

Anja Dietmann (AD) and Julia Lerch Zajączkowska (JZ) in conversation with Clara Alisch (CA)

AD We are happy that we could win you for this interview, could you introduce yourself to our readers with respect to your current work?

CA I studied art at the HfbK in Hamburg in the classes of Matt Mullican, Michaela Melián and Hanne Loreck. Before, I worked as an intensive care nurse, which still influences my artistic practice. In my current piece, *Lactoland*, I combine the professional experience of care work with my personal one of breastfeeding. *Lactoland* is a fictional company and the setting for a film. It performs the revaluation of human milk. In this company, it is assumed that the labour of reproduction — that is, milk production — is paid for. It shows the process of pumping milk in spatial isolation with its characteristic sound and then the production of candy from the laboriously extracted milk. Every drop counts. For me, this candy is a symbol of the social inequality of the female body, the utopian dissolution of which I want to make perceptible to the senses while sucking on it. I am interested in making visible an aspect of reproductive work that is still carried out exclusively by women, work that is often hidden in everyday life in designated spaces such as parent-child rooms, sanitary facilities, or at home. The activity of pumping milk is and remains unpaid as a rule. However, in my view it is a job that could be shared collectively. My written work *Milchmaschine* explores the history of breastfeeding and pumping and forms the theoretical concept for *Lactoland*.

AD Can you tell us again how you arrived at the subject of milk?

CA In September 2019 I gave birth to my son Nikita Yael and three months after the birth I wanted to work in my studio again. For me to be alone there for four hours in the afternoon, special preparation was needed, and I had to take all the pumping equipment with me. Because, for Nikita, pumped milk had to be ready in advance and I had to pump to relieve the pressure on my breasts. I also pumped milk during visits to the art school and realised later that I hadn't really produced anything else. I felt guilty about being in the studio or somewhere else because there were voices from outside telling me to stay at home to breastfeed for now. Pumping took a while at first because I had to practise it. But when it worked, I was relieved. I could do some research and then I had to go home again. The result of my work — my material, so to speak — was the milk I pumped in the studio.

JZ In *Milchmaschine* you use the term Frauenmilch instead of the German term Muttermilch, which means mother-milk or breastmilk in English.

CA Until the 18th century, the Middle High German term Vrouwenmilch/Frauenmilch (women's milk) was common. That is, until it was displaced in the context of breastfeeding campaigns and hygiene writings such as the *Nutrix Noverca* by the so-called naturalist Carl von Linné. Frauenmilch was thus excluded from the market as an economic



commodity and the word Muttermilch (mother's milk) was invented. Muttermilch implies that only the biological mother is responsible for the nutrition of her own child, excluding the possibility of milk from others. The wet nurse system, i.e. the redistribution of the work of breastfeeding, was previously reserved for privileged women. For these privileged mothers, this created the possibility, especially in 16th / 17th century Europe, to participate in social life again despite motherhood, to show themselves, to be visible. Meanwhile, the wet nurses were well-paid and could even feed their own families with their wages. But it is also known that workers, especially silk workers in Bordeaux in the 17th century, gave their children to wet nurses in more rural regions. Through the symbolic power of Muttermilch constructed by Linné and also the writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, mothers were consequently banished indoors to the private, domestic sphere. Breastfeeding became unpaid and invisible work and was legitimised by the premise of motherly love. This created a gender differentiation with clear role assignments: the man was responsible for the outside and the woman for the inside — for the private sphere, so to speak. These gender roles are still effective today. Breast milk is still labelled in breastfeeding guides as the most natural and therefore the best. In *Milchmaschine*, I deliberately use words like Frauenmilch, Brustmilch (breast milk), Reproduktionsarbeit (reproductive work) or Milcharbeiter*in (milk worker) because I am looking for an adequate language to describe this activity that does not reproduce this gender construction.

JZ In *Milchmaschine* you suggest, among other things, that motherhood can function as an example of the cyborg figure, how to change coexistence even under a collective thought.

CA I refer to the fact that mothers merge into a machine at the interface with the pump, that is, they become cyborgs. When writing *Milchmaschine*, I often had the cover of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* in mind: a woman sits at a computer keyboard and her breasts are a kind of an interface, a circuit board (motherboard), like an artificial nervous system. In this picture I imagined the breast pump. It struck me that Haraway's theory is already a reality when I compared myself to other women who presented themselves on social media under the hashtag #pumpingmom, working on their laptops and pumping milk at the same time. The breast pump offers the possibility to leave the role of mother temporarily and to involve others in the reproductive work and thus become milk givers. In my research, I learned that all female bodies with mammary gland tissue can produce milk even without a previous pregnancy. Within queer parenting concepts (ie: lesbian parents with adopted children), it is already common practice that the one who has not given birth can still manipulate the induction of the mammary glands

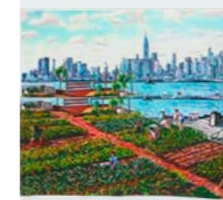
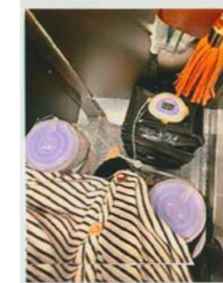
with the help of a breast pump. In this way, it is possible for many to manage the task of reproduction together. By applying the pump, even more milk is produced than without — an excess that usually goes into the waste bin, although the milk could actually have been shared.

