

# **At (art)work value: gendered aspects of income and livelihood, the case of women artists in Israel**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines women artists in Israel seeking to make a living from their art. Reviewing the art field as a broad system of economic and social parameters, it places the Israeli art scene in historical and economic contexts, analysing the difficulties women artists from various socio-economic groups face due to their gender and class background, as well as their ethnicity and nationality. The research is based on interviews with women artists and on intersectional analysis. A pioneering project in the field in Israel, it suggests that more research must be conducted in order to examine future issues in the working lives of women artists from various groups and diverse stages of their life-cycle.

## **Introduction**

This article considers various issues related to women artists and the obstacles that prevent them from earning a dignified living in their chosen profession. The first section reviews the art field as a broad system of economic and social parameters, while addressing institutional aspects of the art field in Israel. The second part – based on in-depth interviews conducted with women artists from various socio-economic groups in Israeli society – presents a preliminary analysis of the obstacles faced by women artists when seeking to support themselves through their artwork. These obstacles include gender, class, ethnic, and national facets of oppression. The final section discusses various research possibilities that could aid women artists in the endeavor to support themselves through their art.

The analysis demonstrates that the cultural imagination views such “universal” issues as remuneration and professionalism – regarded as fundamental elements of

the professional work market – as irrelevant to art in general and to women artists in particular. Other factors, including ethnicity, nationalism, and class, further compound the difficulties faced by women artists from various groups, as the discussion also deals with issues relating to agency and empowering development. The interviews conducted with women artists unveil the myth that the art field is characterised by gender equality.

### **The framework of the discussion: The art field**

Under Western praxis, artists were regarded as craftsmen until the Fifteenth century and the Italian Renaissance, their status and income derived from membership of organised, professional guilds. The rise of the French Romantic movement of the Nineteenth century (Kristeller, 1952; Wolff, 1981; Berlin, 1999) – which promoted the idea of “art for art’s sake”, arguing that the arts are an autonomous field within society and that the artist is a genius (Kadish, 2010) – along with the concurrent decline of the patronage system, led to the view of the artist as a unique figure, unlinked to other professions and to the general work market (Zolberg, 1983).

These Romantic and modern conceptions – still firmly ensconced in our own culture – have more recently been challenged by the sociology of art. Illuminating the social context of art, this approach undermines the premise that art is separate from other areas of life. Rather than regarding the artist as an isolated and individual genius, this school stresses creative and earning processes as social acts. These acts demand cooperation between artists, the suppliers of materials and services, distributors, the experts who write and critique artistic creations, and the audiences whom ultimately consume them (Kadish, 2010). One of the most significant members of this school was Pierre Bourdieu who, in calling the world of art a “field”, maintained that art is a field – like all other social fields – structured on the basis of the power relations between agents who fight over resources and the very definition of the rules of its game (Bourdieu, 1983). It thus comprises a site wherein meanings are created – as, for example, determination of the value of work and the commodities within it.

### **Art as a form of income**

Although the cultural imagination regards art and economic as two very different entities – economics lying in the realm of the material and art in that of the “spirit” – scholarly attention has increasingly been drawn in recent years to the complex links between the two concepts (Thorsby & Hollister, 2003; Towse, 2003; McRobbie,

2006; Thorsby, 2010). This process forms a part – *inter alia* and perhaps primarily – of the developments that have occurred in the wake of the global economic crisis, culminating in increased calls across the globe for “social justice.” These calls principally object to the economic domination of the “free” market and the application of this market model to the fields of culture and art. As various forces seek to subject artistic creation to economic logic, a clear trend exists towards compelling art to align itself with economic development and become an integral part of the economic and industrial field. Others contend that even if they are not regarded as making a quantifiable contribution to economic development, art and cultural creativity must be supported as absolute values because culture constitutes a fundamental human need on a par with food, housing, and love. These two views share a focus on the economic aspects of culture creativity in general and of artistic creation in particular.

The tightening link between economy and art demands that research explore the relationship between the two fields (Hotam, 2012). The modern concept of work has become a key notion shaping personal biography and the human condition as a whole. The transition to a neo-liberal corporate economic culture that weakens organisational and national solidarity and responsibility, prefers to ignore structural obstacles and encourages hyper-individualism, has led to the view that every subject is the exclusive author of his/her own life. Thus, the “author” is solely responsible for building a successful career (Lister, 2004). A longitudinal observation of the local art field indicates that this stance has also penetrated into the field of art, supporting the notion that artists are supposed to expand their activity beyond their artistic work. The expectation is that they should also invest in cultivating contacts with the “right” galleries, meeting with people with influence in the field, making use of the media, etc. If artists cannot or will not do these things, the thinking goes, then they themselves are responsible for failing to support themselves through their own work.

