

Artist Hannah Cooke

"The Art World Must Become More Parent-Friendly"



Foto: Courtesy Hannah Cooke

Hannah Cooke "Ada vs Emin"

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Hannah Cooke's work engages, among other things, with the image of mothers in art. In this interview, she speaks about persistent stereotypes, obstacles in grant applications, and solidarity among female artists.

The video "Ada vs. Abramović" (2018) recreates the setting of the performance "The Artist is Present," which performance artist Marina Abramović presented in 2010 during her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York:

a woman — Abramović herself? — sits at a wooden table in an exhibition space. Artist Hannah Cooke enters the scene, her daughter Ada in her arms. She sits down on the empty chair and begins to breastfeed the baby, looking intently into the other woman's eyes. A sound like a flying drone is heard, along with the rhythmic breathing and swallowing of the nursing child. The artist's hands gently stroking the baby's legs are the only movements.

Scene change: In the video "Ada vs. Emin" (2018), we see an installation strikingly similar to Tracey Emin's "My Bed" (1998). Amid the dirty, unmade bed sits Hannah Cooke, breastfeeding her daughter.

This is anything but ordinary — the topic of motherhood and parenthood is still rarely addressed in art, even though balancing family and career is something many creatives struggle with. Especially during the pandemic, with unresolved childcare questions and closed schools and nurseries, many families are pushed to their limits. A large portion of care work during the pandemic is shouldered by women.

We spoke with Hannah Cooke about her "Ada vs." series, parenthood in art history, and her experiences in the art world.

Hannah Cooke, in your "Ada vs." series you question the image of mothers and women in the art world. In the style of appropriation art, you draw on iconic works by Marina Abramović and Tracey Emin and insert yourself into them. One could say you are claiming a space for yourself. How did you come to these works?

When I became a mother, I asked myself how I could continue artistically. I researched artists who combine motherhood with artistic work and found many positive, encouraging examples. But then there was also the [2016 interview with Marina Abramović](#) in the Tagesspiegel and the [2012 interview with Tracey Emin](#) in Red, in which both spoke very disparagingly about the compatibility of motherhood and artistic work.

Abramović stated, among other things, that she believes women are less successful in art than men because they don't want to give up love, children, and family. Tracey Emin expressed her conviction that she had to be either 100% artist or 100% mother. What did those interviews trigger for you?

When I read that, I thought: That's complete nonsense! It can't be! We all know that the art world is full of machos and that it's not easy for women to assert themselves there — but to have women stabbing us in the back who actually represent strong feminist positions, that knocked me off my feet. I felt I absolutely had to respond to it. My point is not to deny them the right to their own opinion — every woman can of course make that decision for herself and speak freely about it. The "Regretting Motherhood" debate made very clear that motherhood is simply not right for every woman. What bothers me massively, however, is that Abramović and Emin are drawing on traditional, masculine arguments and presenting it as though it is simply impossible for an artist with children to still produce good work. Their statements carry undertones of things I have addressed in other works as well: the cult of

genius, the artist's ego, hierarchies in the art world, authorship, the ethos of performance.

Can you elaborate on that?

The assumption that art can only be made if the artist devotes themselves to it 100% is simply no longer appropriate. We should have moved beyond that long ago. The cult of genius is still something we encounter far too often in the art world — art comes before every other area of life, including love, family, and human connection. But of course Abramović's and Emin's statements are symptomatic. It is true that as a young female artist you can easily fall into the belief that it's impossible to combine both. A lot needs to change in the art world — it must become more women-friendly, more mother-friendly, and more generally parent-friendly. I was, as I said, quite upset when I read their statements, but I have to say I'm actually glad they voiced them. It created a point of friction that makes public debate possible. This assumption — that being a mother and being an artist are mutually exclusive — exists in many people's heads, but no one usually states it so clearly and bluntly. So I'm almost a little grateful to both of them.

Let's look again at Tracey Emin's bed and the objects gathered around it: empty vodka bottles, masses of cigarette butts, condoms, empty contraceptive packaging... All of this corresponds to the image of the artist as a solitary, radical, extravagant individual who creates brilliant art, has wild sex, and consumes enormous amounts of alcohol and drugs. While the distractions that arise from sex, drugs, and parties are part of the artist's image, those arising from caring and nurturing activities are apparently not foreseen...

The decision to reference "My Bed" was also connected to the fact that a large part of my early motherhood took place in bed. It was an important retreat for me, radiating comfort and safety. Emin had completely different experiences in that space — I found that discrepancy fascinating.

