatory art – and especially community art – might be a valuable tool for building a better future." (Matarasso 2019)

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