

# Art in America

ISSUES & COMMENTARY: PRODUCTIVE SPACE



View of Freeman's paintings in MoMA's lactation room, 2015. Photo Zanna Gilbert.

This past summer, New York's Museum of Modern Art hosted a series of exhibitions aimed at a select audience. The shows weren't listed on MoMA's website, and the vast majority of museum visitors and employees were unaware of the programming. The curator, Zanna Gilbert, limited the audience for her presentations to a specific group: nursing mothers on MoMA's payroll. Located on the sixth floor of the museum's office building, the venue was a modest 36-square-foot room, a former utility closet that the museum has repurposed and set aside for lactating mothers to use while pumping breast milk.

Titled "MaMA Cubicle," the series wasn't part of Gilbert's official responsibilities as a postdoctoral research fellow focusing on Conceptual art from Latin America. Instead, it was an exercise in rogue curating similar in spirit and title to her "MoMA Cubicle" project, a rotating selection of mail art presented on the walls of her workspace that attained notoriety in the New York art world entirely through word of mouth.

During the final year of her fellowship, Gilbert gave birth to a daughter. Upon returning to the office three months later, she began quietly inviting women artists to participate in "MaMA

Cubicle" in an effort to make the museum's lactation room a more pleasant environment for the women who use it.

I was interested to see Gilbert's installation of meditative abstract paintings by Brooklyn artist Marley Freeman. But I was also curious about Gilbert's motivations for activating this particular space. Perhaps in part because I was expecting my second child, Zanna welcomed me to the exhibition despite my non-lactating status. Lactation rooms are important to American mothers because we return to work quickly relative to our international peers. Though she claimed to have "thrown the paintings on the wall as quickly as possible," the project nonetheless took valuable time away from her pumping schedule, which already disrupted her workday.

Women who choose to continue breastfeeding after returning to work pump to keep their babies fed and to maintain their body's milk production. Pumping can take up to 20 minutes, and some women pump every three hours. A 2010 New York law mandates that workplaces with 50 or more employees must provide ded

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icated rooms for women to pump. Many institutions comply with this legal requirement by offering their employees the bare minimum: a private space that isn't a restroom. These rooms are often spare closets or storage areas.

Before I started a family, I worked in education departments at MoMA and at the Whitney Museum, but the lactation rooms at these institutions were completely off my radar at the time. Like many childless people, I had barely considered the logistics of maternity. In the close confines of the "MaMA Cubicle," the personal, social and economic implications of breastfeeding came into focus. I had my first child in 2013, four years after I founded Recess, a nonprofit art space in Soho. Recess's four-person staff is made up of women between the ages of 25 and 35. While we offer six weeks of paid parental leave and another six weeks unpaid, our policy is not what I would like it to be, and we have no lactation room.

By comparison, new mothers who work at MoMA and the Whitney Museum have told me they can apply for disability payments and use accrued sick and vacation days for up to three months away. When I started Recess I knew I wanted to have children. However, the organization is not expressly set up to support maternity. We are in the business of commissioning and presenting rigorous contemporary art, and, while the board and I hope to fairly accommodate the life choices of the all-female staff, Recess's core mission has always taken priority.

This tension between the goals of a business or nonprofit and the needs of working mothers is especially difficult to resolve in the United States, the only industrialized nation that doesn't require paid leave for new parents. Lactation rooms are important to American mothers in particular because we return to work quickly relative to our international peers. Had Gilbert been living and working in the U.K., her home country, she could have taken up to a year of maternity leave, while receiving at least a fractional salary for almost 10 months. Under those circumstances, she might have had little or no experience with workplace lactation rooms since she could have breastfed primarily at home. In the U.S. the availability of lactation rooms appears a minor issue in the shadow of an unyielding parental leave policy, but these rooms present a singular opportunity to imagine a workday that accommodates or even welcomes maternity.

