

## The Milk Trucker

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### The “Controversy” of Breastfeeding and an Artist’s Response

*American popular culture—and, not infrequently, popular sentiment—promotes the lactating body as a controversial body to be censored. Discrimination against breastfeeding has led to a host of social protest actions, however. This interview with American artist Jill Miller details the breastfeeding activism of her latest project, The Milk Truck. Through this series of interview questions and responses, Miller and the author discuss the public reception of The Milk Truck, ponder the role of humor in maternal activism, and ground the project within a larger setting of maternal activism in art.*

When it comes to the coverage of breasts, the American mass media—and, by extension, the American public—appears to be a study in contradiction. In recent years, the barely concealed breasts of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues, always a hot-ticket item, have had to share newsstand space with the lactating breasts of Hollywood celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Salma Hayek, Kourtney Kardashian, Christina Aguilera, and others. Popular magazines position these celebrities as model mothers for their dedication to their babies, as evidenced by their breastfeeding—and surely the flash of skin and possibility of nipple sighting only reinforce the subject’s marketability. At the same time, journalists fan the flames of controversy, or even manufacture said controversy, over the breastfeeding body. Major news outlets regularly frame breastfeeding as a provocative act, not only drawing attention to instances of discrimination but also perpetuating potential scandals. For the May 21, 2012 *Time* magazine cover featuring a mother and nursing toddler, photographer Martin Schoeller specifically placed the pair in an unusual standing position that underlined what he called their “uncommon

situation” of breastfeeding into the toddler years (Sun). Rather than seeking to normalize the breastfeeding of infants and toddlers in public perception, *Time* sought to capitalize on potential controversy and public outcry over the appropriateness of extended breastfeeding.

When popular media promotes the lactating body as a controversial body to be censored, it should not be surprising that public opinion might follow suit. American cultural prohibitions surrounding breastfeeding, where public nursing is often deemed inappropriate or even obscene, stand in stark contrast to the much-touted idea that “Breast is Best” for babies, which is promoted by pediatricians, lactation consultants, and even formula companies. States now must pass laws to “allow” breastfeeding in public. In spite of such laws, American nursing mothers not infrequently experience discrimination when breastfeeding in restaurants, retail venues, health clubs, or on airplanes, emotional encounters that often make national headlines. In 2006, Emily Gillette was forcibly removed from a Freedom Airlines flight before takeoff in Vermont for refusing to cover up her nursing baby. The following year, Jessica Swimeley was nearly evicted from a Ronald McDonald House in Houston for breastfeeding her sick toddler (Marcus). Just a few weeks prior to this writing, Adrienne Pine, a professor at American University in Washington, DC, kicked off a firestorm debate in the academic community and beyond by nursing her sick child during a Feminist Anthropology class, rather than cancel class on the first day of the semester. Student journalists immediately contacted Pine for a possible article, to which she responded with a blog post telling her side of the story. Multiple articles and thousands of reader comments on the sites of CNN, *Washington Post*, *Insider Higher Ed*, *Huffington Post*, *ABC News*, *Slate*, *New York Times*, *New York Daily News*, and many private blogs testify to the controversial nature of the act. While many readers supported Pine’s decision, others, including AU officials, questioned her professionalism (Jaschik 2012a).

Elizabeth Podnieks argues that these instances of maternal surveillance are not isolated but represent a broader attitude, espoused particularly by the media. “Mass media praises and vilifies mothers, keeping them under constant surveillance and judging them according to the extent to which they adhere to ideologies of good motherhood” (14). Mothers like Adrienne Pine may be under particular scrutiny simply because mothers still struggle for visibility in the university setting, which holds to antiquated notions of male professors in ivory towers (Evans and Grant; Bassett). Clearly, how and where women breastfeed, who witnesses them breastfeeding, and how long their children nurse are all factors that the media and the general public may employ to determine “good” or “bad” mother status.

In many of these instances, the censorship of breastfeeding results not only in media-generated public discussion but also in protest actions. In the case of

Emily Gillette and Freedom Airlines, more than 800 mothers participated in nurse-ins in Delta airline terminals (Delta partners with Freedom), while the Ronald McDonald House was so inundated by emails protesting its treatment of lactating mothers that its server crashed in the aftermath (Marcus). In 2007, mothers staged nurse-ins at Applebees restaurants across the United States after an employee told a customer in Kentucky to nurse in the bathroom. Other nation-wide nurse-in protests have targeted the actions of employees at Starbucks in 2005 and at Whole Foods and Target, both in 2011. An international and multilingual online protest group, “Hey Facebook, breastfeeding is not obscene,” continues to petition Facebook to reverse their 2007 decision to ban images of breastfeeding.<sup>1</sup>

### An Artist’s Response

In 2011, American artist Jill Miller conceived a performative response to this unfriendly environment encountered by mothers who nurse in public. After raising funds through an online campaign, Miller purchased an old ice cream truck and converted it into a breastfeeding support vehicle. Miller envisioned that she would drive the truck around Pittsburgh, offering support to nursing mothers, attending nursing-related events, and responding to breastfeeding emergencies. What became *The Milk Truck* is also a lactivist mobile art installation and performance, an artist’s way of responding to a social issue about which she feels passionately. *The Milk Truck* empowers nursing mothers, creates community, and raises awareness—and, as a truck topped by a huge breast with a flashing nipple, is a sight to behold. As Miller says, “Thought the nursing mother created a spectacle? Meet *The Milk Truck*.” Miller’s mobile breastaurant made its debut at the 2011 Pittsburgh Biennial to much acclaim, including a city council decree proclaiming September 12, 2011, as The Milk Truck Day. In the interview that follows, Miller details her role as an activist artist-mother and her reasons behind the creation of *The Milk Truck*.

