The following *Project Field Notes* were shared in 2025 by Jennifer Long as part of her Balancing Act Level UP! Pilot Project, which was developed in partnership with Shea Proulx and Gallery@501.

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Jennifer Long
Sustaining & Growing, Artist-Parents in Conversation
Project Field Notes

The following notes were written in 2025 by Jennifer Long to share reflections and insights from her Level UP! Project, completed in collaboration with Shea Proulx and Gallery@501.

Project focus: Running a community engagement session for artist-parents/caregivers and their children, focusing on a discussion around sustainable creative strategies. This relaxed, child-inclusive event featured activities for children ranging in age from toddlers to teens. To accompany this event, and an associated exhibition, a resource sheet with links to related exhibits, projects, publications, and family-inclusive residencies was created with input from 13 artists and arts workers.

Project Inspiration and Context

From personal experience, I understand the impact that community building, resources, and family-friendly art spaces have on artist-parents. I was very supported by several established artists during my early years of parenting. They spoke candidly about how they navigated life/work balance, the challenges, the biases, and the successes. This guidance made a huge impact on my ability to continue my artistic practice during the early years of parenting. Now that my children are of an age that allows more flexibility with my time, I would like to continue the work my mentors began as well as learn from others about what they are needing and experiencing in order to construct programming (individually or through the Feminist Photography Network), policy, and conversations that support artists with caregiving roles.

For Gallery@501 (the gallery where the event and exhibition took place), this pilot was an opportunity to try new ways of welcoming people to their space and consider future programming that could expand their audience and inclusivity. The Gallery@501 featured artwork around parenting on the fifth anniversary of the COVID-19 lockdown—during this period, numerous articles highlighted how mothers were disproportionately affected and the constant pull between caregiving and career.

Project Overview

The project was led by me (Jennifer Long) in partnership with Gallery@501 curator Kris Miller, artist Shea Proulx and Gallery@501 education lead Lindsey Bond-Garcia. I have over 25 years of art administration experience working with galleries, education, projects, and events. Connections from my practice were used to collect information and consult. Past experience informed my determination of timelines, set up, and programming.

A central piece of the project was a community engagement session, *Sustaining & Growing: Artist-Parents in Conversation*, which took place on March 14 from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. (before gallery opening hours).

The project was connected to the exhibition *Tracing Days* at Gallery@501 in Sherwood Park, Alberta, which ran from March 11 to April 17, 2025. The exhibition featured work by Shea Proulx (painting and illustration) and my own work (photography), inspired by daily life, motherhood, child-centred spaces, domestic landscapes, and family interactions.

With the support of a Canada Council for the Arts grant and Level UP!, I travelled from Ontario to Alberta for two weeks for the project. (Note: My children are 12 and 15. It is important to me to note this because it is the first time I have left my family for an art opportunity for more than five days.) Shea Proulx lives three hours away from the gallery and was able to drive up for meetings, installation, and events. (Shea's children are also 12 and 15).

Project Components

This project wove together three main components: the community engagement session for artist-parents/caregivers, creativity stations for children integrated into the gallery space, and a resource sheet for artist-parents.

1. Community Engagement Session:
The community engagement session, *Sustaining & Growing, Artist-Parents in Conversation*, took place on March 14, 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. at Gallery@501 in Sherwood Park, Alberta. It was presented alongside the exhibition *Tracing Days,* featuring work by Shea Proulx and myself, which ran from March 11 – April 17, 2025.

The session took place before the gallery opened for the day and was open to the entire community. It was attended by artists, children, partners/caregivers of attending artists, and interested community members. Children ranged in age from three months to 12

years. The session had a relaxed format and several “creativity stations” set up with art activities for children to engage with (details below).

We invited attendees to discuss sustainable strategies for creating art (e.g., how to make work when time is tight, exhaustion is unending, and you are rarely alone). We also spoke about the pandemic and how it affected our practice and headspace.

The session ended up running long (about 20 minutes over) because of the amount of content we were hoping to discuss, as well as an underestimation of how long it would take to move between spaces. In the future, I would break this into two sessions.

2. Creativity Stations

For the duration of the *Tracing Days* exhibition, creativity stations were set up to engage children in the space. There were three stations:

- *Engagement Station:* A light table with tracing templates (geared toward children aged 8 and up) allowed participants to create their own artwork based on drawings by artist Shea Proulx. Art supplies, including colourful adhesive vinyl, markers, pencil crayons, and pencils, were provided for creative pursuits.
- *Colouring Station:* Positioned at a low table with chairs, this area offered a selection of crayons and colouring pages created by Shea (similar to the Engagement Station but designed for younger children). A section of the gallery wall was available for visitors to hang their work up, or they could take it home.
- *Build/Play/Read Station:* Featured washable toys (colourful building blocks and stacking toys) and art-related books on a child-sized table with chairs.