Mierle Laderman-Ukeles, Lea Lublin, Ulrike Rosenbach, Courtney Kessel, Lenka Clayton, Katharina Bosse — these are just a few examples of artists who integrate their children directly into their art, making them part of their work. Was it a difficult decision to show Ada in your works?

No, I had the image in my head from the very beginning of what the work should look like. It was also important to me that she be visible and that I would be breastfeeding her. People often commented on the Madonna-like quality.

Interesting that a woman breastfeeding her child still evokes the image of the Madonna and child.

Yes, that's true. The image created in Christian Western art history still partly shapes our idea of motherhood today.

Do you notice positive developments toward an opening of the art world for artist-mothers?

Yes, I can clearly tell that something is shifting. For example, there was the Monopol issue in February 2019 that devoted itself to "Art and Children" as the last taboo in art. I think that was important in bringing the discussion into broader art discourse. There were also a few exhibitions: "Beyond Re/Production: Mothering. Dimensions of Social Reproduction in Neoliberalism" in 2011 at Kunstraum Kreuzberg; "Rabenmütter" (Bad Mothers) in 2015/16 at Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz; "bitch MATERial" in 2018 at Studio 1 in Kunstquartier Bethanien in Berlin. And this autumn, the exhibition "Mutter!" (Mother!) will open at Kunsthalle Mannheim.

And outside of exhibitions?

On social media and especially on Instagram there are many channels dedicated to the subject. Marcia Breuer has written the manifesto "Mehr Mütter für die Kunst" (More Mothers for Art), which puts forward concrete demands. As part of the "Neustart Kultur" funding program, there was a special category for artists with children under seven years old. However, the funds were distributed in such a way that more men benefited — which unfortunately does not reflect reality, since in most cases it is women who take care of the children...

There is also a Mother Art Prize, for which you were nominated in 2018. A good idea?

The prize was established by Procreate Project, which works to build an infrastructure for better representation and working conditions for artists who are also mothers. I have to admit that at first I wasn't sure whether to apply. In my artistic practice, I don't primarily engage with motherhood — I question the art world and the hierarchies within it, and that was also my main concern in the "Ada vs." series: systemic critique. I was worried that my work would be stamped with the "mother-artist" label, as if that were something bad... but I didn't want to be reduced to just that discussion. In the end, however, I'm very glad I opened this "mother-artist can of worms." I have been active in the art world for around ten years, but I have never experienced such a warm, welcoming, and supportive attitude as in this community of mother-artists. Networking plays a huge role here — people alert each other to open calls, grants, and publications. It's not about exclusivity, but about supporting each other. I have never experienced anything like it elsewhere in the art world.

Is this a primarily cis-female community?

Yes, largely. I haven't yet encountered queer positions here. I think there are separate networks for that. I also don't know any men who engage with this topic. In that case too: language excludes. Take the example of the Mother Art Prize: although the call emphasized that it was aimed at people with caring responsibilities, it probably doesn't make most men or queer people with children feel addressed — even if they engage with these themes. Institutions need to make

their language more sensitive and inclusive.

From November 2019 to April 2020 you were a resident at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. What conditions did you find there as a mother?

I received no support when it came to finding childcare for my daughter, who was about two years old at the time. This is one of the most important and prestigious residency programs in Europe — there are over 300 studios permanently occupied, and there are always people with children among the residents. But the infrastructure is not at all geared toward children; there isn't even a high chair you could borrow.

How did you deal with that?

We had to drive everything we needed as a family to Paris in a van. In our case that worked, but if someone is coming from farther away, it's much harder. I spent around two months just trying to organize childcare and received no support whatsoever from the Cité — fortunately the people at the local council office were incredibly helpful, so it went comparatively quickly to find a place. And without my husband's support, none of it would have been possible. Children only appear in the regulations when it comes to their accommodation costs — which you have to cover yourself. Once we finally had a nursery spot, the nationwide general strike hit, followed immediately by Corona. In the end, out of six months I only had two months in which I could work with concentration. I had imagined it differently.

Are grants therefore a major challenge for people with children?

I was very upset that there was no support and that artists with children are made to have such a hard time. After my stay I put together a guide for parents coming after me — explaining everything needed to apply for childcare in Paris, so they wouldn't have to start from scratch. But that is really not my job — it's the job of the inviting institution. The Cité has since had a change of leadership; perhaps things will improve soon. And one also has to say, unfortunately, that it's not a given that you can bring a child to a residency at all. I have also heard of cases where the institution knew the artist had a small child and actually assumed she would come without the child...

Do you sometimes get the impression that as an artist and a mother you have to prove that combining the two is possible?

No, why should I now have to prove myself more as a mother than I already do as an artist? That just highlights this performance mindset again. It's annoying!

Were there negative experiences?

