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On Being a Female Entrepreneur in the Arts: Comparative Experiences

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The objective of this essay is to explore being female, being an artist and being an entrepreneur. To offer context, I will take the liberty of briefly outlining my experiences with all three, since I am not an arts entrepreneurship educator in the formal sense.

I grew up in the “gastropub” industry with parents who shouldered equal shares of a grueling work schedule. As small business owners, they struggled daily to maintain high standards in the products and service they delivered through innovative cuisine and entertainment in a small rural English community. As a teenager, I competed nationally in equestrian three-day eventing—one of a handful of Olympic sports where women compete against and with men, individually and on teams. The others, at last count, are snooker, rifle shooting, Ultimate and dog sled racing. It was not until I arrived at Manchester University in 1984 to study art history and read Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” as part of a course requirement that I realized there were some areas of life not offering the equal opportunity to which I had been exposed.¹ My privileged and relatively stable upbringing had given me a sense of security about the world that was forced into question. Fast forward to my current life as a university professor. I do not teach art history, but fashion design. I have pursued a lifelong passion for music to the point where I am half of a male/female duo with two albums under our belt and I lend vocals to our university rock band. I also run a program designed to advance the interests and aspirations of female entrepreneurs on and off campus. I own a small consulting business, which supplies technical product development solutions to complex clothing problems. So, it is from this background of culinary/musical/artistic/design/entrepreneurial/female mash-up that I approach this topic.

According to a 2018 SCORE report, the number of women-owned businesses in the U.S. increased by 45% between 2007 and 2016, but during the same period, they steadily accounted for only 4% of the nation’s business revenue.² Research reports such as those compiled by SCORE have documented the reasons for inequality for female entrepreneurs, citing lack of mentorship, which impacts growth and longevity, plus unequal access to financial capital. *The Diana Project*, founded in 1997 to focus on the finances of female start-ups and the “myths about their capabilities, aspirations and strategies,” found that women

¹ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” in *The Feminine and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge 1971), 229-233.

² “The Megaphone of Main Street: Women’s Entrepreneurship Spring 2018,” SCORE, accessed April 15, 2020, https://s3.amazonaws.com/mentoring.redesign/s3fs-public/SCORE-Megaphone-of-Main-Street-Women%E2%80%99s-Entrepreneurship-Spring-2018_1.pdf.

received as much early stage funding as their male counterparts but drastically less in the late stages.³ This raises serious questions. Do women not expand their businesses as aggressively? Did they leave the venture? What are their long-term relationships with investors like? *The Diana Project* team used the term “creative financing” to describe how women approach fundraising. They found that a sample of women entrepreneurs ($n=90$) were more than twice as likely to be successful if they used creative financing options, or what they called “capital raising ingenuity.”⁴ In that study, women’s creative approaches positioned them for rapid growth and investment. Kate Anderson, founder of *IFundWomen*, also advocates for women to look to more creative funding sources, such as crowdfunding for the smaller pots of money to get a project started. Crowdfunding also helps to “... test the market and make sure what you have is viable for your audience.”⁵

The previously mentioned SCORE report found that 80% of female owned businesses had no employees other than the founder, and while 62% of women depended on their business as their sole means of support, they were much less likely to seek funding from outside investors than men, whether through loans or equity funding. For me, this raises more questions. Do women already innately know how to bootstrap by budgeting and balancing household finances? Do they do more asking of friends and family for support? Do they minimize their expenses as much as possible and do more with less? In my role mentoring and motivating young female entrepreneurs as they begin their journey, I have noticed a significant lack of knowledge about capital, how to find it and what to do with it.