An examination of the local art field also reveals that even when artists are prepared to meet all these demands, they are still not guaranteed success or a level of income sufficient to maintain themselves financially. The majority of artists cannot rely on the income they earn from their art alone, either because they are freelancers (a minority of artists join galleries that sell their work) or because the acquisition and collection of art is largely confined to closed and fixed circles. The present economic climate – especially in Israel, a young state without deeply rooted patterns of culture and art consumption in a centuries-old tradition – also mitigates against the large-scale purchase of artworks. The symbolic wealth of being an “artist” also contains an inherent paradox: while the profession is known for its uniqueness and freedom, art is also not believed to constitute “real” work and therefore does not belong to the productive field of economics (Waring, 2007).

The French economist Françoise Benhamou (2003) argues that artists form a heterogeneous and non-standard group within the field of economics. Determining a set of criteria for identifying “the work of the artist”, she stresses the methodological difficulties faced by researchers in this area; the conclusions drawn from empirical studies and the confirmation of hypotheses regarding employment characteristics vary from source to source. The customary tools for analysing employment within the field of art are population censuses – in which artists declare art to be the occupation from which they earn their primary source of income (Santos, 1976; O’Brien & Feist, 1986; Filer, 1995) – and quantitative and qualitative surveys, whose scope is naturally limited. Another major methodological problem derives from the fact that even those who define themselves as artists also work in other jobs as well, some related to their art and others not, thus blurring the boundaries of the distinct professions and making it difficult to trace the distinct income sources of their various activities (Benhamou, 2003).

As a source of employment, the art field is far less stable than others, many artists engaging in what are defined as time-limited projects—whether as private initiatives or commissioned by bodies or institutions (Benhamou, 2003:70). Artists must also be flexible in order to take on other work, even when this does not suit their needs, with short-term contracts also leading to very high rates of unemployment (*ibid.*). Benhamou’s research suggests that only very few artists actually earn a full income from their artwork, the majority – irrespective of their artistic skills and talents – forced into occupations that condemn them to poverty.

Reputation forms a key element of an artist’s ability to earn a livelihood from his/her art, allowing him/her to move from one temporary job to another – the only way s/he can find suitable work (Benhamou, 2003). Paradoxically – and in contrast to the characteristics of the general work market – the multiplicity of work places and high rate of job-change are precisely the factors that allow the artist to earn a living. The longer and more varied the list of employers and temporary projects in an artist’s resume, the greater chance s/he will have of being offered other paying jobs. In comparison to other jobs in the work market, the importance of a diploma for finding a well-paid job and supporting oneself with dignity is relatively low. An artist can gain the highest and most prestigious academic degrees and still have no work or source of income: or conversely, possess no formal higher education and yet be successful due to his/her contacts, charisma, reputation, etc. (Thorsby & Thompson, 1995).

My familiarity with the Israeli art field suggests that most artists in this country engage in short-term projects, and perceive themselves as independent freelancer workers who determine the type of work they do, what it consists of, the pace at which they work, and the amount of energy they invest in it. While this gives them a large measure of occupational freedom and flexibility, it can also restrict the range of jobs – in the traditional sense by which this term is understood – in which they can engage. Thus,

for example, they find it difficult to work in permanent positions in organisations and institutions, are not always assured of steady work, and may even invest time, money, and resources in artistic projects that yield no financial remuneration.

In light of the many risks which lie in this path, it must be asked why so many people continue in this profession. Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie (2006) argues that recognition is one of the most important aspects of being an “artist”, and that many artists will risk financial uncertainty and even poverty in their pursuit of fame and praise. She also contends that artists – both male and female – are far more devoted to “self-realisation” than in the past, due to the structure of the neo-liberal economic market and the emphasis placed on individualisation. At the same time, self-realisation is especially attractive to those who have faced obstacles in the work market in general and the art field in particular – usually the result of being a member of an excluded minority group, such as women and ethnic minorities (McRobbie, 2008).

### **Institutional aspects in the art field**

The term “cultural policy” describes the activity taken by the State in the areas of art and culture. In Israel, allocation of resources to and support of the arts is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and Sport. The primary efforts of the ministry are directed towards the determination of budgets to various art bodies. To date, relatively few studies have examined the subject of cultural policy in Israel, and there is still the need for the in-depth analysis of the data on this subject. One of the most prominent studies is that undertaken by Tal Feder and Tally Katz-Gerro (2010), which explores the policy of resource allocation to the performing arts in Israel. Their findings indicate that the majority of those who enjoy the benefits of resources invested in this field are members of the middle and upper-middle classes. This study joins a growing list of reports published by the “My Heart is in the East” coalition. The latest of these (Ben-Dayana, Keshet, Tabib-Khalif, & Ohayon, 2012) demonstrates that the social elite in Israel enjoy the lion’s share of the budgets allocated to culture, and that cultural activities run by non-hegemonic groups (ethnic, gender, and national minorities, for example) are grossly under-funded in comparison. At the same time, and to the best of my knowledge, no accurate data exists with respect to the circumstances of the artists themselves, research being required into the reciprocal relations between art and organisations, private bodies, and state institutions.

