



# Female art and the laws of Supply & Demand

*The Commodification of Culture as a tool for resurrecting the notion of Equal Opportunities for female artists*

By Sarah Gram

In Denmark heated discussion ensued concerning opportunities, or lack thereof for women artists when statistics were released showing that in the years 1989-1999, output by female artists totalled only 6.5% of all museum purchases. Unfortunately this discussion petered out without engendering any sort of fruitful resolution and nothing has been done since. However, while studying in Berlin, I became aware of the "Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt art IT", a German postgraduate professional development programme for women fine artists in Berlin. This programme has the stated objective of addressing similar problems as they exist in contemporary Germany. The programme is set up as a step towards solving the problem that women artists – despite formal equality and a disproportionate representation in art education – still face hidden obstacles in their career path as professional artists. Goldrausch is in other words a programme that strives to redress this balance by offering female artists a professional "shot in the arm".<sup>1</sup>

For it is necessary for women artists to truly think about what their professional and economic goals are, concerning the work that they produce. This is a given if they are to make use of equal opportunities as they already exist, at least theoretically, in the art market. Goldrausch gives women artists an opportunity to do this, by addressing relevant strategy for successful freelance artistic practice. The programme focuses on theoretical and practical issues. It encompasses studio presentations, meetings with curators, artists and gallery owners, and workshops in various management skills.

Goldrausch has global relevance. Not only because it is a programme which promotes equal opportunity, but also because it can be seen as a product of an ongoing focus on the "economic aspects of culture." Additionally it is relevant because the goals of the programme take into consideration the shifting sands of theoretical justification for publicly funded cultural production in Europe over the last 50 years. Goldrausch strategies are specifically tied to contemporary notions of culture and art as commodities – and therefore do not reduce the work of women artists to archaic and politicised notions of "women's art," – as this categorisation immediately eliminates a majority of the potential market for fine art. We could learn from this in Denmark, and I believe that the trend this article will describe as: *the commodification of culture*, will be one way of securing higher visibility for women artists in

Denmark and additionally over time will increase their market share.

Programmes like Goldrausch demonstrate that focused, more quantitative and "neutral" strategies, are one way of limiting a polarization of genders which isolates women artists from the mainstream markets for fine art. These strategies start from an understanding of contemporary public policy as it pertains to art and culture. However the fact that, within the art-world buyers engage in obvious de facto discrimination against women who are producers of fine art makes it naive to think that a simple re-alignment of marketing strategies to address the assumptions inherent in particular cultural trends will change things overnight. In fact you could argue that it could have the opposite effect – a strict adherence to the laws of supply and demand could in fact lead to reduced market share for women artists in the future.

The notion of the commodification of culture should however be used and taken into consideration, – so that female artists need not merely to claim gender equality but also to work purposefully "within this paradigm" and use it to skilfully promote their work.

The discussion is thus clear. It should be possible also in Denmark for the commodification of culture to bring a change of scenery for female artists, and to expand their opportunities for commercial success, as exemplified by the German *Goldrausch* project.

## Different phases of cultural policy

Cultural policy has gone through different phases throughout the last 60 years. It has, roughly put, gone from an affirmative notion of culture in the fifties, where the state was seen as the provider of broad support of culture – a kind of "nursing-tradition", to a socio-cultural notion in the seventies, where an idealistic and critical view broke through and Hilmer Hoffmans statement: "*Kultur für alle*" – culture for everyone – is central. In the eighties the concept emerged of culture as simply one more form of business, and public support for culture was often linked to specific artists' abilities to sell their work in the open marketplace as well as to raise funds privately to supplement the more traditional forms of public support. This has naturally lead to even more market-based approaches to understanding the meanings of art and the diverse professional responsibilities of artists leading thus to cultural policies in the northern part of Europe today that can be said to have a neo-liberal touch. (Pölluck 2005/2006). Here the organization of the public policy on the arts focuses on supply and

<sup>1</sup> Learn more at the Goldrausch website: [www.goldrausch-kuenstlerinnen.de](http://www.goldrausch-kuenstlerinnen.de)



demand, and the relationship of culture to the marketplace itself.

These perspectives have in turn meant that new conditions for culture have arisen, whereby among other things the theory of New Public Management (NPM) has become a key factor.