On the positive side for the arts, the SCORE report found that women are slightly more likely than men to start a business, and those who do so are slightly more likely than men to start a business in art, entertainment or recreation. In these types of businesses, little difference was found in revenue expectation, hiring forecasting, business longevity and overall reported success between men and women. It appears the arts offer women an equal and positive avenue into an entrepreneurial career path. Art as an entry for women to assert their voices and bring about change is not new. Emmeline Pankhurst, pioneer of English women’s suffrage, began her career as an interior decorator. She opened her first shop, named “Emerson & Co.,” in London in 1886, selling a variety of home decor products. She relocated the shop to Manchester and remained in business until 1905, after which time she devoted herself to leading the women’s suffrage movement.⁶

Research offers multiple historical and ongoing challenges and opportunities for the study of entrepreneurship, some of which are gender-based. For this short discussion, I wanted to find out how successful women approach arts venture creation, management and growth. My method was to interview two women deep into their entrepreneurial journeys who had established notoriety in their respective fields. Both created and own their brands and the art stories within. In other words, they can be seen to have “made it” in their areas of the industry. Interviewee A is a culinary artist, writer and television

³ Elizabeth J. Gatewood et al., “Diana: A Symbol of Women Entrepreneurs’ Hunt for Knowledge, Money, and the Rewards of Entrepreneurship,” *Small Business Economics* 32, no. 2 (2009): 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵ Kate Anderson, personal communication, 5/20/2020.

⁶ Miranda Garrett, “Interior Decoration and Domesticity in the Women’s Penny Paper/Woman’s Herald,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 51, no. 2 (2018): 289-306.

celebrity. Interviewee B is a world-famous musician whose work is genre-crossing. My conversations were guided loosely by questions about being female and an artist, mentoring, tough challenges and their approaches to business management. The following represents a summary of common themes for further thought and discussion.

Labeling as an Entrepreneur

Direct translation of the French word *entrepreneur* is “to undertake,” and as appropriated into the English language, is class-less, gender-less (although the literal female French version would be *entrepreneuse*), location-less and genre-less. Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832) is credited with emphasizing the creation of value: “The entrepreneur shifts economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher productivity and greater yield.”⁷ Bonin-Rodriguez addresses artists’ conflict with the notion of “artist entrepreneurship” in his discussion of a 2003 University of Texas-Austin panel of female hip-hop artists, dance artists and theatre artists.⁸ The panelists offered no resistance to the term entrepreneur, yet did not “engage it directly” and were willing to be seen as entrepreneurs if it helped explain to audiences the ways they have built their careers. Bonin-Rodriguez goes on to suggest that the word entrepreneur “loads differently for different people.”⁹ Furthermore, “...if entrepreneurship is to be the rubric under which artists are trained and organized, then its definition must be specifically developed and, much like the business and economics definitions, incrementally determined.”¹⁰

Interviewee A’s response to the question of her comfort level with the label “entrepreneur” was that she sees herself as a writer, chef and rural entrepreneur. “I consider myself a creative...My individual approach is informed by my creative side.” She considers the “rural piece” to be very important because it relates to where she grew up and learned about the importance of farming and the local food supply chain, which plays an important role in her work. “My liability has never been being female—it’s always been being rural.” She does not think about being a “female” entrepreneur, other than links to motherhood, which are discussed more fully below.

Interviewee B’s response was closer to Bonin-Rodriguez’ findings. She sees herself as “OK with that label...if it helps...I am an artist full-time” with an entrepreneurial side born out of a need to engage with the commercial world because that is how artists live in the system. As an entrepreneur, starting a corporation and having payroll is a necessity to ensure that the art will live and thrive. Interviewee B continues: “We have made the art consumable and there is that compromise; it’s give and take.”

In my work with the student female entrepreneurship group, the concept of the entrepreneur label has never come up as a point of discussion. However, evaluations participants complete after events rarely mention the word entrepreneur. They list “business-owner,” “creative,” “storyteller” and “individual” when giving feedback. In addition, participants appreciate hearing from “real founders.”

⁷ William J. Byrnes and Aleksander Brkić, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Arts Management* (New York & London: Routledge, 2019), 87.