Financial support of artists in Israel comes primarily in the form of prizes and scholarships. This system covers various areas, beginning with government budgeting and ending in private philanthropic initiatives. Awards and stipends are available to artists as they start their careers, even while they are still training – college or university prizes, for example. The Ministry of Culture and Sport sets aside special

budgets for institutions that are legal corporate entities, supporting them through the Israel Council for the Arts and the Culture Authority (Ministry of Culture and Sports—Culture Authority web site, 2013). Non-profits organisations also award prizes and scholarships to artists, and there are also philanthropists supporting the local field.

Both genders compete for the same sources of funding, and to the best of my knowledge no special or separate prizes or scholarships exist for women artists. As early as 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin – in a seminal article adducing the reasons why they have been so few “great” women artists in history – maintained that economic and social factors are often to blame. The materials and equipment necessary have traditionally never been available to women; up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, engagement in art also required the support of a patron and academic art training denied to women. Arguing that women have internalised sexist views, Lochlin also stressed that, even if innately gifted, artists must undergo long and arduous professional training. Thus, as long as women are prevented from establishing any financial, material, or socio-emotional basis of support (because they are expected to devote themselves to their “domestic duties” – and thus remain dependent upon the dictates of a patriarchal society that compels them first and foremost into “female” roles) their status will never improve.

Within the framework of the present article, I interviewed eight women artists from a variety of social backgrounds and locations. The analysis of these interviews reveals both the structural obstacles faced by women artists in Israel as well as the points of strength that derive from their particular positions in society.

### **Gender as an obstacle and as a resource in the art field**

As Virginia Woolf (1929/1981) pointed out, a number of conditions must exist in order for a woman to be able to earn her living from her profession as an artist. In an article entitled “God’s Little Artist” (1981), Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock provide a panoramic survey of the professional status women artists have held throughout Western history, and the necessary conditions for their integration into the profession. The prevailing view that artists are men of exceptional talent was linked to male sexuality and potency, with the term “artist” becoming associated with exclusively male parameters; the “female artist”, a woman who produced inferior work – still-life paintings, for example – would never reach the true greatness of male genius (1981).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the status of women artists is not only dependent upon the power relations existing in the art field, but is also influenced by much broader contexts relating to the very principles of the culture and the work market that regards men and women in terms of gender binaries.

Another stance understands the art profession as an unstable field that, rather than constituting “true” work, is only suitable as a hobby. According to this notion, the fact that society merely expects women artists to devote themselves to their homes and families allows them to find self-expression in hobbies or contribute to the family income by providing a “second income.” This relative advantage, however, which appears to open possibilities to women in the art field, also contains a disadvantage – namely, the expectation that women will work as volunteers, for no payment. Artist Shira Richter draws attention to this point very clearly in her interview:

“There is a public and personal view that women don’t need to be paid for what they enjoy doing. Like other “women’s work,” engagement in art must be done as a volunteer activity because it’s work for the soul, a therapeutic matter. Artistic professions are regarded as being for women in any case – and it’s our fault that we choose such a profession” (Richter, 2013).

Richter associates the economic reality of modernity – and in particular neo-liberalism – with the art field and the ways in which art is created. Her observations correspond with the findings of scholars of employment studies Damian Grimshaw and Jill Rubery (2007), who illustrate how employers in the global neo-liberal economy assume that women do not need to be paid for work that comes “naturally” to them.

In surveying the Israeli art field, it is important to recall that the roots of its modern history lie in techniques of artistic creation founded on a gender basis. This was evident in the very first art academy established in the country – Bezalel (Hinsky, 1997). As art historian Ruth Markus (2008) has demonstrated, until the 1980s women artists in Israel were primarily regarded as housewives and only then as plastic artists. Cultural researcher Yael Guilat (2006) argues that in the 1990s, a dramatic watershed occurred in the way that women artists were viewed and the legitimacy that their engagement in this profession was accorded. This decade witnessed the emergence of the idea that women could be professional artists in precisely the same way as men. At the same time however, Guilat asserts that numerous obstacles still lie in their path because the traditional conservative gender discourse remains alive and well in the local art field and Israeli society in general.