REB: Can you describe the physical transformation of an old ice cream truck into *The Milk Truck*? What all did you change and why did you make the choices you did?

JM: From the inception of *The Milk Truck*, I had imagined an over-the-top, superhero-esque manifestation of a breastfeeding police vehicle. Informed by Hollywood in some ways, Big brother in others, I imagined an omniscient brain center observing the city, keeping watch on the treatment of breastfeeding mothers in public places. When it came time to realize the work, I had to balance my fantasy with the reality of creating a vehicle that I could legally and safely operate on city streets. The giant breast was always a part of the vision, and the flashing nipple light won out over a nipple that squirted milk



The Milk Truck, 2011. Photo courtesy of Jill Miller.

into the air. It just worked better on many levels. The interior of the truck is pretty basic—it required a new floor and a paint job.

REB: I first came upon your project through its fundraising beginnings in Summer 2011 on Kickstarter. I've continued to follow *The Milk Truck* through Facebook, and you regularly post breastfeeding news and nursing alerts through Facebook and Twitter. What has been the role of social media in the success of *The Milk Truck*?

JM: Social media has been everything, absolutely critical to our success. Most of the people who follow us have never laid eyes on the truck in person, just in images. They believe in the idea, which we've communicated through social media.

REB: Does *The Milk Truck* represent your first foray into maternal activism or do you have a longer history with this type of work?

JM: *The Milk Truck* is my first distinctly “activist” work that relates to motherhood, although it's been creeping into my work for some time. Going back to the *Collectors* project I did a few years ago—I completed several hours of surveillance with my first son asleep in his carseat. [REB: In the *Collectors* project (2007), Miller trained with a licensed private investigator and then spent six months undercover, conducting surveillance on an elusive community of art collectors.] It worked well all around—I was able to make my work with my child present, and he lent some credibility to my cover when I was subrosa. Mostly I drove around until he fell asleep, then parked at the subjects' homes and did my stake out. I was always interested in privacy and surveillance, and

I found this project to serve my interests as an artist and also my needs as a mother (i.e. bring your kid to work).

REB: What background, if any, do you have in activism in general, women's and gender studies, or feminism?

JM: I was a feminist before I knew what the word meant. I was accepted into a program at the University of Illinois at Chicago when I was a senior in high school, and we were allowed to take any college classes we wanted for free. I signed up for "20th-Century Feminist Poetry" where I was introduced to June Jordan and the *Iowa Review*, etc. Completely the opposite of the somewhat repressed farm town I grew up in. It was life changing.

REB: Are there writers, activists, or other artists who have been particularly influential for you?

JM: Early on I looked at artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Sophie Calle.

REB: In the last ten years or so, a number of other contemporary artists have addressed breastfeeding in their work. How does *The Milk Truck* fit into this emerging artistic dialogue?

JM: We do seem to be experiencing a cultural moment, which is exciting. Women artists, particularly mothers, have struggled and I appreciate that this moment feels right for this conversation to happen.

REB: Do you see significant similarities or differences between your own work and that of artists like Jess Dobkin [a performance artist who prompted public dialogue on breastfeeding by staging a gallery-sited breastmilk-tasting event, *The Lactation Station* (2006)] or Patty Chang [a video and performance artist who devours her own cantaloupe / breast in *Melons (At a Loss)* (1998)]?

JM: I think we all use humor in our work, but it functions differently for each of us. Someone once said to me that my work was funny up front, but serious on the backside. I think there's absolutely truth in that. The humor is disarming, and it draws a viewer in. It's the punch line that precedes the joke: our curiosity is aroused, but we feel safe knowing that the surprise is over. And that's when the critical questions come in, and a discussion has been opened.

REB: How do you relate to historical images of breastfeeding, most of which were painted or sculpted by male artists?

JM: I find the early Madonna and child paintings to be curious, especially pre-renaissance when the human body is so awkwardly painted, like when the breasts are in impossible places.

REB: I remember listening to a segment of National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation" several years ago and being shocked that host Neil Conan had never heard the term lactivism. How does the general public receive *The Milk Truck*? Do people understand what you're trying to do?

JM: I'm not surprised. Most people who aren't breastfeeding don't think

about it. It's treated the way that "woman's work" traditionally was. It's mother's work, it's invisible.

