

# “YOU ARE A MOTHER FOREVER, BUT AN ARTIST FOR GOOD, AS WELL”: CREATIVE WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF INTENSIVE- EXTENSIVE MOTHERING.

## *Summary*

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In contemporary Russian culture motherhood as a gendered institution and an ideology is enveloped in myths about a woman’s well-being and destiny. Contemporary conservative narrative promotes an ideology of “good mothering,” and experts shape the discourse on normative mothering practices. Research shows, however, that in real life balancing many roles is an acute problem for present-day Russian women. In view of their intense emotional and physical involvement in child rearing, mothers have fewer chances for self-actualization in professional, social, and civic spheres: they face the so-called motherhood penalty.

This feminist research analyzes role balance among a specific group of women: contemporary female artists, who as parents combine their creative and mothering practices. We look at how women are inscribed in the structure of the gendered institution of motherhood and what resources are available to them to overcome conflicts between their multiple roles.

According to recent Russian studies of motherhood and our own empirical data, the demands on a mother by society, the state, and the media affect a woman artist’s involvement in mothering practices, leading her to internalize the ideological premises of what we call the intensive-extensive model of mothering.<sup>1</sup> After giving birth to a child, women artists do not abandon their creative work, but rather expend a lot of effort trying to juggle both the demands of motherhood and their professional activities. We are interested in the problem of how women balance the roles of mother and artist, as the measure of success in this enterprise will determine the professional future of a female artist and her continued participation in the sphere of art in general.

Based on theoretical perspectives from the sociology of art, sociology of motherhood, and feminist theories, as well as on in-depth interviews conducted for this study, we examine the experience of 12 Russian artist mothers aged between 29 and

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<sup>1</sup> A “model” is a sum of ideals and practices, wherein “practices” are a number of actions routinely performed and reproduced in daily life in a specific context.

41. The term (woman) artist (*khudozhnitsa*), as used in this study, is rather broad and denotes an individual involved in any number of artistic practices including but not limited to graphic art, painting, video, cinema, poetic and literary activity, installations, music, and photography. At the time of their interviews all informants had established themselves as active artists in the professional world of contemporary Russian art.

Empirical data demonstrates that for all women artists, regardless of their art practices, their social and financial standing, age, success, or level of prestige, creative work is not just a profession but also a unique worldview and a lifestyle distinctive from that of nonartists. Their creative work, the production of culturally significant art objects and events, belonging to a certain habitus, and their active participation in the contemporary art scene (international as well as local), shape their identities and practices as artist mothers.

All interviews were conducted in 2013–2015, with each session running anywhere between 2.5 and 7 hours. All interviews were videotaped. Informants' youngest children were born between 2002 and 2014. We focused on mothering during the period when a child is most dependent (from birth to age 3 or 4) and up to the period when mother begins to play a less significant role in a child's life (8–11 years), including the time when women artists transitioned back to work. We studied this process from the perspective of artist mothers looking back on their experiences at the time of the interviews. Our objective was to highlight the commonalities in experiences of child rearing and the difficulties they encountered balancing their roles as mothers and artists. In addition, we conducted six expert interviews with curators, art historians, art critics, philosophers, and art activists. Videotaping both in the artists' private quarters and their studios allowed us not only to record artist mothers' behavior during the interviews, the specifics of their interactions with their child(ren), and the presence of "help," but also to understand how their space is organized and how the artists transition from one "territory" to another—from private to professional to maternal—and how they play their various roles.

Approaching art from the perspective of sociology of art, we see the "production and consumption" of cultural products as a complex, multilayered social system and study women artists' professional activity in the framework of this system. We briefly turn to the theories of Howard S. Becker and Pierre Bourdieu to describe the particulars of the world/field of contemporary art, its limitations, and the demands placed on its principal actors—the artists. We felt it important to determine the specific conditions of a woman artist's professional work, in order to then trace their transformation under the pressure of mothering practices.