Today, the systematic institutional barriers that prevented women from gaining an education and profession that Nochlin pointed out (2006) no longer exist, with some scholars even contending that the reverse situation exists. The majority of art students in academic institutions in Israel since the end of the twentieth century have been female, and many have succeeded in gaining visibility and exhibitions within the museum framework.<sup>2</sup> Most of the women who choose to become artists and for whom this is their primary occupation nonetheless cannot support themselves solely through their artwork. Thus, for example, even Sigalit

Landau – one of the most well-known and prominent women artists in Israel, with widespread recognition both in the country and abroad – acknowledged in a 2009 interview: “Each of my sculptures costs thousands of dollars ... but I don’t make any compromises.” Asked whether economic security was not important to her, Landau replied:

“I don’t have a business plan. I invest everything I have. I’m not a person who saves ... I get carried away by the work and absorb all the costs. It’s a kind of totality. But it’s harder for women than for men in the art world, and I’ve only recently discovered that! Up until now, I also thought that this was a sort of excuse; ... Today, I understand that the deal women get is totally different, that somehow women are responsible not only for their art but also for their children, the father’s kids, their homes, and everything around them.” (p. 43)

Landau is frustrated not only by an economic and work situation within which she cannot earn a living from her profession, but also by her inability to dedicate sufficient time and energy to her art because she also has to fulfil the domestic duties imposed on her as a woman. At the same time, she also draws attention to the demand that artists also be good businesswomen.

Artist Shira Richter became acutely aware of the gender challenges after she gave birth to her twins. The need to take care of two babies prevented her from seeking work outside the house, so she decided to make use of her immediate environment in creating her art. In an exhibition that examined the need to combine her identity as a mother with her professional identity, she observed:

“The initial period of caregiving for a baby is called “maternity leave.” According to the calculation system of the OECD, raising children and running a family have no economic value and are thus not included in the national budget. In the eyes of the National Insurance Institute, parents are regarded as “not working” ... the images presented in the exhibition were photographed during the activities linked to taking care of the children. Hundreds of thousands of hours of invisible work that have no public, economic, or national value ... At a certain point in the day, for the millionth time, when the sun’s free rays burst through the blinds, suddenly something else reveals itself to me. The light that fell on the pacifiers and silicon teats turns them into different, playful objects that look as though they have become jewels, crowns, precious metal, a distinctive fabric—not just ordinary, day-to-day objects. I took these “epiphanies” as a sign of their true value, the real value of this work.” (Richter, 2011)

Photographing the items artistically, she presented them in “spectacular” form in an exhibition that won wide public acclaim (Figure 1).





*Figure 1: Shira Richter, Untitled (from the project "Invisible Invaluables"), 2011.  
Illuminated photo, 120 x 84 x 10 cm.*

Her piece from 2011 undermines the patriarchal social views that refuse to regard parental duties as real work, maternal care considered an undertaking of love and thus not deserving of financial recompense. A parallel exists between the cultural construction of maternal care based on love as the essence of motherhood and between art production, which is likewise created from the passion embedded in the artist's personality: Neither are recognised as "work" by the hegemonic discourse, and thus are not worthy of remuneration.

The traditional division of labor according to gender which Landau and Richter refer to is also clearly manifested in contemporary studies conducted in Israel (Frenkel, 2008). The art field places an additional cultural obstacle in the path of women, however – namely, limiting them to the subjects that are supposedly acceptable for artistic creativity. As Richter notes, art that addresses motherhood from a critical feminist perspective is not considered fitting and therefore will not sell and bring its creators income:

"With respect to institutional support, I face even more obstacles than other women artists because of the subjects in which I engage. The contents of my work lead

committees to reject it. This happens less abroad, perhaps, but here I'm really ignored. Today, I only submit work to really big, international centers. All these submissions demand a huge investment and hours of work. And in most cases I don't win any funding. And in Israel, most of the committees are composed of men. If there are women, they're what I call "vanquished women"—i.e., vanquished by patriarchy and its values, and they don't understand why my art, which deals with the status of women as mothers—and especially that of artists who are mothers—needs to be supported or why I should be given funding for making such works. In addition, those who are supposed to buy the works—the collectors—are almost always men, who have a completely opposite discourse to mine, a male discourse. They won't buy feminist art like mine [laughs] ..." (Richter, 2013)

### **Class and art**

In addition to gender, women artists also face obstacles related to social class and different levels of access to monetary resources. Throughout history, artists have been in need of patrons to support them (Haskell, 1980; Sinclair, 1990). Today, circumstances have changed and women with private means are not supported solely by the meagre resources at the disposal of governments, but can use family resources to further their art. Two of the artists I interviewed alluded directly to this factor:

"Earning a living from my profession, from my art, is a very sore point. One of the most important subjects is the issue of choice. People always accuse artists: "But you chose to do this." I didn't want to be an artist at all, it's actually the last thing I would have chosen to be. I started on my professional path when I was abroad and I already knew that I could make money in all sorts of well-paying jobs—such as advertising. I saw myself as a career woman, with a suit and designer briefcase who went to the office every morning. But although I tried to escape from becoming an artist, that's what I became. I don't think I'm a great financial success and I'm very frustrated ... The only reason I could give art a chance as a professional job was because I had money—an inheritance from my grandfather, of blessed memory, and rather than investing it in an apartment, like most people do, I decided to give myself a year to depend on it, to work carefree to see whether I could make a career. If I hadn't had that money, I don't know if I could have done it. People who don't have some money put aside, it's virtually impossible for them to do this. They have to give it up very quickly." (Richter, 2013)

Ora Ruven made a similar observation, asserting that in addition to her artistic talent, her secure financial situation was helpful in becoming a successful artist:

“My turn to art came about as a result of the fact that I had the freedom to devote myself to it—i.e., the economic freedom. After I finished raising my children, and after my partner had become a significant breadwinner, I felt that I could stop bringing home my modest earnings. I turned to art as a hobby and it became a real profession. I discovered that I was an excellent artist. The more well-known I developed into the art world, the more important it was to me to gain exposure and be exhibited. But it was very difficult to find a way into the gallery scene because of the dearth of showing space. The galleries also tended to exhibit the same artists over and over again. At that time I planned to rent a studio, but eventually my partner recommended that I simply buy one, as an investment. Over the course of time, and due to the fact that I wasn’t gaining much public exposure, I created a space in the studio that I used as a gallery, where I exhibited my own and other people’s work. It became a very successful venture, lots of people coming to the exhibitions—to the point where I was forced to stop using the space as a studio because I couldn’t find any peace and quiet to work in. So I rented another space to work in, somewhere close. So in addition to the gallery I was also renting a studio, where I was working and creating. Eventually, I was spending much more money than I’d ever thought I would.” (Ruveny, 2013)

Ruven goes on to comment on the money she hoped her works would make:

“Because I come from a financially secured position I’m supposedly not interested in whether I sell a lot or not, because I don’t need the money. But I do find myself interested in selling my work: one of the criteria for recognition in the art world is whether I can sell my pieces, because that’s linked to my professional identity, to my feeling of being successful. So even though I’m ostensibly not interested in the money, it still sneaks up from the “back door.” Unfortunately, I don’t sell enough. I have recognition and exposure, but I’d be very happy if I sold more of my pieces, because then they’d be in the hands of the right collectors and exhibited in prestigious places. These are very important items in any resume.” (Ruveny, 2013)

Women who do not come from well-off families face numerous difficulties in becoming professional artists, as artist Smadar Elias observed:

“For my end-of-training project I exhibited several huge photos, the size of two meters. It cost an awful lot of money to print. But I had some financial help, a grant of 1,500 NIS. It didn’t cover all the costs of the project, though. One of the reasons that you don’t see many Ethiopian students like me who continue to work as artists after they graduate is the financial aspect ... I don’t know what my future will be. I’m going to try and find some more funding. I don’t know any

organisations that can help me with this. But the art field, especially in Israel, still isn't very developed, particularly when you're from the Ethiopian community—then it's even harder. And the fact that we're women—I always say: I'm a woman, and an Ethiopian ... [laughs].” (Elias, 2013)

Artist Vered Nissim places the issue of class at the centre of her work, thereby seeking to “give visibility to people who are invisible – the blue-collar workers” (Nissim, 2013). Her parents appear as recurring figures in her pieces – her mother, a cleaner who works at the Labour Federation and her father, a car mechanic – described as simple workers, struggling to survive from day to day and with their hard labour inscribed on their exhausted bodies. The images of the pair, especially her mother, express the feelings of intimacy and love between the family members, together with the values of mutual support in times of financial difficulty and years of struggle. Nissim acknowledges the lack of feasibility of selling artwork that deals with the subject of class and economic inequality and the difficulties of disseminating art considered subversive: “I say to myself, would someone accustomed to exploiting the poor actually buy an artwork in which social inequality is its central topic? Would he buy a piece describing a cleaning lady? It would be like spitting in his face!” (2013).