⁸ Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, “What’s in a Name? Typifying Artist Entrepreneurship in Community Based Training,” *Artivate* 1, no. 1 (2012), 9-27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

Business and Artistic Sustenance

Interviewee A approaches the business aspect of her art by considering the core of how the business integrates with her creativity. She stated there is a storytelling component that represents the strength of her business. "That's the thing we do best, and we use that strength to move forward." This business development also mirrors how her role in the company changed. When things began, she saw herself as a chef, which was the role she played in her primary business, but her entrepreneurial role evolved over the years and storytelling was the "guiding principle" behind that evolution.

Interviewee B felt that the meshing of her art and business is a collaborative process. She cannot say whether this stems from being female; however, she was raised in an all-female household and believes that environment may have affected her process. The interviewee mentioned that her art is better ". . . the less her ego is in it." She is not interested in having just her ideas in the art, but in bringing people together to create something beautiful.

An interesting takeaway from discussions about business matters was that both women transitioned immediately from the first person to the third person as soon as the words "company," "business" or "operations" were mentioned. The words "us" and "we" were substituted for "I" and "me" as soon as the collective entity of the business was approached.

In our student support group, the question of how to sustain a business has come up in conversations and event evaluations. Students are excited to learn from speakers about "business struggles," the "business process" and "new information from outside companies." They have also consistently asked the organization to hold events "that give lessons on business development."

Support Systems

Interviewee A felt that early access to skills, knowledge and resources on the business side of creativity is incredibly important. She did not have access to these initially and wished that these types of resources were available. Her current support structures as a rural entrepreneur are also lacking, because she is "...doing something that not a lot of people are doing. I feel like I miss those support structures. Whether they be community, restaurateurs, even just friend circles. I definitely think it makes our experience very different and often lonely." She would recommend to early-stage entrepreneurs the following: "Don't be afraid to reach out to people who are smarter than you. Or bring people in on your team that are smarter than you."

Interviewee B felt that it is important to give back and encourage other female entrepreneurs. The way she does this is by hiring other women, giving advice, asking other musicians to open for her yet respecting the art first. Her commitment to giving back is based on her upbringing but also the endemic challenges she sees in the music industry: "I always had strong women in my life and felt incredibly supported. If women are going to succeed, they need to be visible, as managers, engineers, etc. It's important to give back to all the hands that helped you up." This sentiment was echoed in a BBC interview

with the band Haim.¹¹ Danielle, the middle sister of the three band members, observes the inequalities of the music industry: “Every time we walk into the studio, the engineer is a man. . . there’s no equal opportunity.”

The greatest strength of the female entrepreneurship group that I direct lies in the support system that is generated and sustained throughout our programming and frequent contact with female entrepreneurs throughout the community. Feedback from event evaluations support this: “I loved hearing from women who started businesses,” “I enjoyed talking about and listening to how we each interpret self-care,” “(I loved) seeing other people’s perspectives and sharing ideas,” “I liked hearing relatable stories from other women,” and “I enjoy talking about the different issues and hearing how others feel and what they experience.” The way in which we try to communicate the information and maintain intimacy with small group situations is also well-received. Participants at events talk about appreciating “the warm and welcoming atmosphere” and “the small feel.” One thing we include in our support structure is a multi-generational perspective, including a group of retired entrepreneurs who have made a commitment to give back to younger generations. Participants at these events appreciate the “inter-generational focus” and the “wonderful mentors for our community.”

Conversations We Need to Have

I asked the interviewees if there was anything that should be addressed which, in their opinion, is not being addressed on the topic of women and arts entrepreneurship. Their responses were swift and unequivocal: we are not addressing the planning and quality of personal life with a partner and children.

Interviewee A felt that we are failing to address the sacrifices being made when setting out to start a family, and that cultural expectations (not entrepreneurial ones) continue to be different for women than they are of men. This sentiment is echoed in the literature. Nochlin discussed how the total commitment to artistic careers throughout history did not fit with female cultural expectations.¹² She explained how dedication to a single skill was masculine and that the female role was to plan and execute multiple domestic tasks. Therefore, commitment to a single task was seen as unfeminine. Miller discussed the construct of the “transformative genius” where working in isolation was not socially acceptable for women but more easily excused in men: “When we imagine artists as unpredictable creative geniuses, we implicitly imagine men.”¹³

Interviewee B responded that, along with training related to art and business, young entrepreneurs must address how to have a fulfilling personal life. Her specific points included “...if you have a partner who is also an artist, whose art is going to be ‘first?’” – especially when children are part of the equation. She mentioned: “Often we find a partner and get married, but you need to figure out if they share your values;

¹¹ Mark Savage, “Haim: ‘We’d be Taken More Seriously If We Were Brooding and Aggressive,” *BBC*, accessed 5/22/20, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52736756>.