An artist is part of a dense network of social relations in a world that imposes on her/him a certain set of actions and interactions by "compelling" her to constantly produce objects and thus maintain her status and prestige. The key characteristics of an artist's work are her absolute immersion in the creative process, a constant intensive interaction with other social actors in the world of contemporary art, and belonging to a specific habitus. Compulsory for her work are an ability to manage her own time, an availability of work space (studio), and the means to arrange and con-

trol specific states of mind conducive to creative work. An artist's professional employment is unstable, precarious, and often poorly paid. Under these conditions, an artist mother often finds herself socially vulnerable and unprotected.

We take into consideration feminist theories in sociology and art relevant to understanding the contradictory situation a woman faces: as a woman artist in the art community and as a mother in traditional society and family. Based on the analysis of the American model of intensive mothering as described by Sharon Hays and on the late-Soviet model of extensive mothering as illustrated by Anna Rotkirch, we have concluded that an "intensive-extensive" model has new features and Soviet legacy, combining the priorities and ideology of intensive mothering with the delegation of childcare and a certain responsibility to other state institutions, relatives, and babysitters enabling artist mothers to resume their creative process.

When children are born, artist mothers find themselves inscribed in a rigidly regulated institution of motherhood, which demands that they play the role of an intensive mother and unceasingly bear responsibility and provide care for a child through multiple resources, including the labor of various helpers. This period wreaks havoc on their daily life and artistic practices: their time is dominated by motherly concerns, their spatial autonomy is lost, and no conditions exist for productive or creative states of mind. Women artists have fewer opportunities for communication with the world of contemporary art, where the role of an artist is performed and her reputation and prestige are formed and maintained. This generates an acute conflict between the two roles. Many artist mothers are forced to put off their creative work or significantly curb professional activities.

Every artist's return to work is different and depends on various factors and circumstances, including the involvement of a partner, availability of external help, age and number of children, and so forth. Regardless of the "practiced" mode of mothering, all informants underscored how important were their self-actualization as professional artists and their participation in the world of contemporary art. Gradually all of them realized the following: that they needed to make greater effort in order not to "fall under and drown in the daily drudgery of motherhood," as one informant put it; that dropping off the professional radar carried certain risks/penalties; that an interrupted artistic practice required methodical reconstruction and normalization under the new circumstances; and that their social status was unstable and required constant maintenance; and so on. In the words of another informant, women artists "come out of creative silence and regain their voice" step by step, little by little.

Our empirical data shows how artist mothers overcome this conflict of interests and maintain the conditions/arrangements for creative work after being transformed by motherhood. We conclude that artist mothers learn to use effectively the limited spare time that they have through time management and that both their mode of work and their assessment of time resources undergo changes. By calling on woman-centric intergenerational connections and commercial and state-sponsored childcare, they recruit "external helpers" and, by delegating the care and partial responsibility for children, gain opportunities to temporarily step away from their role as

mother and fully concentrate on the creative process. Artist mothers construct new boundaries between creative/professional and private/familial spaces. Under changing life circumstances due to combining artistic and mothering practices, women artists relearn to immerse themselves in specific creative states and acquire skills necessary for efficient work with limited resources.

This study allows us to assert that, under current sociopolitical, economic, and ideological conditions, motherhood may cause artist mothers to be excluded from the world of (contemporary) art. In order to preserve their social position and role as artists, they require time, effort, and resources. Over time women artists become aware of the need to reorganize and reconstitute their creative activity. They realize that they need to break free from the deep immersion in motherhood and daily life (what one informant described as “maternal amnesia”), that they ought to continue participating in professional production and dissemination of art objects and events, thus consciously or unconsciously following the feminist call.

Having gained the sense of responsibility for a child and limiting or diverting her creative efforts towards specific goals, an artist mother comes back to the professional art community. She preserves her social position and the role of a “woman creator” in the gender-marked world of contemporary art. The hardships of motherhood notwithstanding, an artist remains an active producer of cultural meanings by making her contribution to the development of creative process and the art world.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Elena Lemeneva*