### **Ethnicity and art**

Ethnicity constitutes a further obstacle to women's ability to support themselves sufficiently from working in the art field. As an example, let us take the exhibition entitled “Black Labour,” shown at the Barbur Gallery in Jerusalem in August 2008. Curated by Mizrahi artist Shula Keshet, she explained the motivations behind the project:

“There are superb women artists in Israel—they simply don't always create art that the Ashkenazi Establishment considers to possess content or meaning. They can be women who don't necessarily “speak” in a language that one would see in museums, women who didn't study at art academies. But they reveal rich life experiences in a wonderful artistic manner. This exhibition gave them a solution to their muted experiences, to their invisibility, while relieving their financial difficulties by offering all items for sale.” (Keshet, 2011)

Keshet chose to exhibit the art works in bee-hive cells, symbolising the cooperation between all the women who had taken part in it and as a metaphor for the feminist vision of collaboration between different women. Each cell housed pieces made of textile, embroidery, clay sculptures, items of food, or colourful woven straw plates created by women of divergent ages and backgrounds with diverse life stories—all accompanied by books and poetry journals (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2: A general view of the “Black Labour” exhibition (curator: Shula Keshet) Barbur Gallery, 2008, mixed media.*

All the pieces were part of what the traditional Western art canon regards as “craftwork.” Rather than the expensive and “noble” materials – such as marble, bronze, and oil colours – of “high” art, they were created from cheap raw materials, and employed techniques like embroidery and knitting.

The exhibition reveals the ethnization process which the pieces underwent, as they do not form part of the Eurocentric art canon or Western values regarded as “sacred” in Israeli terms. From the hegemonic perspective, such works merely constitute folklore objects, and thus can be pushed outside the realm of legitimate art and the definition of “proper” art.

In the spirit of fair trade organisations – according to which all the profits go directly to the labourers – all the pieces exhibited were also for sale.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this collaborative project also challenged some of the fundamental premises held by those within the art field. As Keshet explained, it represents a conscious decision to relinquish hyper individualism characteristic of the capitalist system:

“This is a stance that distances itself from artwork that derives from the ego of a single artist and seeks instead a communal cultural collaboration,



which the Western Establishment does not recognize as a legitimate format. Collaborative art undermines hegemonic attempts to determine various types and hierarchies of art. We are, in fact, trying to draw the center of gravity itself away from the discussion of the value of a piece of art to a broader examination of questions of identity and the processes of creation and power relations in the arts and social field.” (Keshet, 2011)

Artist Esti Alamo-Wexler similarly does not belong to the hegemonic group. In my interview with her, she stressed the difficulties attendant upon her choice to become an artist – a decision she links with the fact that she is “different” from the veteran population in Israel:

“The intercultural path new immigrants are faced with, in light of the Establishment and veteran immigrants, is a very difficult one. It’s also the internal politics of the curators in this field of art ... The women artists who succeed are not new immigrants but those who have already established themselves in the existing discourse, those who correspond with earlier artists and with their colleagues today. True, they have also had to struggle to get where they are, nothing comes easily. But today I understand unambiguously that I am creating something new, my art is part of a discourse that was not here before. I don’t really have a niche, and that’s a problem in relation to my profession. From their perspective, I’m still a new immigrant—and I came from Ethiopia such a very long time ago, in 1984.”

Alamo-Wexler’s art – photographs and video works – combine values and images from various cultures. Many continue to regard her as a “new immigrant” and refuse to classify her work as “Israeli.” She thus has none of the symbolic wealth that artists born in the country, who enjoy a broad network of contacts that help career progression, possess – despite having immigrated thirty years ago. Still being viewed as an “outsider,” she cannot support herself through her art and is forced to work at additional jobs in order to bring in extra income to maintain herself:

“I visit schools across the country, showing my photographed art, and the children are intrigued. They’re hungry for the subject, to see such images, black skinned powerful figures, because they in fact come from the same background as they. I do this through the Ethiopian coordinator, as a paying job. We need a social revolution here, and I think about this in my context: how can I bring this about through my art? How should I mediate my views? ... I mostly present images of strong, beautiful Ethiopian women, and then each one of the pupils will begin to think and believe. And then things will develop and happen towards a deep change.” (Alamo-Wexler, 2010)

Because she is motivated by a deep belief in the need for urgent social change, Alamo-Wexler makes the best use of her need for additional income. Her undermining of the hegemony and its discourses that oppress Ethiopian women is manifest paradoxically by her participation in the teaching profession – identified in the work market as a traditionally “female,” non-subversive occupation. In her work as a teacher, Alamo-Wexler combines broad social messages with feminist messages that focus on the status of women – in particular that of Ethiopian women. She thus serves as a model for the marginalised Ethiopian youth.

### **Nationality and art**

Today, Arab and Palestinian women artists work in an arena dominated by majority-minority relations. This relationship stems from the fact that the local culture was established by Jews within a statehood context, and in accordance with their views and needs. Consequently, the Arab and Palestinian minorities were heavily marginalised, women especially so (Herzog, 2009). The Arab and Palestinian populations are thus prevented from enjoying an equal distribution of resources, and find it extremely difficult to be a part of the decision-making and rule-defining processes (Smootha, 2001).