Both children and adults used the stations.

A note about engaging and inclusive gallery spaces: I believe it is important to create gallery spaces that engage viewers of all ages and make the public feel welcome in the space. We did this by considering the language we used in our promotion (e.g., including notes about stroller parking and change tables in the accessibility information), clearly indicating that children were welcome, and setting up the creativity stations. We also placed the artwork at heights visible to children and installed vinyl artworks on the floor that children could walk/jump on. If people feel welcomed into a space, there is a better chance they will return.

3. Resource Sheet:
We developed an eight-page PDF containing links to upcoming events, books, projects, artists, residencies, and general resources. While it was geared toward artist-parents, it also included resources of broader interest. To compile the document, we reached out to 26 artists and arts workers for suggestions and conducted independent research.

Copies of the resource were provided to all participants at the community engagement session and later shared with parents, graduate programs, and interested artists and arts workers.

Outreach

We promoted the event and the exhibition through an Akimbo broadcast, social media, Balancing Act, press releases, and targeted outreach.

Both presenters were from outside the local area, and in my experience, this often results in lower turnout for arts events. To counteract this, the gallery sent invitations to local arts groups and centres, daycares, and collaborated with the library (located in the same complex) to create a public display of related books and signage about the show and event.

Project Timeline

- **October 2024**: Began planning immediately after being confirmed as a Level UP! partner.
- **November 2024**:
    - Booked an Akimbo broadcast to raise awareness about the community engagement session and the exhibition. Booking early allowed us to secure 2024 rates and provided greater flexibility in choosing the broadcast date.
    - Confirmed the session date and time at the gallery to fit between installation week and the public reception. We chose to run the session outside of gallery hours and considered daycare and naptimes when scheduling the event.
- **November 2024–March 2025**: Collected resources for the resource sheet through outreach to artists/arts workers and research, finalizing three days before the event.
- **March 11, 2025**: Exhibition launch; creativity stations opened.

- **March 14, 2025**: Community engagement session held; resource sheet distributed.
- **April 17, 2025**: Exhibition and art stations closed.

Note: Given the timing of the session (March in Alberta), we planned for the possibility of shifting to an online format if the weather became an issue. We had a snowstorm the day before the session (which delayed the start time by a few minutes), but we were still able to move ahead in person.

Funding and Support

In advance of this project, I received a Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) travel grant. I am based in Toronto, and since the exhibition and event were in Alberta, the grant helped to pay for my flight, per diems, and local travel. Gallery@501 paid CARFAC fees (e.g. for the exhibition, artist talk, and installation) and provided in-kind support for my accommodations. The Ontario Arts Council also contributed funding through the Exhibition Assistance grant program.

Between these sources and the Level UP! funding, I was able to undertake this work. I am now awaiting the results of a CCA Concept to Realization grant, which incorporates this project. If successful, this funding will help with additional per diems, creation expenses, and payment for my research efforts.

Follow-Up Activities

Follow-up work for the project involved contacting the community members who attended the in-person session to email them a digital copy of the resource sheet and to ask if they'd like to be included on a mailing list for future initiatives. In theory, this should have been completed in a week, but given the travel component, busy schedules, and illness, this was delayed.

Informal debriefing meetings with my co-presenter, Shea, may also take place to strategize about future sessions.

Key Conversations

Key conversations occurred between gallery staff, Shea and myself. These conversations occurred very organically and were sometimes initiated by me or Shea, and sometimes by gallery staff. Topics ranged from:

- Accessibility and safety — photo policy, barrier-free access, stroller parking, baby changing station, nut-free food, objects that can be sanitized, conversation content, movement through the space, and location of children's activities.
- Timing — good times for artist-parents vs. 9 to 5 work schedules, daycare schedules vs. nap times.
- Ongoing initiatives — continued use of children's engagement stations and future programming tied to the community centre (where the gallery is located), such as "stroller tours".
- Content — tied to the gallery's funding and approval processes.