As we made arrangements via e-mail for my visit to "MaMA Cubicle," Gilbert apologized for having limited time. "Pumping is breaking up my working day and destroying my productive (not reproductive) capabilities," she wrote. When we met, I asked her about how the meaning of "productivity" shifts throughout her day. Producing information through research seems to stand in stark contrast to the other mode of production occupying her time: the chore of using a machine to pump milk from one's body into plastic bags. Yet Gilbert's project blends the word's biological and intellectual registers. She and I wondered aloud if the space most analogous to a lactation room might be that of a cryobank where men donate sperm (take a joyful bodily function, remove any pleasure, add boredom). The spaces we occupy to pump are utilitarian; MoMA's lactation room was, after all, a utility closet. When I asked about the biography of Alfred Barr, MoMA's founding director, lying on a table in "MaMA Cubicle," Gilbert laughed and, thinking again of the cryobank, said she thought it might be useful material for moms.

The particularities of what mothers look at while they pump are actually quite relevant to the task, and can even prove essential. Nursing my son was a relaxing, intimate escape from my day; pumping never quite worked for me. It was tedious and dehumanizing, and, practically speaking, not productive. My doctor

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suggested I take a picture of my son breastfeeding and look at it while I pump. This helped, but I still hated the act.

In “MaMA Cubicle,” Freeman’s paintings, saturated with rich colors layered into a collaged abstraction, prompt serene contemplation. Although these images don’t cause the same release of oxytocin as a photo of a nursing infant, they could certainly lower stress levels, which affect pumping output. Freeman’s unambiguous brushstrokes and deliberate gestures offer a tribute to process, to mark-making, to the body moving in response to materials. The paintings’ overlapping, opaque layers, which take on a milky quality in the context of the lactation room, make the overall space more inviting, less oppressive.

There were three other exhibitions as part of “MaMA Cubicle,” each offering a different form of feminine meditation. The first in the series featured work by a collective called Miniature Garden. They produced a coloring book inspired by early 20th-century artist Hilma af Klint’s mystical abstractions. “MaMA Cubicle” complicates the simple split between maternal and professional responsibilities, offering a playful critique of the dominant sentiment within the American workforce. Pumping moms were encouraged to fill in copies of the book with colored pencils placed in the room. Gilbert also presented a selection of Elise Rasmussen’s postcards from the Arizona desert. Sent one by one to the museum, these photographs of open spaces and expansive horizons were offered as an alternative to the enclosed landscape of the lactation room. The final edition of “MaMA Cubicle” was by Susanne Bürner, who offered a series of altered black-and-white images of dairy products and also installed a small fountain for optimal relaxation.

Before concluding her fellowship, Gilbert hoped to connect with the museum’s department of prints and drawings about programming the lactation room using work from MoMA’s collection. Such works already hang in the museum’s offices and administrative spaces, providing intellectual and aesthetic stimulation to employees. I like imagining pieces from the MoMA canon similarly calming and encouraging lactating mothers, while, on the other side of the wall, furthering curatorial research. Indeed, as Gilbert’s project suggests, paintings and other artwork might prime the mother for a more productive workday in every sense of the word.

As the executive director of Recess, I’ve always treated maternal and professional spaces as necessarily compartmentalized. When I went back to work after the birth of my son, it was a relief to leave the insular world of my newly forming family, just as it was a relief to leave work and return home to the project of keeping my son alive. “MaMA Cubicle” complicates the simple split between maternal and professional responsibilities, offering a playful critique of the dominant sentiment within the American workforce that formulates maternity as a personal predicament that should be addressed on one’s personal time.

I wish I could conclude with the announcement that Recess is building a lactation room that Gilbert will curate in perpetuity, or rolling out a leave policy allowing women to nurse at home for a year. But for many reasons, neither solution seems realistic. The scale of Recess—both in terms of our square footage and our budget—presents a very real challenge to a holistic vision of productive space. How can we best support lactation and maternity when the organization would be truly paralyzed if two staff members took leave at the same time? Limited resources may make this an intractable problem.

But what small-scale institutions lack in financing, they often make up for in creative problem-solving,

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flexibility and individualized care for artists and staff. As Recess continues to grow, I hope to regard all aspects of the workday as productive and allow every staff member the opportunity to build a parental-professional identity as she sees fit. Space for maternity should be conceived as an extension of our creative space rather than an inconvenient distraction from our mission. When the needs of working mothers are given serious attention, it's possible to envision a professional environment built on a more abstract, gestural and layered ground, with the objective of composing a more fluid, productive workplace.

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