

The unequal struggle of women artists

Katharina Scherke Despite outstanding qualifications it is often impossible for women artists to succeed in the arts and pursue an uninterrupted career in them. Women's life situation inside the arts is the classic one of a conflict of interests between professional and family commitments

For years now about half the graduates of Austrian arts academies have been women. Among the group of freelance, socially insured artists women are still under-represented, however. Somewhere along the way between their artistic training and the arts as a profession they seem to fail. Why? A case study of the life conditions of twelve women artists in different age groups conducted in Graz, Austria sheds some light on the matter. In addition, seven exhibition organisers and gallerists were interviewed to obtain information on the market opportunities for women artists (Scherke 1993). The study relied mainly on in-depth interviews. Women artists were asked to describe their everyday lives, family situations and - especially - their strategies on the art market. On the basis of the women's descriptions of their everyday life situations we attempted to explain the difference between male and female artists in their respective

abilities to build a career in the arts.

Quantitative studies performed in Austria in recent years underline the results of this qualitative study (Schulz a.o. 1997; Almhofer 1999). Estimates vary for the number of Austrian artists and the proportion of women among them; Schulz et al. report 38.6% for 1995, including not only freelance insured artists but also the members of different professional associations (Schulz a.o. 1997, 28). The female share on all estimates is between around 30% and 40%. There is a disparity between the number of female art students and graduates on the one hand and the number of registered women artists on the other.

The proportion of women among students of the Austrian art academies has been rising constantly over the past ten years (see table 1). The disparity between men and women among freelance artists is very surprising, therefore. One cause may lie in the registration

difficulties, as it is impossible to count the exact number of artists in a country. Since 'artist' is not a protected professional title, anyone can designate himself or herself as such. Social Insurance Company statistics cover freelance artists only, and only if this activity is their main occupation and source of income. However, if an artist's principal source of income is from another job - e.g. as an art teacher - he or she will also be socially insured through this occupation. Women artists are especially affected by these registration problems. They often carry out their art work as a sideline to another job, which is why even women exhibiting regularly and designating themselves as artists are not listed in official artists' statistics. Also unregistered in the official statistics are women co-insured with a husband who does not work in the arts.

In order to distinguish between artists and 'hobby artists' we defined artists as those women who have completed an arts training, exhibit regularly, are involved in the art market and express interest in continual activity in the arts. It was not necessary for an artist to earn her living through her artistic activities only. For self-taught artists the criterion applied was regular exhibition activities.

The case study revealed that structural disadvantages which are part of women's general life situation are the main reason for

their under-representation in the arts, in which regard they are indistinguishable from other working women. For a description of the life situation of women artists the following topics are considered: general features of art markets, the income situation of the women artists interviewed, women artists' problems concerning relationships and family matters, women artists' attitudes towards art work and their reactions to the features of the art market.

Entering and succeeding on the art market

Marketing activities are vital to artistic success. Producing excellent work alone is not sufficient. A lot of time and vigour must be devoted to contact with officials and gallerists. The communications network in the arts is complex (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993; Scherke 1999). This network encompasses public figures with a cultural remit as well as exhibition organisers, gallerists, collectors, critics, teachers at the art academies - and the artists themselves. Talk on this network is about exhibitions, competitions, public support measures, etc. Communication between the various players in the art market is an important information source for gallerists and artists. Up-and-coming artists entering the network will be recommended to gallerists and other exhibition organisers. The doors of this art scene open less readily to self-taught artists

Table 1 The female share (%) among the Austrian art academy

| | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 1999 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| students | 39.4 | 42.9 | 43.4 | 44.2 | 45.4 | 50.4 | 54.1 |
| graduates | 45.0 | 44.4 | 46.5 | 48.8 | 46.7 | 54.1 | 53.7 |
| assistants | 11.1 | 15.9 | 24.0 | 25.2 | 29.9 | 32.9 | 34.3 |
| professors | 4.1 | 2.4 | 11.2 | 15.1 | 13.8 | 16.3 | 18.2 |

Source: Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Verkehr 1999, 92.

than to former students of the art academies, whose teachers pass them on directly to officials and gallerists. But all artists keen to establish themselves on the market need initiative and persistence, and staying in continual contact with the network is vital. The 'degree of familiarity' is particularly important for receiving public commissions or invitations to enter competitions. Austria has a raft of public support measures in place, such as studio subsidies and purchases conducted under the auspices of the Federal Ministry for Science and Art. While the wider public is relatively unaware of the support available, this information is easily obtainable through the art market network.