JZ This is a good transition to the aspects of your work that deal with how images are constructed visually and through language. By images, I mean especially the romantic representations of mother and child that you juxtapose with #pumpingmoms. How did you come up with this and can you tell us more about this hashtag?

CA It all came about because I first realised my own posture when pumping milk. With my eyes lowered, I sat down and leaned further and further forward so that as much milk as possible ran. According to the pictorial motifs from art history, the symbolism of milk and the mother are two of the oldest subjects, represented in the Christian context as Maria Lactans (nursing Mary). She is hardly visible as an individual and is always depicted with a child standing over her, so to speak. I couldn't identify with this image of the Madonna, although I automatically embodied it, as the self-sacrificing mother, when I was breastfeeding and when breastfeeding itself took up so much of my time. In the antenatal classes, everything was focused on pregnancy and birth itself, but hardly on breastfeeding. The birth happened so quickly, but I wasn't prepared for how much time and daily effort breastfeeding would take. And then I find the German word *Stillen* problematic as well. *Stillen* means breastfeeding, but at the same time being still, silent, calm as well. The hashtag #pumpingmom makes pumping in the *silence time* visible on social media. Women, but also trans men can be found under this hashtag, showing many variants of pumping scenarios, mostly in the form of selfies, performing without shame. In contrast to Maria Lactans, who is always pictured with a child, the child is actually no longer present with the #pumpingmoms and the gaze is usually set offensively into the camera. However, #pumpingmoms are not really part of public life. At least not at the moment of pumping. The pictures show the rooms in which pumping takes place. These are, for example, toilet rooms, storage rooms, or one's own car, so they are still private spaces. But the photos bear witness to the simultaneity of wage labour and milk pumping, the repetition, the leisure, the endurance and also show the milk itself.

AD In *Milchmaschine* you compare the milk pump with a Hoover. Both inventions promise to save time. With the breast pump, however, you have twice the work because you become your own wet nurse.

CA Both household technologies make the work seem faster and suggests that the work be done alone. But it is forgotten how often these processes have to be repeated. The technologies therefore stand for an individualisation of domestic and care work. Activities that were previously done together — such as scrubbing the floor, washing the laundry, and nursing — can now be done by the housewife and mother alone due to the entry of machines into the private sphere. In my research, I came across the first electronic breast pumps in the USA, such as Black's Automatic Breast Pump around 1903 and the invention of the vacuum



cleaner, of the brand The Hoover around 1920. These two objects in particular represent the separation of responsibility. At the same time, domestic and care work thus becomes doubly invisible, for in public life, the demonstration is that the work is done by machines.

Speaking of double work: in order to produce enough milk, the pump has to be applied very often. The nipple stimulus, which is triggered by sucking, influences the amount of milk. In order for the body to be able to produce enough milk, the pump has to be applied optimally every two hours in the beginning, even at night. I always set an alarm clock for this. Only then was I able to build up a milk depot that made it possible for me to go to the studio or anywhere at all without a child. But there is also the cleaning time of the pumping equipment and the search for someone to warm up the milk and give the bottle to the child. So many steps that are omitted when breastfeeding directly at the breast. I found this multiple work with the pump quite stressful, but because of the positive qualities of human milk, I didn't want to deprive my child of it — it is considered as the best.

AD But it would be wonderful if there was the possibility to take the child to the office or studio — or at least to have the choice of working alone or together.

CA Yes, of course, it would be great if there was at least an invitation to bring the child along, or if it was taken for granted that the child belonged. In my studio it is possible, but I was also met with rejection in the beginning. Bringing my child was undesirable, and that annoyed me. On the other hand, it is a double burden to work and look after a child simultaneously. The possibility to bring the child with you does not replace the possibility to be without the child. The offer to bring your child with you must not become a requirement to be successful in your job and a caring mother at the same time. Therefore, it is essential that others help with the care of the children.

AD I wonder if it has come to a head over time that breast milk is the best. I was born on the Swabian Alb in the '80s, my mother couldn't breastfeed. She tried cocoa, which was a common practice there at the time. Then I also had to think of Nestlé. It all started with milk powder. This whole empire is built on the invention of breast milk substitutes and can perhaps be seen as the anti-example in terms of world nutrition. *Lactoland* would then be the utopia that stands in opposition to that.