Yes — shortly after finding out I was pregnant, I had a meeting with the director of

the museum where my first institutional solo exhibition was supposed to take place. It was essentially already settled. When it came to fixing the date — he wanted to move the previously planned date forward — I mentioned that I was pregnant, because the new opening date fell shortly after my due date. In the end, the exhibition never happened; to this day I don't know exactly why. Were there budget problems, or was it the pregnancy? That hit me very hard, and the "Ada vs." works also grew partly out of that experience.

And in day-to-day working life?

Of course it's more demanding than before — you have to organize yourself well and build a network of people who can help when needed. When I made the "Ada vs." works, she was about eight months old. I was completely exhausted at the time, but with the help of supportive people I managed to realize these works anyway. It was an enormous effort, and working with the medium of film was completely new to me. But I'm used to getting involved with new techniques — I basically do that in every work. Through Ada I learned to pace myself better and to set my limits clearly. For me, this new way of working is the better, healthier one.

Has the experience of being a mother otherwise affected your artistic practice?

Really only when it comes to materials. I don't want to work with toxic or harmful materials, because it's important to me that Ada can come to my studio at any time to paint here. I now work mainly with sustainable materials. In my next work, which will address the "gender data gap," I will be using ceramics and textiles — including materials with strongly feminine connotations.

In christian western art history, the mother figure has always played a role — depicted as the devoted, self-sacrificing, immaculate saint. These images of motherhood had nothing to do with the reality of mothers. From the early 20th century, more differentiated images began to emerge...

I can imagine that there were many more artists who engaged with the subject but were bypassed and forgotten by the canon. But yes, the depiction of motherhood in the early 20th century did begin to correct the idealized mother portraits somewhat. If you look, for example, at Arthur Brusenbauch's painting "Klagende Mutter mit Kind" (Mourning Mother with Child, 1919) — it no longer has much in common with the eternally happy, composed Maria lactans.

Which artistic positions engaging with motherhood interest you?

Courtney Kessel's performance "In Balance with" (2011), in which she tries to reach equilibrium on a seesaw with her daughter Chloe, I find incredibly powerful. She perfectly stages the balancing act of motherhood. I also find Louise Bourgeois's work impressive. She addresses the themes of motherhood and the female body in a completely different way from anyone before her — she manages to make it comprehensible how it feels for her to be a woman and how she experiences motherhood. The motif of the giant spider, for example, is not necessarily a

positive image, but it is a very compelling one.

Are there other examples?

I also find Rineke Dijkstra's series of women who have just given birth extraordinary. The images speak of vulnerability as much as of strength and the bond with their children. The photographs also show what a body looks like after carrying and giving birth to a baby. And of course Katharina Bosse. She is for me currently a strong and very visible presence in the German discourse on combining motherhood and being an artist. I find her work wonderfully provocative. She claims space and enters into an intimate relationship with her child, staging herself in a new way that we haven't seen before from mothers/artists. For me she challenges many ideals and depicts an alternative image of the mother-child relationship. She also shows that children can be incorporated wonderfully into one's own artistic practice.

Art is the "place" where norms and structures are questioned and broken, where critical engagement with the status quo takes place. It penetrates every area of human existence. Yet this one, multifaceted, important area — motherhood — was long largely excluded. Isn't that contradictory?

Yes, I think this double standard is fundamentally a problem in the art world, and it affects not just the topic of motherhood. Many institutions write socially critical themes on their banners — they present themselves as innovative, feminist, anti-colonialist. But when you look behind the scenes at how these institutions operate and how their hierarchies function, you see that they operate in an extremely exclusive, elitist, and exclusionary way. In the art world much is precarious and inhumane. Motherhood is just one of many areas where things go wrong.

The inequality regarding gender equity in the art world is also addressed in "Bruised Egos and Small Heads" (2015), created together with Carmen Donet García. In the video, two children perform a puppet show. The figures consist of cut-out faces mounted on wooden sticks — the heads of famous artists named by Art Review magazine in 2015 as the 100 most influential people in the art world.

My colleague's children simply grabbed the sticks and started playing with them. They counted how many men there were and how many women. Nothing in the video is scripted. They immediately noticed the gender imbalance and, at three to five years old, named it quite clearly: "It's just stupid that the men won!"



Hannah Cooke, geboren 1986 in München, lebt und arbeitet in Karlsruhe.

Ihre künstlerischen Arbeiten wurden unter anderem in der Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, der Staatlichen Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, im Badischen Kunstverein, dem Kunstverein Freiburg, dem Mimosa House London und im CAFA Beijing in China gezeigt. Sie studierte Medienkunst an der HfG Karlsruhe und Artistic Research an der Universität Amsterdam

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