

The Parent Trap

What are the economics involved when artists have children?

To be or not to be a parent? It's a question many people ask themselves at some point in their lives. Whatever the answer, artists seem to treat the decision as a private matter, best left out of their art works. Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–9) provided an early exception, which also confirmed that childbirth is more difficult for mothers than fathers, even after labour.

My private conversations with women artists alerted me to other setbacks – not just physical and psychological. In contrast to father-artists, mother-artists may suffer economically, professionally and even socially from having children. One acquaintance confided that she was ostracized in art school for asking why there was no day care in the academy, although its flexible operations could have accommodated such services more easily than, say, an office or a shop. Another was warned during pregnancy – from male and female colleagues alike – that her child would put a rash end to her career.

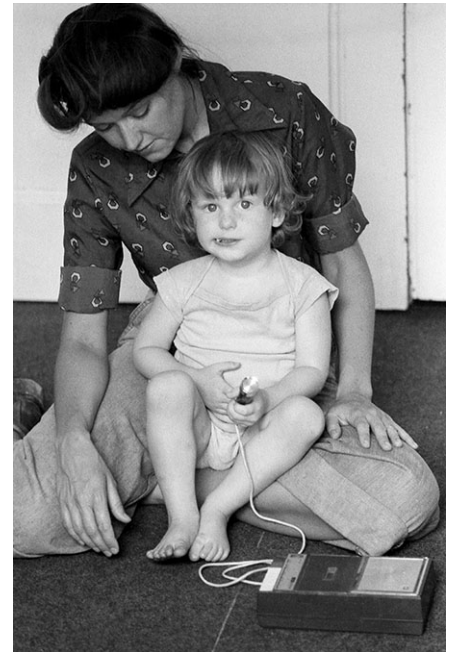
Hard to believe? Alas, these grim tales somehow echo with a report from Sweden's Konstnärsnämnden (Arts Grants Committee), which manages grants and monitors artists' living conditions with respect to the welfare state's policies, such as promoting gender equality. *A Survey of Artists' Income from a Gender Perspective. Economy, Work and Family Life* – completed by Marita Flisbäck in 2010 and only recently translated into English – examines the lives of 21,185 Swedish artists active in seven fields: theatre, music, dance, writing, film and musical theatre, as well as our field of concern: visual arts and design, which includes 6,045 artists (3,406 women and 2,639 men). The gender split here – 56 percent women to 44 percent men – documents a radical improvement since 1975, when less than one third of all Swedish artists were women.

Such good news in the report is tinged by harsher realities though, which start with the impact of finances on family life. Both women and men in visual arts and design earn about

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Mary Kelly and son, recording session for *Post-Partum Document*, 1975

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the same average annual income – which happens to be the lowest among the seven art fields. Yet this apparent equality may simply reflect the fact that gender has little-to-no impact on the salaries of low-income occupations. Moreover, the equality magically disappears with professional and commercial success: 61 percent of male artists in visual arts and design exceed the top annual income bracket of 400,000 SEK (£38,000), against only 39 percent of women.

What about children? The percentage of women and men in visual arts and design with no children is about the same: one in three have none. Ditto for having two. Yet having only one child was more common among women (24 percent) than men (19 percent). As in all of the other art fields, men were more likely to have three or more children: 18 percent versus 13 percent of women. Overall, it would seem that the financial implications of having children impact less on men than on women. ‘Although Visual Arts & Design proved to be a group with limited economic resources,’ writes Flisbäck, ‘the percentage of men with three or more children in this category did not differ appreciably from the corresponding figure for men in the total population (or 19 percent).’ While Flisbäck cites no figures, women are, she claims, more likely to abandon their careers after having children. No wonder. According to her research, a freelancing mother who invests more time in her job than her kids is more likely to be viewed as socially deviant, even when the father agrees to share parental leave.

Education doesn’t help – for finances or family. Whatever their profession, Swedish women earn less overall than Swedish men, although women are better educated, and women artists are among the best educated, as measured by years spent studying and diplomas earned. Yet in terms of education, the gender income gap is greatest among artists who have completed post-graduate studies; women’s median income is 77 percent of men’s. Here’s a titbit to make you cringe: in the general population, this gap is greatest among Swedes with no more than nine years of primary education (women make only 70 percent of their male cohort’s income). Staying in school longer can lead any artist to postpone starting a family. Yet for women artists, this postponement can mean bearing fewer children, due to the shorter fertility time left after earning a diploma. In light of such statistics, day care services in the art academy seem nothing short of necessary. And what Flisbäck calls ‘asymmetric mate selection’ – whereby heterosexual men tend to choose partners who are less educated (as well as less established, younger and earning less) than themselves – may make any

heterosexual woman think twice about grad school.

‘Even if professionally practicing artists cannot be considered to form an economically strong group,’ writes Flisbäck, ‘they nevertheless possess cultural resources and educational capital that, for the men among them, may constitute positive capital that makes having more children possible but may not function the same way for the women.’ You might be thinking what I was as I read the report: this is Sweden, the land of legislated gender equality and paid parental leave for both fathers and mothers. If things are so bad there, they can only be worse elsewhere.

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