

Reinventing the Art World

By Rosalind Davis

In 2012 Annabel Tilley and I decided – without arrogance or naivety but with total conviction - that quite simply we would reinvent the art world for ourselves. From the outset we decided that as an arts organisation Zeitgeist Arts Projects (ZAP), and all its events, would be open to all, with no strictures – educationally or otherwise. To be ethical, equal or non-hierarchical is not exactly common practice in the art world. In fact as we quickly discovered it is threatening to some; to offer something where everyone can join and will still be respected for their various backgrounds and careers. This goes against the grain of maintaining our current art culture which has stratified into a highly hierarchical system. In the simplest form ZAP is an arts organisation aimed at supporting artists in practical ways to sustain their practice that encourage and empower artists to develop networks, learn from other artists, engage, and thrive.

Although having no specific membership criteria or agenda relating to gender, ZAP's fast-developing membership has given us another insight into a more complicated and also problematic picture of the art world. Our membership is predominantly made up of articulate, ambitious and intelligent women who find they are not being represented in the nationwide but often London-centric art world today.

However, this is hardly surprising. According to a survey by a-n¹ 71% of practising artists are female. This is not reflected in the representation of artists in commercial galleries or in the ratio of graduating students. It is well documented that women make up a majority of cohorts within our Art departments and yet this is not translated into careers as artists within a clearly patriarchal art world. In an instant straw poll by my ZAP co-founder Annabel Tilley of eleven renowned and London-based galleries revealed that of the 290 artists represented by those galleries two thirds were men (203) and only one third (87) were women. Only two pioneering galleries – Danielle Arnaud (16 women/ 3 men) and WW Gallery (6 Women/ 4 Men) – were found to represent more women than men, with Pillar Corrias representing equal numbers. The most imbalanced galleries for male/female ratios (in this straw poll) are among the oldest of established galleries - all run by male gallerists: Hales (14 Men/2 Women), Lisson (41 Men/8 Women) and White Cube (41 Men/14 Women).²

In May 2013, East London Fawcett³ (ELF), revealed the results of their London-based investigation resulting in a wider and more startling picture being collated on the position of women within the arts: "Of 134 commercial galleries in London, which collectively represent 3163 artists, only 31% of the represented artists are women and 78% of the galleries represent more men than women. Analysis of the 100 highest grossing auction performances of 2012 revealed there were no women on the list."

ELF also analysed the list of artists represented by each of the international galleries exhibiting in the commercial section of Frieze Art Fair 2012. "From a survey of 3441 artists across the 135

¹www.a-n.co.uk

² Only 16% of all practising artists in the UK are represented by commercial galleries, according to a-n.

³ <http://elf-audit.com/the-results/>

international galleries represented in the commercial section of Frieze Art Fair 2012 just 27.5% of the artists represented are women. Of the 131 artists nominated for the Turner Prize since its inception in 1984, 41 have been women - constituting 31% of the artists.”

Of course it may be possible that these statistics represent choices based solely on artistic merit. Why there is such a large disparity and imbalance is something that requires further exposure and investigation. Surely the art world cannot be sexist... can it? Kira Cochrane writing in The Guardian: said ‘Because figures like Tracey Emin have defied the statistics, their rare success misleads people into thinking women get an equal shot.’⁴

Arts Writer, Cristiana Bedei says “In spite of the liberal and progressive attitude associated with the art scene in the English capital, women keep struggling within a male-dominated environment, even in public art institutions and commissions.” She cites potential factors as “lack of confidence, motherhood and fear for financial security as crucial factors, combined with the widely acknowledged industry issue of uneven representation from galleries.”⁵

As Bedei cites, gender realities such as motherhood are not taken into account with statistics. Many women will have to take themselves out of their career’s to have children in their late 20’s / 30’s (and in so doing will probably also need a solvent partner – who is probably not an artist). This is a critical time for an artist, male or female, but the odds are invariably stacked against women at this critical point in their career trajectory. No research or statistics would be able to reflect this reality but which no doubt has some small part to play in this disparity of representation. I also doubt this reality is something that art schools are preparing their female students for.

Almost all of our members are not only female but parents and have taken time out of their practice to manage this. It also has to be said at this stage that anecdotally we know of several male artists that also take this time out and compromise their careers to be carers of young children as they are the most flexible party in their relationship. All the artist and curator parents we know, struggle to make it to those all-important networking events such as gallery previews or evening talks, which can be transformative to your career. We were keen to find solutions for artist/parents at ZAP and have addressed some of these issues by planning aspects of our programme to fit in with childcare etc. It is quite surprising how unique we are in this respect; by actually taking into account the logistics of our audience and we are committed to continue in this progressive and exemplary attitude.

In many respects I have come to see my role both personally and as part of an arts organisation as representing the rights of artists to question discrimination as well as wider issues relating particularly to the creative industry. This questioning is not always welcome, and we have certainly felt a resistance (and also discrimination) for asking awkward questions that challenges the status quo. It is incumbent on all of us to collectively ask these questions if we are to have any chance of changing our sector for the better. There are numerous further aspects of the creative industries outside and apart from gender that are also deeply problematic such as fee structures for creative ideas, research, teaching and the production of artworks. These wider forms of exploitation need to

⁴ Kira Cochrane: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/may/24/women-art-great-artists-men>

⁵ Cristiana Bedei, Mind The Gender gap: <http://igor.gold.ac.uk/~co304cb/gendergap/>

be challenged by us as a community. We must realise that we are the creative industry and yet still exploit our own best resource - we must refuse to be complicit in this dynamic.

One of the benefits of not having a defined career structure as creatives, is that you have the power to create your own art world on your own terms and question its conventions; how you might challenge, disrupt and provide alternative solutions for the next generation. "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept" ⁶ Be a pioneer. Be exemplary.

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Biog:

Rosalind Davis is an artist, curator, writer, lecturer, creative consultant and graduate of the Royal College of Art. Davis lectures for a number of universities, galleries and art organisations across the country including the Royal College of Art, Camden Arts Centre, University of the Arts and ArtQuest. As a writer she has contributed to The Guardian, a-n, Artlicks and Jotta. As a creative consultant Davis has worked for arts organisations, charities, independants as well as corporations such as BBC4 & E4. Davis leads regular art tours with ZAP across London and has also provided them for Boston ICA for Arts & Travel, The Whitechapel Gallery and South London Art Map.

Zeitgeist Arts Projects was founded in 2012 by artists Rosalind Davis and Annabel Tilley and is an arts and curatorial organisation. They create support systems to enable artists to realise their creative potential, to continue to learn, exchange dialogue, develop networks and collaborate, framed around their wide ranging activities as well as exhibitions.

Davis has exhibited widely and internationally with commercial, public and artist-led institution and galleries.

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www.ZeitgeistArtsProjects.com

⁶ @Academicsay