

Notes on weaning



In these isolation days, I've started plasticising my breastmilk. It is a form of domestic alchemy adapted from Youtube tutorials for kids that show how to make your own bioplastic, encouraging science-focused play at home.¹ Once a week, I take the milk I've squirted and squeezed out between feeds, and heat it on the stove top with a spoonful of starch, and a dash of vinegar and glycerin. Once it glugs up in the pot, I spread the slightly pungent ooze onto a sheet of aluminium foil and massage the stickiness into balls and beads. The paste coats my fingertips and palms, leaving them smelling faintly of vinegar for hours afterwards. I leave each new batch to dry for a couple of days on top of the bookshelf, out of reach of the curious fingers of the baby and the neighbours' kids. After air drying, the balls are sealed with a gloss varnish typically used for decoupage craft. My growing collection of milk sculptures remind me of wild pearls. They are bulbous and slightly grubby, the harvested secretions of a mysterious organism.

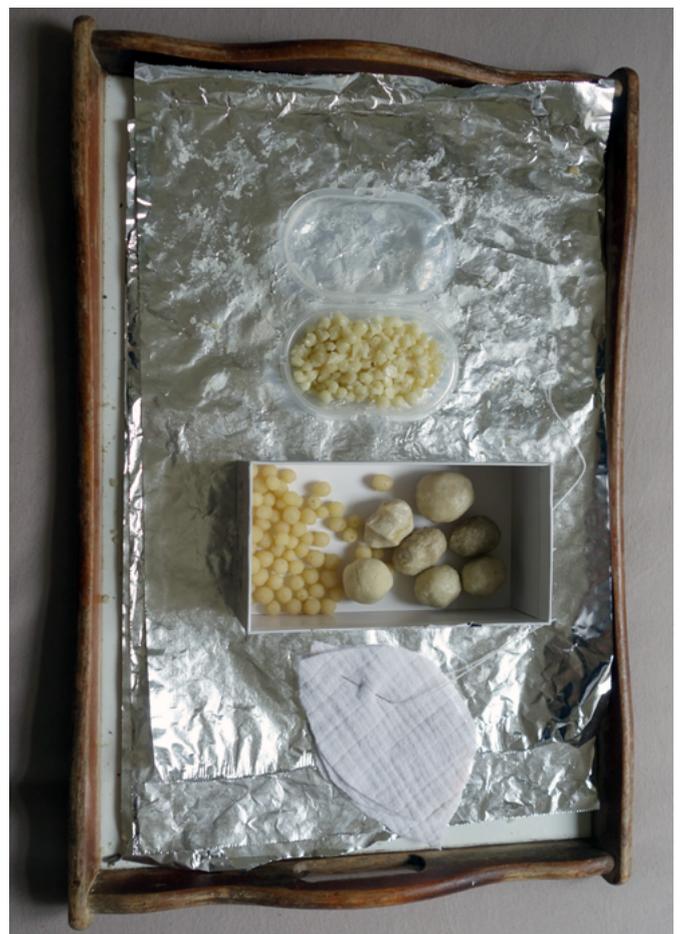
The confinement period has coincided with the process of weaning my 12 month old daughter. Before the crisis, I imagined this as a period when my daughter and I would be slowly extricating ourselves from a sometimes claustrophobic state of dependency. In the past few months, as the intervals between feeds shifted from three to four hours, to three times a day and now only once at the start and end of the day, I relished the prospect



Stills from Youtube footage of wild pearl harvest
Pearl hunter: Real Pearls From Oyster/Wild freshwater shells harvest pearls part 2, 25 February, 2020
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ymj9j9RmSY>

of returning to regular paid work, and being able to pass longer stretches of time away from the home. As is the case for artists and arts workers worldwide, the exhibition and festival projects in Australia and Switzerland I had committed to for this next six months have been cancelled. I'm mourning the loss of work and income, but also the loss of longed-for time with my friends and family in Australia. Days in isolation spent within close range of the flat take me back to the first few months after the birth, which now seem like a sort of training course for quarantine conditions. Thoughts of how to document this time intertwine with a need to somehow record the labour of nourishing and caring for another being with my body over the past twelve months, and during pregnancy.

Lately I've been reading texts about archaeological research focused on gender roles, rituals and the social function of art in prehistoric societies.² I've been thinking about how researchers construct narratives of how people lived in the past from obscure fragments of pottery and bone, ambiguous objects and the partial remnants of structural foundations. I'm interested in how these narratives reflect our contemporary needs and desires: perhaps a need to find evidence that there were ancient peoples who knew and practised 'better' ways of living on this planet, who were perhaps more equal, more creative and spiritually fulfilled, and that these ways of living could inform the possible presents and futures of our current era. As I sit in the kitchen pumping, brewing, squeezing and shaping my milk, I listen to the BBC world service newsreader list the global COVID-19 case rates and wonder what ritual function future archaeologists would assign to the objects I am creating. What narrative are we living now? What are we leaving behind?



Stills from 'Weaning' work in progress, April 2020

¹ *Make your own bioplastic*, 8 November, 2008
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M_eDLyfp8

² Rosemary A. Joyce, *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008
Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. New York: The New Press, 1983