CA Yes, right now human milk is experiencing major hype, not only through the hashtag #pumpingmom but also through the research of the milk pumping industry. The milk pumping companies are very keen to emphasise the positive qualities of human milk and they fund the relevant research. My mother couldn't breastfeed me either, which is why the experience of feeding my child was such a sensitive topic for me. The exchange with my mother made this even clearer to me. Milk — especially women's milk — is the only bread for children at the very beginning of their lives. This is pure stress for many mothers. They are often bread-bringers, but not breadgivers in the financial sense. The idea of nourishment has historically taken many turns between human, maternal milk and artificial baby food, influenced by the spirit of the

times and the respective state interests. This has always had an influence on the role of women. In the 1960s, there was the hype of powdered milk, and it was totally en vogue to give the children only that and not to breastfeed them oneself, which of course also made one's own occupation possible, but at the same time did not go hand in hand with the liberation from housework and care. But people were more open to raising their children with the bottle. And then there was always this alternating between own and animal milk. *Lactoland* tries to make these issues visible so that utopia can become reality.

JZ The breadwinner is basically a construct from the 1950s and is based on a classic understanding of the family and a clear division of roles. There is the father as the main breadwinner. He goes to the factory and works [laughter], yet the mother, who is a nourisher in exactly the same sense, so to speak, does not count as a breadwinner in this outdated understanding.

CA The role concept of the man as the sole breadwinner of the family is still powerful, although the woman was considered the nurturer for a long time in history. In my research I came across the many-breasted Diana, who goes back to the Greek goddess Artemis. She is the goddess of hunting and at the same time she is the nurturer of animals, humans and nature. The two attributes of hunting and nurturing intersect in Roman and Greek mythology, and in a way I have found this reflected in the imagery of #pumpingmom: the stamina, the sporting activity, giving everything for the milk and for the job, the partnership and family. I also see all of this in the art historical representations of Artemis and the many-breasted Diana. The construction of multiple work, of the all-nurturer as an image of motherhood is ancient. The depictions of the mother as the natural nurturer still shape the situation of the female body in the bourgeois order. And yet the man is considered the breadwinner.

AD You write that the milk pump industry creates an oversupply of milk, which then goes into domestic refrigerators or is de-supplied. It is even forbidden by law to pass on milk. What could a collective practice of breastfeeding together look like, or how could the surplus of milk be passed on?

CA The work of breastfeeding is a temporary thing that eventually wears off as the child grows up. Often there is a backlog of milk when the child is weaned. A breast that has been trained by the pump first has to be weaned again, and that is not possible without a pump. You empty in ever greater intervals until at some point there is no more milk. Yes, and the leftover milk that is then no longer fed to the child is sometimes donated to milk banks in hospitals if it meets certain requirements, or it is simply disposed



of. Under the hashtag #pumpingmom, you can often see overflowing freezers full of women's milk on Instagram. When I started breastfeeding and I still had too little milk, these pictures triggered me: there was just so much milk that could have been shared. It occurred to me that there could be some kind of agglomeration, like a milk lake of the many shareholders. Unfortunately, milk does not legally fall under the category of assisted reproduction. Sperm donation, surrogacy and egg donation are recognised modes of this reproduction as labour. Why not milk as well, as in the days of the wage mothers? There is a multitude of platforms where women offer their milk for sale, for babies or for athletes — all illegal. Via the BBC, I came across a case from 2017 in Cambodia: women were pumping their milk twice a day in so-called milk factories (labs) for a low wage, which was then sold for eight times the final consumer price in the USA. Demand continues to be high, and although the practice stopped after these unlawful circumstances came to light, the milk was once again banned from sale as a commodity.

The uncanniness of strangers' milk plays a significant role in the reflections on a collective practice. Accepting milk from strangers, not using one's own milk, requires some overcoming. I felt this way, for example, when I borrowed the pump from a friend, including her surplus milk. Somehow I was disgusted by the milk. The carton is still in my freezer. But then why use animal products? Cow's milk, according to this logic, would also be something disgusting, or rather, something abject. There are already concepts of milk siblings and practices of communal breastfeeding: whoever has more provides for other children. It would be great if this kind of sharing could be appropriately rewarded as recognition of the hard work involved in milk production. I find it interesting to think about new exchange concepts, the exchange of human milk and its legally legitimised transfer. I think it is important to create publicity and visibility for milk as a resource. I find the model of *Commoning* by the feminist philosopher Silvia Federici particularly exciting in this context. In organised, so-called community kitchens — *Commonings* — one's own resources are consciously pooled in order to share them and thus supply the community. In addition, financial added value is also generated. I can also imagine these small forms of resource pooling for a collective and solidary practice of dairy work. The initial disgust of stranger's milk would perhaps dissolve. The work would be shared and for many it would be a relief. The concept of mixing different kinds of milk would dissolve the constructed boundaries between own and foreign. The mother model is not absolutely necessary; the task of reproductive work could be one of solidarity.