NPM reforms became commonplace in the eighties. Such reforms had as their stated objectives keywords such as: output-oriented budgeting, result-oriented management, performance-pay, privatising, agencification and cut-downs (Turner and Hulme, 1997; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). These ideas, well known from the lexicon of management theory, are today a central component of reforms in the entire public sector. So it should come as no surprise that they have trickled down into the arena of publicly funded arts and culture as well.

#### Female artists: A status report

In Germany and in Denmark the situation for women artists is remarkably similar. This can be clearly demonstrated by observing the fact that since 1968 only 14 women artists have presented solo exhibitions at the "Staatliche Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin" out of an absolute total of 169 (Effinger, 2005: 7). This is nearly identical to the figure of 6.5% which women artists in Denmark can claim as their market share of museum purchases during the 1990s (Hansen, 2005: 9).

| Museum                     | Men         | Women     | Totally purchased |
|----------------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Statens museum for kunst   | 436         | 12        | 448               |
| Aarhus Kunstmuseum         | 94          | 5         | 99                |
| Louisiana                  | 72          | 5         | 77                |
| Vejle Kunstmuseum          | 155         | 27        | 182               |
| Horsens Kunstmuseum        | 79          | 7         | 86                |
| Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum   | 59          | 14        | 73                |
| Sønderjyllands Kunstmuseum | 43          | 3         | 46                |
| Vestsjællands Kunstmuseum  | 256         | 7         | 259               |
| Nivaagaard                 | 4           | 0         | 4                 |
| Randers Kunstmuseum        | 55          | 6         | 61                |
| <b>Total</b>               | <b>1249</b> | <b>86</b> | <b>1335</b>       |

Figure 1: The largest Danish museum purchases of paintings from 1989-99. (Hansen, 2005: 8).

In Germany this more specifically means that only five percent of all female artists are able to support themselves solely by means of artistic production. The problem is only exacerbated by the fact that in Germany art produced by women sells for an average

of 30% less than art produced by men (Effinger, 2005: 7).

For years it was a commonplace assumption that formal educational equality would naturally lead to a more general professional equality across gender, even if exact financial parity was not a stated goal. However, while men and women have been accepted into the Academy of Fine Arts on equal terms since 1965 in Denmark, no movement has occurred in the direction of equal representation of men and women artists at the professional level on any quantifiable level in the years that have elapsed since (Sander, 2005: 81).

If we use the lens of new "liberal" economic theory to look at this problem, a conclusion to be taken into consideration is that gender is irrelevant to personal success as an artist, because the invisible hand of market forces is always there to ensure that no injustice will occur.

This then leads to several possible conclusions. 1) The overall lack of equal market share for women fine artists in Denmark is a result of the fact that art produced by women in Denmark is not as good as art produced by men. 2) Womens' art is different. – Or 3) Somewhere in the processes of marketing and distribution of fine art in Denmark women artists are being discriminated against.

#### Untalented Women Artists

Could it in fact be true that women artists in Denmark are less talented than their male counterparts? To argue in defence of this point would be to confuse cause with effect. For as Elisabeth Toubro states: talent is something that is randomly distributed among people, free of charge and without rhyme or reason. Artistic talent itself does not discriminate based on class, race, or gender. But said talent becomes socially worthless when it is not developed according to relevantly stated goals and objectives (Toubro, 2005: 22).

Rather, it should be stated that women artists are forced to overcome additional hurdles and barriers in order to simply achieve parity in the areas of marketing and distribution of their work. Perhaps it is the case that many women artists are sorted out as unworthy – deemed unmarketable, long before the last battles for survival among the fittest in the marketplace for fine art are even fought. In this case, success or failure in this highly specialised bourse is thus neither a question of lack of talent nor of a lack of artistic quality, but simply of inability to find a place at the starting gate at the beginning of the race to commercial success and viability (Toubro, 2005: 23).

Public museums in Denmark have claimed that: "*We never buy because of gender – but only on the principle of quality*" (Toubro, 2005: 26). But if equal access to representation in Danish museums is purely



determined by the quality of the art, then you can consequently note that men produce art which is better than that produced by women, and to an extraordinary degree. But when this has been stated one question remains: what is quality? And is there, in the Danish art world, an objective concept of quality?

