

MAGAZINE › JUNE 2024 › PARENTING

# Carrying the motherload

## A walking artist looks back on a decade of pram-pushing

Clare Qualmann

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“There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall.”

– Cyril Connolly, 1938

I began to incorporate walking into my creative practice in 2004. In collaboration with artists Gail Burton and Serena Korda, I created a project entitled *Walk walk walk: An archaeology of the familiar and forgotten*, where we used walking to explore our local environment and the political meshwork of connections between people and places. We made a series of walks as live art events: night walks, a musical walk and guided tours. Through our work, we encountered many other artists who used walking in their practice, and together we founded the Walking Artists Network in 2007. Walking plays an ongoing core role in my work. My artworks and practice-research projects include *Spinning stories* (2008–2011), *Darned memory* (2010), *Perambulator* (2011–2023) and *East End jam* (2014–ongoing).

I recently emerged from more than a decade of pram use, a time in which I pushed three small children from babyhood to independent mobility and made a series of artworks exploring that experience called *Perambulator* (2012–2023), which ended with a poem. Becoming a parent changed my approach to art, and my experiences of walking with a pram inspired the project. *Perambulator* is an old-fashioned word for a baby carriage. Its shortened form, “pram”, is commonly used in UK English, often synonymously with pushchair or buggy. I chose the title in part because of the two other definitions of the word:

“A person who walks or travels through or about a place; a traveller; a pedestrian. Also figurative. Now archaic.

A person who performs a perambulation to determine the boundaries of a territory; a surveyor. Now chiefly historical.

*Perambulator, n.*”

In *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press.

# Transforming the terrain

Perambulator [<https://huntlyperambulator.wordpress.com/>] began with my son in 2012: a response to the total disruption of my smooth mobility (and work as a walking artist) that I grappled with after his arrival. Suddenly, the materiality of the city streets that I thought were so familiar came into focus in new hyper-detailed ways, centred around their conduciveness (or not) to sleep. Human geographer Derek McCormack's discussion of "passenger becomings" resonated with my experience in the pram-walks-for-sleep that formed my new walking routine: "Search out, and become familiar with neighbourhood surfaces and textures... avoid surprising bumps and jolts". I had always been a walker, but my walking changed, and the ways that I surveyed my territory and its terrains were transformed.

I became more fluent in operating this technology of childcare: the packing and the loading of the pram with just the right stuff, the knack of getting up kerbs, steps and onto buses. Drawing on the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, psychosocial researcher Lisa Baraitser categorises "maternal tool-beings", identifying a "rubric of objects of maternal work" including the pram, and describing how "an investigation of her relation to such objects could be thought of as an inquiry into the ergonomics of motherhood". Baraitser goes on to outline the "vast array of different physical and geographical locations" that mothers perform their parenting work in, accompanied by and encumbered with "mother stuff". For non-car-owning, city-dwelling parents such as me, the pram enables this reach and access to diverse, near and distant places and spaces, loaded up with the objects and equipment we need to support us.

## Art of the pram

In my pram nap portraits (2015-2016), which formed part of the Perambulator project, I call on artist Louise Bourgeois' *Femme maison* (1994), an artwork that uses the repeated image of a woman's head obliterated by a house, and I describe the identification and inspiration that this invoked. I spent a lot of time with my head stuck in a pram, which the pram nap portraits capture.

The artist and researcher Paula McCloskey discusses the nexus of art encounter and maternal encounter (also through Bourgeois' work), describing the potential for art to act as a catalyst and exploring "art-encounters' possible capacity for subjective transformation". The catalysis she identifies is a creative driver that moves the artist (in this case, a mother artist) to recognise the power of her own creative endeavour and, in turn, its potential future impact on audiences, whether they are mothers or not. Making images and other representations of motherhood (and parenting more widely) that disrupt stereotypical tropes is a vital and powerful tool in diversifying the way that parenting is culturally understood.