In the network it is not only the quality of the work and marketing activities that count but also the artist's personality. Obviously, those who stick in the mind will achieve the necessary familiarity more quickly; an appropriate personal manner is essential for this public-relations work. Coming over self-confidently will help to convince gallerists that exhibiting a particular artist's work is a sound investment. It is therefore understandable why many artists work hard on their appearance and manner. Our interviews with gallerists reveal that an artist's personality as well as the work is always considered. Klein describes this as follows: 'The art market is primarily a communications and/or reputation market and only secondarily about selling goods.' (Klein 1993, 238).¹

There are different strategies for entering the art market network and obtaining the information benefits coupled with it. These strategies differ, depending on the actual contacts; an important difference was identified between strategies for dealing with gallerists on the one hand and with other persons - public or otherwise - responsible for culture on the other.² One strategy is for artists to introduce

themselves with a portfolio of work to exhibition organisers and gallerists. However, the success of this strategy varies greatly. Gallerists told us they are not interested in getting to know an artist 'via the portfolio'. They all stressed a preference for finding artists themselves and observing them over a lengthy period before deciding to stage an exhibition in their own gallery. This viewpoint differs completely from what the non-commercial exhibition organisers told us. They certainly are interested in discovering young talent, and the strategy of approaching them with a portfolio appears to be successful.

Our study revealed that the non-commercial exhibition organisers' selection criteria differ from the gallerists', depending as the latter do on exhibition sales. A private gallery in Graz simply cannot afford to exhibit unknown artists since sales are not guaranteed. Public galleries, however, have the resources to organise potentially unprofitable events. They are therefore in a far better position than the sale galleries to offer young and women artists the chance to get a foot on the ladder and enter the network.

Once an artist has managed to take the first step his or her career may then start to accelerate, with further exhibitions, commissions and invitations coming in. Even so, permanent networking remains necessary in the shape of visits to vernissages and symposia, etc. and maintaining regular contacts with gallerists and other persons in the cultural domain. An artist who neglects the public-relations dimension risks oblivion - artistic and commercial success are not identical. Artists who participate in the art market only irregularly may have artistic successes, enjoying peer recognition, say, or receiving invitations to enter exhibitions or competitions, but they will be unable to earn enough from their art to live from it. Artists are

able to generate a sufficient income only if they work constantly on their market value - always assuming, of course, that their work is good enough in the first place (Scherke 1994, 33).

Income situation of women artists

Marketing is a very time-consuming activity. Faced with their other commitments - family and otherwise - women are unable to find the time required. The result is that they are less well known than they otherwise would be and receive fewer invitations to competitions. The possibility of earning a living from their art work then dwindles, and the irregular and very low earnings from artistic activities impose a further burden (this, of course, does not affect women only, but is an *additional* difficulty for them). On average, women artists still earn far less than their male colleagues (Scherke 1993; Schulz a.o. 1997, 95). They are under-represented in the higher-earning categories, command lower prices for their work and attract lower subsidies from the ministry than do men. (Cf. Scherke 1993, 42-52; Schulz a.o. 1997, 221.)

On the one hand, certain disadvantages women have in other professions as well may also play a role here. In some sectors of the economy, firms use the possibility that women may leave their jobs because of family commitments as a reason not to employ them in responsible jobs. In the arts the impact of this factor may be that women are ignored for official competitions and purchases (Scherke 1993, 176-177). On the other hand, women's upbringing may explain their low incomes. Women artists often demand lower prices because of an apparent lack of self-confidence and, at the same time, a conscious refusal to deploy the usual marketing strategies. All the women we interviewed said they refused to go along with the market mechanisms, particularly the need to 'play up to' the gallerists. They are loathe to put on 'a big

show', and they thought the self-confidence they observed in many male colleagues was exaggerated (Scherke 1993, 180-182).

All the women artists interviewed corresponded to our definition, i.e. they exhibit regularly, their work is praised by critics and they have already received public awards. However, only two of the artists are able to live exclusively on their earnings from art. All the others have sidelines - in or outside the arts. As far as genre is concerned, the study covered a spectrum across the traditional arts such as painting and newer forms such as computer art. The interviewees were aged between 25 and 55. Seven of them had children (covering different age groups). Six women lived with a partner (themselves mostly artists).