The dimension of nationality is mostly perceived as an obstacle but sometimes also as a resource, as reflected in the interviews I conducted with Arab and Palestinian women artists. Thus, for example, artist Hannan Abu Hussein observed:

“I don’t have a gallery that exhibits my work. I do everything myself in order to advance my art: I write emails to curators, I submit applications for awards, I disseminate catalogues. There are rich artists who can get paid help, but I really can’t. You need contacts and that takes energy and time ... You have to understand who you should sell to and who isn’t worth selling to, and where you should exhibit your work. I’m not a young artist but I’m still building and establishing my career with care ... Every application I’ve made in the past for grants and awards has been accepted. That’s because I’m a good and interesting artist, but it’s clear to me that we have here what I call the “category.” They like to give to the Arab sector and in particular to Arab women, as though it’s “women who have succeeded against all the odds.” This helps me in the committees: if everything else in my life is difficult, and even very difficult indeed, then at least I can use this to my advantage. I’ve received a lot of prizes over the years. But on the other side, don’t forget, I am an Arab Palestinian woman in the State of Israel. That’s a very complex position: some Palestinians won’t accept prizes if they’re given by the State of Israel—but I do. In the broader world, it’s more difficult for me, because some international curators

won't exhibit my work abroad because I'm as if it were collaborating with the State of Israel—and I lose potential future income because of that.” (Abu Hussein, 2013)

Abu Hussein talks openly about the fact that institutions are willing to support Arab women artists as a “fig leaf.” Her own readiness to accept prizes and funding from the Israeli Establishment comes at a high personal cost.

As a Palestinian woman, Abu Hussein faces additional difficulties:

It's not simple being a Palestinian woman artist because it's a very patriarchal society. My father has refused to support me financially for a long time because it's hard for him to accept that I'm an artist – and use provocative subjects in my art. In our society, we don't relate in the same way to boys and girls, especially if the girls aren't married, like me. My mother is sometimes able to give me some money, but it's not easy for her either, because she's a housewife, she doesn't have any money that she earns by herself, because my father controls all the money. (Abu Hussein, 2013)

Abu Hussein points to the particular difficulties Palestinian women artists face which, for the most part, Jewish women artists from hegemonic groups do not encounter. Her father's refusal to help support her derives directly from her choice of art as a career. She also has to fight harder because she has chosen not to marry. Being able to rely only upon herself financially, she has learned to manage her time and energy:

“I have a structured work day and it's important to me to keep to it. From the morning until the afternoon, I teach in school. From four o'clock until ten, I'm in the studio. Sundays and Fridays I don't teach, so I have longer days in the studio. But it's difficult to only live on around 5,000 NIS a month, I have a lot of expenses—both general life expenses and those linked to the money I spend on materials for my art. So in addition to the money I make from teaching, I also work as a guide in the museum, and on those days I get to the studio later, in the evening. It all needs planning, they're complicated calculations, and it took me a long time to maximize my schedule so that it's optimal. I hope to be able to retire already at 50, and then I'll really be able to take off as an artist, because then, finally, I'll have all the time in the world to devote to my art.” (Abu Hussein, 2013)

### **Integrated aspects of particular positions**

Obstacles and strengths exist simultaneously as women attempt to support themselves as artists. Alongside the difficulties that arise from the lack of Establishment support,



domestic duties, high costs of higher education fees, age, physical limitations, the common social view that artists should not expect to support themselves from creating art, and the concrete reality of not being able to sell sufficient work and the problems of finding enough time to create pieces; positive aspects also exist. Such aspects may include the relative freedom that exists in this profession. In addition, it is interesting to note that – rather paradoxically – the prevalent view that art is not a worthy or sufficient income in fact enables many women to engage in art. Within heterosexual relationships, the release from the yoke of bringing in money when the man is the chief income-providers allows many women artists with families and children to devote their time to this occupation.

When women do not have independent financial means however, they need the help of family or friends. When this does not suffice, they turn to support from the Establishment. Nevertheless, most women tend not to depend on such support because it is not available to them. A quantitative study conducted in 2007 by New Zealand researcher Marilyn Waring indicates that many women artists reported that the majority of their support came from the network of contacts they had developed over the years with other women artists, rather than from support from public bodies or institutions. These bodies, by way of contrast, reject most of the applications made to them by women artists (Waring, 2007).