“By bringing the maternal into representation through arts-based practices, a recursive loop is established whereby maternity is produced, even as it is represented, and intergeneration becomes temporally reciprocal, the act of creativity passing back to the mother her renewed subjectivity.” Lisa Baraitser

## The end of an era

The pram finally left us one uneventful day in 2023. It had been languishing in the hall for some time, used very occasionally for taking a sick child to the doctor or moving heavy shopping. We gave it away on a neighbourhood free-stuff WhatsApp group. By now a pram of Theseus, every wheel replaced, the seat straps, buckles and hood fabric all swapped out, some of them repeatedly. The children crowded around, holding on and saying “goodbye pram, goodbye” as its new owner looked on, slightly perplexed at their reaction and my request to take one last photograph. It wasn’t just a farewell to a thing, but the end of a life stage, the end of an era, a farewell to a version of me.

## Farewell to the pram

Farewell to the enemy of good art. The strap struggle snap pain, pinched skin caught in buckle.

Farewell to the hidden no-longer-orange. Blue, green, furry, leaking foul juice into the fabric of the hood.

Farewell to the Motherload-sharing weightbearing gatherer of crumbs.

Goodbye wrist jarring, hard stop pavement-crack-shock running through metal frame soft body.

Farewell, shopping transporter, toy loader, bike hanger, scooter carrier.



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A baby peeks out from a pram in the street. Subsequent scenes show how obstacles, such as cracks and deep gaps, make progress difficult.

Artwork: Clare Qualmann, photographs: Clare Qualmann

Farewell to the muddy stuck wheel lift and shove and lift and push and zig zag up the no path hill. Good riddance to back breaking contortion, fastener manipulation, strap struggle, cover changing, choreography of the absurd.



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A red pram sits in different natural settings. In the photos that follow, parents and babies navigate through outdoor environments.

Artwork: Clare Qualmann, photographs: Clare Qualmann, Blake Morris, Catrin Jeans

Farewell, to the smooth dance of flow and pause, the unexpected strength the knack of bend, grasp, lift, carry up stairs, down escalators, round corners, off the bus.

Farewell, to the side-look judgemental glance, interference, take up space accusation, the fear of confrontation, the Battle of Wills and might-as-well-just-walk moments.

Farewell to the won't fold fumble, clip sides unsynchronised, the jam, jiggle, squeeze, catch wheels.

Goodbye to the swoop in rescue for exhausted little legs, the relief of transfer from shoulders to wheels.



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View media on original website [<https://youtu.be/HUEGWyfF2No>]

A woman lifts and carries a pram containing a baby or toddler up and down stairs in different locations, showing that it takes effort and care to transport a child in this way.

Artwork: Clare Qualmann, photographs: Rebecca Ford, Katie Wilson, Heather Macinnes

Farewell to the nap machine, the quest for perfect surface, smooth not too smooth, not too bumpy, no sudden noises.

Farewell to the desperate performance of bed imitation. Fold flat, lean in, bend, hold. The shushing and soothing, lost inhibitions. Public sharing of the go to sleep show.



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A woman kneels, stands and bends over a pram, interacting with a baby in different locations.

Artwork: Clare Qualmann, photographs: Clare Qualmann, Barnaby Hewlett, Ernest Hewlett

Farewell to the rain cover wrestle knelt in puddles in the dark, tugging plastic over kicking legs, velcro caught in hair.

Farewell to the mother-tool, mother-machine, mother-wheels, parent-mobile, giver of distance, assistant.

Farewell to the pram.



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View media on original website [<https://youtu.be/DzBhrGzny28>]

A red pram stands on a city street, train platform and park. In the scenes that follow, a woman and a toddler load luggage, fix a rain cover and engage with a baby.

Artwork: Clare Qualmann, photographs: Clare Qualmann, Sam Zambrano, Katie Wilson, Barnaby Hewlett

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## About the author

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Clare Qualmann is Associate Professor in the Department of Music, Writing and Performance at the School of Arts and Creative Industries, University of East London. Her teaching, research and art practice explore the interconnections between art, activism and the radical potentials of participation. She was a founding member of the Walking Artists Network and led an AHRC-funded project (2012–2015) to extend the network’s interdisciplinary connections internationally, using walking as a creative critical practice. With Claire Hind, she has co-edited two volumes of “wander scores”: *Ways to Wander* (Triarchy Press, 2015) and *Ways to Wander the Gallery* (Triarchy Press, 2018). Twitter/X: @ClareQualmann

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