Very few of the interviewees were able to live exclusively from their art, which generated meagre and unreliable earnings. Faced with this insecurity many of them resorted to arts or non-arts sidelines to cover their main costs. This was particularly the case for women with families. We ascertained five categories: women able to live entirely from their art (only two of the interviewees), those who work on commission, those who have a non-arts sideline, those with a main, non-arts job, and those with a partner able to support the family (only one woman in our case study). Commissioned work appeared to be an important source of income for all interviewees. Examples of such work are restorations, jewellery-making and doing advertising spots.

Depending on the women's life circumstances, commissions require much of the time they have available for art. Women with a family were particularly dependent on a regular income and so tended to have such a time-consuming sideline.

Costs for materials depend on the genre. These costs are higher for conceptual art and jewellery than for painting. Artists performed

many preparatory works themselves in order to reduce costs. The high costs for materials with simultaneously small gains from the arts have direct effects to artistic activity as such: smaller formats are chosen in order to save on materials. Large formats are often feasible only with public subsidy.

A separate working space is a basic necessity for producing art. With their earnings low and uncertain, many interviewees had used their living room to work in for a time since they were unable to afford to rent a studio. However, this combination is a source of numerous problems, ranging from a lack of space for materials and drying pictures to damage to health caused by solvent odour. One possibility is to share a studio with other artists. Many interviewees had shared a studio with friends or partners (if they were also artists) at the start of their careers.

For women with children the distance between living and working space is an important consideration. While integrating the studio into the artist's flat may be convenient and times when the children do not require immediate care can be used for art, the proximity of working and living space may also be a source of stress. For instance, women may feel obliged to do the housework instead of their art work. Concentration suffers under such circumstances.

Because of their circumstances, many interviewees exhibited too infrequently to make a profit on their artistic activity. However, despite temporarily living at close to subsistence level they did not want to give up their art. Money was felt to be a less important measure of success than personal contentment with art and peer recognition.

The influence of a relationship

Relationships may be a highly problematic area for artists - more so than for other people. Female artists are more rarely married and

more often separated than are their male counterparts (Landeskulturreferentenkonferenz 1984; Schulz a.o. 1997). Whether or not a female artist's partner is also an artist is also important. Almost every woman we interviewed was in a relationship with another artist; four were cohabiting with an artist at the time of the interview or had been married to one.

Interviewees felt that a major advantage of a relationship with another artist is that he can be presumed to have an insight into their circumstances. All stated that the possibility of discussing their art work was very important to them. With partners in other walks of life there was often an inadequate basis for conversation. A further advantage of having an artist as a partner is that he will not be bound by an employer's timetable - a major source of difficulty in relationships with non-artists. If there are children, being in a relationship with a fellow artist may also yield the further advantage that, through their partner, women can maintain contact with the art market and stay up with the latest developments even if several years elapse without them producing work themselves. Restarting will sometimes be easier for these women than for those who have been entirely isolated from the art market for a lengthy period.

Frequently, female artists with a partner working in another sector and earning enough to maintain the family will not be obliged to sell work. However, the woman will then run the risk of becoming a mere hobby artist, particularly if her partner has no appreciation of her work or scheduling needs. Conflicts will then occur if the woman does not accept her husband's view of her as a hobbyist. Interestingly, women artists choose a partner who is also active in the arts more frequently than do their male counterparts (Schulz a.o. 1997, 37).

But living with another artist can also have its disadvantages, e.g. the low and unreliable earnings. Relationships with artists may also be fraught with difficulty if the male partner regards the woman's activity as competition or if he is an obstacle to her independent development as an artist.

Children make all the difference

In career terms, children are still a bigger factor for female than for most male artists. Since, as traditionally, children are still reared largely by women, it is *their* careers that are interrupted. As a result, many women's artistic activities will remain limited during this period of several years. Since in the arts it is necessary to maintain contact with the art market and officials in order not to be forgotten, interruptions to artistic production therefore have a highly negative impact on an artist's future career prospects. Re-entry into the art world after a period of family-building is very difficult - there is no such things as job guarantees in the arts. A woman artist can never rest on her laurels. She must gain and confirm her position in the art market time and again. If she stops working for several years she may then find herself right back to square one. Moreover, if her outgoings increase because of the children she may well be unable to afford to return to the financially insecure field of freelance art in any case. In that event she will then have to work on commission or look for another source of earnings outside the arts.

