



German artist Hannah Cooke, whose unmade bed references a famous work by Tracey Emin ("Ada vs. Emin", 2018).

Abb.: © Hannah Cooke

## The Last Taboo

Everyone should live as they please, that is the mantra of the art business. There is only one thing that female students are warned about: Pregnancy. Why mothers have a particularly tough time in the arts BY LARISSA KIKOL

**F**inally, the women have arrived. Since they were first admitted to study at art academies, over a hundred years have passed. And now, astonishingly, the time has really come, the male bias of many exhibitions is beginning to dissolve. At the Venice Biennale, but also at many other major exhibitions of contemporary art, the women artists are now even in the majority. However, there is one question that continues to be anxiously shrouded: the question of motherhood.

There is Tracey Emin, a British woman known for her radical works. She says, yes, she knows artists, good artists who have children. But they are all men.

The famous Marina Abramović expresses a similar opinion, she says that for women in the art world there can be only one thing in the art world: either children or a career. Art needs all the energy it can get, and it cannot be shared.

And accordingly, the American painter Rebecca Campbell says that she has often been reproached that she was going to fail either as a mother or an artist, anything else was inconceivable. In the art world, which likes to present itself as tolerant, open to the most diverse forms of existence, one thing still seems to be unthinkable: a life with children.

In 2018, a large-scale social study in Austria showed that only a quarter of female artists and fe-

male art educators decide to have children, not even half as many as in the female population as a whole. The situation is not much better among male artists at just 35 per cent.

What are the reasons? Western art history has always been dominated by men. Genius has always been masculine, while mothers were responsible for the home for emotional warmth that enabled them to care for their children and to provide for their husbands. Many of these stereotypes have persisted up to this day. A father, it is widely believed, through parenthood develops more maturity and commitment towards his career aspirations. A mother, on the other hand will forfeit all ambition in the nursery. Many female art students are still advised by their professors to forego having children if they want to make a career for themselves.

Some years ago, the young German star Jenny Brosinski, born in 1984, had to experience that a female careers advisor at her art school reacted reproachfully to the artist's pregnancy - where she had actually been supported with scholarships! She was prophesied the end of her career. Today her son builds castles in his studio, while Brosinski is represented by three internationally successful galleries.

Sometimes the prejudices even play a role in the art production, as is the case with the media artist Hannah Cooke. She re-enacted the famous performance by Abramović *The Artist Is Present*, only she sat

down at the big table with a baby.

Also the legendary rumpled bed of Tracey Emin, symbolising a wild sex and single life but with herself as a young mother in it. Of course, mothers have a harder time in many professional fields more difficult than men. But art is still dominated by many ideas, by a system of beliefs that is very close to Catholic celibacy.

Like a priest who has to devote himself exclusively to his task as God's servant, artists are also supposed to do the same. For only in this way, following this one principle, the necessary quality of a work is made possible. If, on the other hand, an artist decides to become a mother, the work of art would be desecrated. The art-religious aura would be stained as soon as the artist takes out her breast/milk pump.

In addition, many collectors and viewers want to see the artist as a role model, a figure they look up to. For this reason alone, they prefer adventurers, revolutionaries or sensitive free spirits, who lead a different life, a life far removed from the world, beyond all the usual family troubles. It is no coincidence that those women who have escaped such mundanities and embody more masculine connoted qualities. Identifying with mothers, on the other hand, seems unattractive. If anything, mothers are supposed to or, if they want to make a career out of it, they should keep motherhood in the private sphere.

The art world has never had a problem with

drugs, depression or psychosis. An alcohol dependant man is still trusted with more than a healthy woman with a child. Thus, unlike women, men can without a care also confess to childlike inspiration. Entire art movements have been influenced in this way, such as Dadaism, Fluxus and the genre of the Happening.

Fathers like Ólafur Eliasson make no secret of their artistic involvement with their children, and Raymond Pettibon likes to hang children's drawings in his solo exhibitions. Mothers, on the other hand, are often reduced to their motherhood.

But there are exceptions, women who defy all reservations. For example, the performance artist Courtney Kessel includes her daughter in her work. For her, the intellectual role of the artist and closeness to her child are not mutually exclusive. She wants to bring the »mother« into the gallery, not an idealised one, but a real one, i.e. a "spirited enthusiastic, grumpy, frustrated, proud" mother. They sit opposite each other on a large seesaw; toys balance the different weights of the two. It is about relationship work, but also about the representation of a new generation that suddenly makes Marina Abramović and her exclusiveness suddenly look very old.

Hannah Cooke receives mainly positive feedback: here is a woman who has explicitly changed her mind, for art *and* children. And why shouldn't the works of art from an artist's pregnancy also be considered the most sought-after work phase in the future?