¹² Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹³ Diana Miller, “Gender and the Artist Archetype: Understanding Gender Inequality in Artistic Career,” *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 2 (2016): 124.

make work/life decisions. These decisions aren't clear cut and people are afraid to talk about it. Whose art is going to be the most important? Because [with children] your creating is curtailed and you need to support each other." Literature suggests that, for musicians especially, the rehearsal, touring and recording schedules required can be detrimental to family stability. Miller reports how time pressures can create structural conflicts between art, domestic responsibilities and childcare—inconvenient work times, prolonged projects and travel.¹⁴ For many "side-hustle" arts entrepreneurs, these challenges may be in addition to a full-time job.

There is a growing opinion that many women who are also mothers can attest to motherhood actually being great preparation for the rigors of running a small business and preparing to raise capital. Hitha Palepu, founder, blogger, author and former pharmaceutical executive, explains that women have "... business powers by virtue of motherhood that are perfectly translatable to success as an entrepreneur."¹⁵ Other mothers have mentioned how the daily routines of motherhood—living with uncertainty, pivoting when necessary, dealing with highs and lows and relying on the support of others—mimic the realities of entrepreneurship.

Room for Improvement /Ways We Can Help

In conclusion, I have drawn on evaluations and informal conversations with the student female entrepreneurship group participants to provide suggestions for paths forward:

- We need to engage a more diverse set of role models and speakers. This has been apparent from discussions and event requests and evaluations. One of the fastest growing demographic entrepreneurial groups with impact are women of color, whose companies account for eight in ten new women-owned firms.¹⁶ Diverse approaches and perspectives to the conversation are crucial for student engagement.
- In our discussions, students indicated a need to include more humor, passion and interesting stories. Our membership reacts well to speakers and storytellers with "relatable advice and examples" and appreciated one of our female guests as an "inspiring speaker, especially for college students."
- We need to provide more mentoring. Students suggest "a mentor program where you can get matched with a mentor in your field" and with "entrepreneurs and community leaders."
- We need to encourage self-promotion of our work. Miller discusses how self-promotion is problematic for women.¹⁷ As an organization, we can do better with self-promotion, as most of our participants hear about our events through word of mouth.

¹⁴ Miller, "Gender and the Artist Archetype," 122.

¹⁵ Hitha Palepu, personal communication, 5/20/2020.

¹⁶ "Women, Especially Women of Color, are Fueling Business Startup Activity," American Express, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/women-especially-women-of-color-are-fueling-business-startup-activity>.

¹⁷ Miller, "Gender and the Artist Archetype," 124.

- We need to impart knowledge within a context. I take very seriously this comment from an event evaluation: "Make sure to provide context behind presentations. People love context."

Even though female artists have always participated in the creation and cultural exchange of good and services, it appears that their paths have been unique in some ways. The growth of musicians who took control of their creative output such as Joni Mitchell, or early pioneers like Alice Waters who did the same thing with the food and dining industry, has occurred relatively recently. Are the structures built for arts entrepreneurs effective, nurturing and safe for women, or do alternative approaches need to be considered?

Many of the points raised in this essay are, I suspect, gender-neutral and gender-embracing. This is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of the "differences" between female and male arts entrepreneurs, simply a way of getting some ideas out into forums of discussion and channels of change. I will leave you with Interviewee A's response to one of my rather naive questions about women being perceived in the way they want to be perceived. She responded, "Is anyone in the creative field being perceived the way they want to be perceived?"

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