Waring's study draws attention to the fact that 50% of women artists were told "Art is not a real job," or "In any case it's an occupation that you can't support yourself with dignity" in contrast to 31% of the men (2007). It also evinces that women who asserted their desire to engage in art full-time nevertheless tended to exploit opportunities to improve their professional skills and specialise to a far lesser extent than men – declining to take expensive specialist courses either because these did not fit into the family schedule, or because they had to work full-time at another occupation in order to maintain themselves with dignity. 68% of the women reported that they did not recover the money and expenses they invested in their artwork. 41% reported that they had not created any pieces because they could not afford to buy the raw materials and basic essentials or because they had insufficient studio space at their disposal. 36% reported that they could not engage in art due to routine domestic duties (2007). The need to be flexible and open to a broad variety of jobs also served as an important factor, the terms "survival" and "juggling" frequently cropping up (2007). In addition to cleaners and care assistants, the majority of the women whom Waring interviewed also worked as teachers, secretaries, or administrators. In my present research, a substantial portion of those interviewed similarly reported that they supported themselves by working at other jobs, half of them in teaching positions.

Despite the lack of quantitative data available regarding the field of art and artists in Israel, it would appear to correspond to the broad social systems in

the country that are driven by interests of control. Artists thus not only have to work in complex power fields, but are also controlled by and serve the latter (Dovev, 2009). Women artists live in a world of multifaceted dominance, one of whose faces is the economic factor, which in turn is linked to socio-political and subordination dominance. Economic power takes endless forms and affects women's ability to create – the cost of raw materials and equipment, the time and space to produce artworks, the economic comfort necessary to be able to make time for art, and job security and stability in the occupation. The economic aspect thus imposes its full weight on the possibility of agency, affecting primarily those who do not possess economic power. If we look at additional dimensions, we discover that many artists suffer from triple, if not quadruple, forms of oppression: they are women in a male-dominated society, artists in a neo-liberal economic system, and – if ethnically or nationally marginal – do not belong to the hegemonic group. In light of all these factors, the networks of gender, class, ethnic, and national power relations control the lives of people in general and those of women artists who do not belong to the hegemonic groups in particular.

An analysis of the interviews I conducted indicates that women artists point to a broad range of obstacles that lie in their path, and that they are actively engaged in negotiating the construction of their professional identity and economic possibilities. This study thus suggests considering a multilayered explanation, in which the Establishment, social and personal parameters serve in the understanding of oppressions and empowerment which women artists experience. Some artists are not interested in financial issues because they came from affluent backgrounds and have the economic freedom to produce their art but face obstacles when they try to exhibit their work in commercial or Establishment venues. Others, from unstable economic backgrounds, succeed against the odds and secure broad recognition through their work in the most prestigious galleries – and yet, are unable to sell their pieces at a price that enables them to support themselves with dignity. For some, the fact that they have become mothers affects their ability to devote time to their chosen occupation, preventing them from earning sufficient means to support themselves from their art. For others, ethnic background – in addition to their gender status – has become a major factor hindering their acceptance by the art Establishment and impeding their ability to support themselves through their work. These varied positions promote an approach that seeks to undermine the monolithic category titled “women artists” working in the art field, and stresses the particularism of each person. Herein, the flexibility and fluidity in the status of women artists – each individually in her own specific place – becomes very

significant, highlighting the ways in which each can position herself in the face of possibilities and conflicts when she looks to realise her art and a desire to support herself through her artwork.

The current study is a pioneering project in the Israeli field, and more research is required in order to examine further issues in the working lives of women artists at various stages of their life-cycle. Much thought must be invested in the most appropriate methodology for collecting and processing data regarding the employment of women artists in Israel, as no decisive consensus exists even outside the country in this respect (Thorsby, 1994). Quantitative and qualitative data may be analysed jointly, and use may be made of various feminist methodologies such as institutional ethnography. Amongst the questions that must be asked are the following: is the level of willingness to invest in the profession – despite the low odds of being able to support oneself with dignity – constant over the course of one's life? How do parameters like age, parenthood, physical abilities, and education affect the artists' decision-making processes? What can be done to promote women artists in their pursuit of a dignified livelihood? The examination of such issues may contribute to the formulation of criteria and the establishment of regulations for support by the State and various art bodies. Future studies in the field of the obstacles faced by women who engage in art must exhibit cultural sensitivity and ensure that all groups are properly represented. The voices of different professional women must be heeded when they tell their personal and collective stories, and especially when they suggest ways in which their status can be improved.

## NOTE

- 1 It should be remembered that, during the eighteenth century, the traditional view of the nature of men and women underwent a radical change. Thus, for example, while during the Middle Ages women were portrayed as lustful, in the eighteenth century they were regarded as pure and delicate.
- 2 To the best of my knowledge, no gender-perspective research has ever surveyed the numbers of men and women graduating from higher educational institutions in the framework of academic art studies, no accurate information regarding the proportion of women represented in museums, income scales, direct and indirect female employment tracks, etc., similarly being available.
- 3 For the principles of fair trade, see the report in this issue.

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