#### A broader concept of the value of art

What does it mean, if one states that a particular work of art has *greater or lesser artistic value*? Generally agreed upon ideas about these notions have fluctuated radically throughout the entire modern period. Until today where there is no longer one concept, but many, covering a *broadened concept of art*. (Toubro, 2005: 25).

Donald Preziosi writes: "No art historical knowledge can be gender-neutral" (Burkard, 2005: 61) – but when this is said it still seems as if we are forced to look at the history of art through a pair of "old glasses," glasses which provide us with a vision of quality art which is only created by men (Burkard, 2005: 62).

I will not discuss gender in "works of art" further in this article but will simply raise one final question on the subject. If we are deeply and innately imbued with a cultural canon which is hundreds of years old, can a change in cultural policy, i.e. the implementation of new marketing techniques (a product of the commodification of art and culture) then truly change our embedded long range attitudes?

#### The distribution system of art

According to Dorte Jelstrup female artists have more difficulties achieving the pinnacle of commercial success than do their male colleagues – among other things because of the structures and hierarchies that characterize the "art-world," which must be considered as factor which limits their viability (Jelstrup, 2005: 33).

Sanne Kofod, citing the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, calls this "the distribution system of art" (Kofod, 2005: 45). This concept can be used to map how art institutions, as parts of a whole, work, and how the value of art is established as a function of this closed system. There are many agents in this system besides the artists themselves. The system consists of artists, critics, gallery owners, curators, museum inspectors, culture editors, art-publishers, funds, councils etc. – and all of these players work together to determine the symbolic and economic value of the work of an artist (Kofod, 2005: 46). It is specifically the nature, mechanisms and fundamental structures of this system that the Goldrausch program in Germany seeks to educate women to understand and to use to their own advantage:

Die künstlerische Tätigkeit erfordert neben der konzeptionellen Erarbeitung und Realisierung des eigentlichen Kunstwerkes erhebliche Navigationsfähigkeit im Umgang mit den Strukturen und Mechanismen des Kunstmärktes. Um in der komplexen Struktur des Kunstbetriebes und der Kunstoffentlichkeit souverän agieren zu können, müssen Künstlerinnen

zusätzlich zur künstlerisch-ästhetischen Kompetenz berufspraktisches Know-how erwerben. (Hansen, 2005: 6).

Thus Goldrausch acknowledges the need for women to acquire more vocational skill and marketing ability in order better to promote their own work. In this way it takes into consideration the commodification of culture. This type of thinking could also change the situation for women artists in Denmark, because it openly acknowledges that all artists today have to work within this system in order to be granted opportunities. The romantic myth regarding the unnoticed genius, who is only acknowledged after his/her death and is therefore able to work isolated from the system, is a fairy tale – in today's world it is simply not practical, either economically or socially. (Sander, 2005: 84). Artists who acknowledge the structures of the marketplace will thus be able to alter them. So that in the future it will be easier for new artists to generate awareness of their work, and to gain a foothold in previously inaccessible areas.

But when this is said and done it is obvious that owners of galleries, for example, are in a double position. On the one hand they are free to choose how to market their personal stable of artists, but on the other they are also dependent on the market forces which exist at any given moment (supply and demand). And here we shouldn't be blind to weight of museum purchases (unequally dispersed) in determining the overall value of fine art. For this reason Goldrausch teaches its female artists to become literate in the ways of the distribution system for fine art. The argument being that, even though the female artist seldom has the support of this distribution system in the beginning, she can use knowledge of its structures to communicate about her work, and to organize exhibitions and marketing projects so that in the long term, she can become part of this rhizomatic structure – a place where the artistic acknowledgement is established (Kofod, 2005: 46).

With this short presentation of the Goldrausch project from Berlin, and the accompanying explanation of contemporary trends in liberal economic and management theory as they have been influential in determining public policy in the realm of culture, I would note that it is not yet possible to judge the success of Goldrausch, or whether in the long run women artists will be able to increase their share of the market, based solely on their willingness to attempt to play the game according to the rules of the liberal economy as they have been applied to the marketing and distribution of fine art. However the possibilities discussed do give us food for thought. Perhaps increased market share is possible. And perhaps this will engender a paradigm shift so that in the future women artists will not be forced to argue from a starting point of statistical inferiority, simply to defend the right to be both female and an artist. Perhaps this paradigm shift will alter the comprehension of culture



which we all suffer under, and in this way change the scenery in a positive way for women artists.

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