One advantage of art is that it can be done at home and therefore even when the children are small. However, simultaneously freelancing as an artist, rearing children and doing some other work on the side to earn a living is a considerable strain on the nerves. Although male artists are also often obliged to accept non-art sidelines if they have children because of the greater need for a regular income, the

additional lack of time because of the bringing up of children tends to confront them to a lesser extent. It is more often women who find themselves with a conflict of interests. While feeling responsible for the children and wanting to take care of them, women are also interested in their art. Combining the two is difficult. Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that more women in the arts refuse to have a family than do women in other walks of life (cf. Landeskulturreferentenkonferenz 1984, 157; Schulz a.o. 1997, 181, 187).

Leisure time... what leisure time?

The idea of art tends to invoke an idyllic situation governed by muse and mood. However, artists themselves consider art to be their 'normal work'. Ideas often come only in the process of intense analysis or formulation of a problem. Rigour and regularity are vital to artistic thought and getting used to materials. If concentration is affected by household tasks, children or other commitments, ideas will not come or cannot be worked up into projects.

Freelance artists are at liberty to divide their own time - which many regarded as an advantage versus other professions. Art is not comparable with other activities that can be performed on an 8-hour-day basis, since ideas are not bound to specific times of the day. Most artists do keep regular working hours, however. Artists with small children state that their main working hours are in the morning while the children are at school or kindergarten. (As specified above, child-rearing and housekeeping in artists' households are done mainly by the woman.) Women artists with children have more limited time available for their freelance art than do their male counterparts (Schulz a.o. 1997, 142).

None of the interviewees was able to draw a clear distinction between working hours and leisure time. Interviewees gave several reasons:

since there are no fixed working hours, artists have to create their own daily routine. Any leisure time available will depend on the artist's needs and not external structures. Women artists' need to perform hobbies in addition to their art work is negligible. Although they certainly regard art as a serious pursuit and a 'normal kind of job' it is, at the same time, something they are very happy to do. This pleasure the artists take in their work is a key factor. (Scherke 1993, 147-150).

Suggestions for improvement

We cannot yet speak of equal opportunities for men and women in the arts. Women artists' situation in life is the classic conflict of interests between professional and family commitments. It would appear that self-criticism and modesty, traditionally feminine virtues, still dominate the thinking of women artists - and this despite several decades of the feminist movement. However, these attitudes are counterproductive in the arts since the necessary marketing requires a self-confident manner and tough bargaining skills. The art market is not geared to women artists' specific situation in life.

If we also consider women's above-mentioned aversions to the mechanisms of the freelance art market then it is understandable why many try to practise their work independently of the market whenever they have the chance to do so. However, the consequence for many of them is that they do not have enough time for their art, which leads to some of them giving up their work entirely.

An important step towards improving women's disadvantaged situation in the arts would be to bring this to public attention. One aim of the qualitative and quantitative investigations of recent years has been to highlight the different working situations of male and female artists. This research work can

only be an initial step; actual improvement must come from the policy-makers.

A whole range of improvement measures aimed at preventing women drifting away from the arts is conceivable, notably public commissioning coupled with greater efforts to invite women artists to enter competitions. The public galleries have the important task of providing women with opportunities to get their careers started, irrespective of age. Only the public exhibition organisers are able deliberately to pursue policy in this direction, since the private galleries are overly dependent on the prejudices of the collectors' market. Increased efforts to bring women teachers into the art academies are a further possibility for supporting women in the arts, with women already appointed to chairs encouraging other women in their attempts to build an arts career. Our interviews revealed the importance of role models for women who had decided to enter the arts. The model provided by women in art academies who successfully pursue their own art work, possibly even combining this with having a family, would also facilitate the entry of younger women into the arts.

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Notes

1. 'Der Kunstmarkt ist mithin primär Kommunikations- bzw. Reputationsmarkt und erst sekundär Warenhandel.'
2. At present there are approx. sixteen private galleries and more than twenty public exhibition premises in Graz. In the last quarter of 1999 there were 342 male and 134 female socially insured and freelance artists in Styria (These data were kindly made available by the Sozialversicherungsanstalt der gewerblichen Wirtschaft). The problem with the data is that they exclude artists doing art as a sideline.

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Katharina Scherke

studied sociology and art history at the Karl-Franzens-University, Graz (Austria) and wrote her master's thesis: *The life and working conditions of female artists in Styria and Graz* in 1993