I've never had an issue with a person face-to-face. I've heard random criticism from people on Twitter or email, but it's chatter, usually made by people who are young and childless. I'd love to check in with them in ten years. But overwhelmingly, people get it. The women I've talked to are tired of a sexualized breast being accepted in our culture while a functional one is challenged.

REB: Has *The Milk Truck* been called out to assist with breastfeeding emergencies? Participated in nurse-ins?

JM: *The Milk Truck* has been contacted [for emergencies], but unfortunately, not by anyone within a four-hour drive. We just aren't able to respond outside of Pittsburgh at this time. There are a few of us who drive the truck, and we have jobs and families. We have participated in local nurse-ins.

REB: What does a normal day in the life of *The Milk Truck* look like?

JM: Typically, we have a phone in the truck that we use when driving around the city. I like to drive the truck to work at CMU [Carnegie Mellon University] whenever I can to get the truck out there in the public eye. I stop at Whole Foods with it, since they sponsor us, and I often take the truck on errands. When we get invited to events, we try to go for the exposure. We are in the process of becoming a nonprofit, so we are kind of limping through financially until we get that status and can apply for grants.

REB: Lastly, what do you envision as the future of *The Milk Truck*, both immediate and long-term?

JM: *The Milk Truck* is an art project that will become a non-profit someday (soon, I hope). It has a large fan base in Pittsburgh, and there is certainly a community on Facebook and Twitter that desires the truck's existence. I go back and forth, though. In some ways, the idea of the truck is enough. It's a metaphor for the world we, as mothers, desire to live in. It signifies the support that we have for each other no matter where we are geographically located. (This is the part where we define "community"—is it where you live? the people who you follow on Twitter? etc.) I wonder sometimes if we need the truck at this point. As an art piece, I say no. As a non-profit, of course we do.

## Analysis

Jill Miller is not the only contemporary artist to engage with lactation, making it highly visible and, perhaps, lessening the stigma of the nursing body in public. Catherine Opie and Renée Cox have both photographed the breastfeeding self, with Opie raising issues of queer maternal identity (Morgan) and Cox speaking to an often invisible history of maternity, race, and surrogacy (Liss).



Sarah Webb, Ellen McMahon, Denise Ferris, Élisabeth Douillet, Alexia Creusen, and many others make work that refers to lactation, even when it is not directly pictured (see Chernick and Klein; Quinby). Margaret Morgan, Jess Dobkin, and Lisa Glauer have all worked with breastmilk as an artistic medium, whether as a drawing material or as part of provocative installations (see Buller; Reuschling).

Understood more broadly, however, *The Milk Truck* builds upon several decades of women's art activism concerning the female body. Many of those active in the American Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s sought to reclaim the female body from the male gaze. For some artists, such as Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, and Carolee Schneemann, this meant giving visibility to female sexuality and biological difference (Broude and Garrard). In one of the best known examples of feminist art activism, the anonymous Guerrilla Girls collective targeted the sexism, and, later, the racism, of the art world through a series of stealthy poster actions, beginning in the 1980s. Some of their earliest posters identified the disproportionate representation of male artists and female nudes in museum collections, asking, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than five percent of artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85 percent of the nudes are female."

A key factor in the protest actions of the Guerrilla Girls is the use of humor. The collective continues to maintain anonymity by donning gorilla masks for all public appearances, a play on words that is part of a successful campaign of visual rhetoric (Demo). While the Guerrilla Girls pointedly target high-powered art museums, galleries, and collectors, the use of the gorilla masks adds an element of absurdity that momentarily disarms the viewer. The issues are weighty but the masks add levity amidst the leveling of serious accusations of discrimination.

Like the mob of masked gorillas, *The Milk Truck*, with its candy-stripped decoration and enormous pink breast topped by a flashing nipple, creates a humorous spectacle. Miller's use of humor is disarming, which both de-escalates the perceived controversy of public breastfeeding while also underscoring the absurdity that breastfeeding in public is even an issue of note. *The Milk Truck* proves effective not only because its very presence draws attention to the importance of breastfeeding education but also because it parallels the spectacle that the mass media and general public tend to create around breastfeeding "incidents."

Since the interview with Jill Miller was conducted, *The Milk Truck* has undergone a change of direction. While Miller developed the project specifically for the Fall 2011 Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) Biennial, she and some collaborators continued their lactivist activities into Spring 2012. In March, Miller took *The Milk Truck* on the road to Toronto, where she worked with

mothers to collect stories of breastfeeding experiences and then gave voice to them at different locations around the city. In July, *The Milk Truck* relocated to California with Miller and her family. The work of *The Milk Truck* continues in Pittsburgh, though in a subtler manner: volunteers now assemble and distribute breastfeeding support bags for new mothers to local hospitals (Miller). Cheeky to the end, Miller framed the move as “Farewell, Pittsburgh (Go West, Big Boob!)” Whether *The Milk Truck* enters retirement in California or is needed once again to support lactating mothers remains to be seen.

<sup>1</sup>See “Hey Facebook, breastfeeding is not obscene,” Facebook group, accessed 25 September 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2517126532/>. Lactivists also protested in person outside of Facebook’s offices around the world in February 2012 (see Conley).

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