Important information shared between artist presenters and attendees included:

- Details about the relaxed session format (i.e., all sounds welcome, give care as needed, everyone is welcome to move through any space, etc.)
- Conversation about personal experiences creating work as artist-parents
- How to connect

Our conversations were vulnerable, honest, and practical. The working relationships with gallery staff, Shea, and me were strong and respectful, which allowed for easy communication as the programming was developed. We were able to brainstorm with ease and consider everyone's ideas.

At the start of the session, when we introduced the nature of the relaxed session (an approach inspired by Sarah Cullen's recent talk about MOTHRA at The Power Plant in Toronto), there were smiles and laughs, possibly of relief. At one point during the session, a baby shared their thoughts and the whole group chuckled. This was a refreshing response. After the session, I heard feedback from several people about how much they liked starting the session with that tone.

Community members were quite quiet during the discussion. I suspect this was due to several factors, for instance:

- not enough time to get to know one another and the fact that few people knew one another in advance,
- the diversity of everyone's experience (babes in arms through to teens, professional artists through to interested gallery goers without an artistic practice),
- multitasking (engaging with care while also listening), and
- being surrounded by artwork by Shea and me—while we were leading the session—which may have created a perceived hierarchy of knowledge.

Post-event, the discussion started to bubble as the children and parents started mixing more between the stations. Following the event, a follow-up email was sent to all participants offering to continue the conversation. I have been contacted by several Alberta creators.

Language and Communications

One person at the event said they were relieved that they weren't the only person who brought children. That comment stuck with me since I thought it was quite clear from the event messaging that children were included. It made me wonder if additional text or adjustments to the registration process could have made it even clearer that children were expected to attend.

The gallery's membership is made up more of artists caring for their parents than artists caring for children. In advance of the session, we prepared ways to make our language more inclusive and tried to find links for the resource sheet that touched on this area. At the session, it was only artist-parents and one interested community member (without an artistic practice or caregiving responsibilities) who attended.

Sustainability

I plan to continue to integrate this work into my upcoming exhibitions and grant proposals. This project could be quite expansive and I am exploring ways to secure funding to formally continue this pilot with ongoing free sessions, supports, and opportunities across Canada. I am also planning to maintain and grow the resource sheet, which will be manageable.

As an independent artist and arts worker, time could be carved out to continue this work during down periods or when an exhibition opportunity arises. This area of focus is directly tied to my creative research and aligns with my long-term goals as well of those of the collective I co-direct, the Feminist Photography Network (FPN). I leveraged my FPN connections throughout this pilot, but strategically did not make the network a formal partner. This strategy is tied to supporting future grant applications, which FPN may undertake. I believe if FPN initiates a project, writing a grant to fund a pilot may be more successful than requesting funds to further a project that has already begun.

Future Planning

Reflecting on this project, we tried to achieve too much in one sitting. Next time, I would reduce discussions around facilitator practices and focus on the conversation of sustainable strategies. I would also consider adding an online follow-up session and asking participants to bring suggestions for the resource sheet.

Future projects related to this pilot include:

- May 24, 2025 – ARTSPLACE Gallery, Nova Scotia: Tied to the exhibition, *Embedded Memory,* Ursula Handleigh and I will present a hands-on workshop for artists, children, and interested community members. The experience of being an artist-parent and the Level UP! community engagement event were inspirations for this session.
- September 2028 – Saint John Art Centre, New Brunswick: Early discussions are underway for artist-parent/community programming tied to the exhibition *Caesura*.

Additional Information and Advice

Stickers and photography: We had photographers at the community engagement session and one thing that worked well was providing red stickers for anyone who did not want to be photographed to make it easy to identify them. We also had an alternative selection of stickers for children who wanted to wear them or anyone who wanted to make their name tags sparkle. The children responded very well to this.

Stroller parking: Having stroller parking is wonderful, but if possible, also welcome people to park their strollers anywhere that is convenient to them. This was helpful for our session because it allowed people to rock sleeping babes in their strollers, easily grab wet wipes, etc. during the conversation.

Offer of support and contact information: I would love to share the artist resource sheet with anyone interested. To get the most current version, email me at: artistparentresource@gmail.com and put “Request Current Copy” in the subject line. Additionally, anyone wanting to suggest something to add to the resource sheet can put “Resource Addition” in the subject line, along with a few words in the email body about where the resource should be placed (e.g., “This is a family-inclusive residency”). All contributors are listed at the back of the resource with an online link (this is optional), so please also include how you wish to be referenced.

I am more than happy to discuss my experiences on this project, as well as other administrative/project work I have undertaken, with any artists or companies exploring related initiatives. Feel free to reach out to me with any questions at jenniferroselong@gmail.com.