

Processes Stimulating Dynamic Cooperation in Female Art Groups. A Qualitative Research Report

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ABSTRACT

The subject of the article is the activity of female artistic groups, with a particular focus on development and its dynamics. The aim of the research was to reconstruct the experiences and meanings that professional artists attribute to functioning in such groups. The analysis of the activities of such groups is part of the study of the environmental aspect of creativity. For the purposes of the article, qualitative research was conducted using the technique of free interviews with representatives of four artistic groups representing fine arts, cooperating in Łódź/ Poland. The artists represent different generations.

INTRODUCTION

Female artists rarely appear throughout art history. Women's art gains significance only in the 20th century, which naturally corresponds to the feminist/suffrage movement and women obtaining full public rights, which among others included the right to vote. A change in legal status meant better education and employment opportunities, but most importantly higher individual self-esteem and a sense of freedom and agency. The question arises: do women tend to form groups apart from their common struggle for independence? How do female artists combine the need for independence typical of creative personalities with the necessity for cooperation? (Gombrich, 2002; Dziemidok, 2002; Talar, 2011; Chadwick, 2015).

Art group analysis belongs to the realm of research into the environmental aspect of creation, whose assumptions surpass the paradigm of individual genius – a single author of scientific discoveries, artistic achievements due to the individual's own personal and cognitive predispositions, which is characteristic of Western culture. According to researchers who adopt systemic and relational creativity models, the explanation of motivation, cognition and artistic activities cannot be limited only to psychological factors, but must also include the realm of socio-cultural values. Indeed, in science and art, the creative environment is of significant importance, particularly with regard to the following mechanisms: 1) social exchange and support (such as transfer of knowledge, experience, rules of conduct and personal interaction); 2) social communication (mechanisms of inspiration, imitation, opposition); 3) adoption of common values (common or similar norms concerning activity; operating principles); 4) efficient creative operation (organisational measures, cost distribution, promotional activities). The cooperative nature of creative activity is usually attributed to scientific work, but art history is also a history of groups and manifestos (surrealists, impressionists) (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihaly, 1996; Stasiakiewicz, 1999; Sawyer, 2006, 2007; Lebuda, Glăveanu, 2019). Rottenberg (2005) perceives groups as “talent incubators”. Sawyer (2010) explores the relationship between individual and group creative activity, particularly the mechanisms of idea generation (*collaborative emergence*) in small creative groups (theatre and jazz). Experimental psychological research studies aim to determine whether a group is more creative than individuals working separately, and the results are ambiguous. Group thinking has many advantages, but it also carries many risks like the harmful effect of authority (Nęcka, 1994; Paulus, Brown, & Ortega, 1999).

METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

While planning a research project one must take several elements into consideration - the conceptual framework, the aim, research and interpretation methods - all of which are structured around the key element which is the research question (Flick, 2010). Therefore, the following questions were formulated to initiate the research process:

- What encourages/induces women to form groups?
- Which areas does the cooperation involve in female art groups?

The aim of the study was to reconstruct the experiences and meanings which women - professional artists - attribute to their work in female art groups. The open questions formulated above required: first, a purposive selection of cases/research sample; secondly, an adequate manner for empirical data gathering which would make it possible to elicit each subject's perspective and system of meanings, and as a result build a theory based on qualitative data (Konecki, 2000; Olesen, 2009; Flick, 2010; Miles, Huberman, 2000).

Research participants

One of the main aspects of any research study is the selection of the research sample. Flick (2010) suggests that a qualitative approach warrants selection of cases in a manner that enables the researcher to achieve the most effective exploration of the studied phenomenon. Therefore, while choosing the test group, based on the subject matter and aims of the study, the authors employed two main criteria plus a third, additional one, which all of the Artists included in the study met:

- 1) Activity for female art groups. The artistic activity of all women in the test group has two aspects: an individual (individual creative work which often culminates in solo exhibitions in Poland and abroad) and a group one (resulting from cooperation in art groups). Each group is briefly described below;
- 2) Being a professional artist interpreted here as:
 - Holding a university degree and/or professional course certificate confirming one's professional art education;
 - Regular confrontation of one's art with the artistic environment and the public by displaying one's works at solo and group exhibitions as well as participating in professional art contests and reviews;
 - Obtaining regular income from one's artistic activity, e.g. the sale of one's artworks (Szmidt, 2013; Kunst, 2016).
- 3) Availability of the interviewees. In literature, selection based on the *availability of the interviewees* is also referred to as the *convenience criterion* (Patton, 2002). The choice of such an additional criterion in the selection process of the interviewees was dictated by the economic aspect of the study. Due to the difficulty in conducting the study on subjects who meet the basic criteria, which are connected with the subject matter, we/ the authors decided to focus on artistic groups associated with their place of residence - Lodz, Poland. Also, one of the authors belongs to an art group included in the study and actively works for the benefit of the artistic community. Her personal contacts significantly facilitated the process of test group selection and obtaining consent to participate in the study from her fellow artists.

The group activities of the female artists involve four female art groups:

- **The PLUSMINUS** group formed in 2007¹ includes nine female artists with different perspectives on art and distinctive artistic personalities. The art involves easel painting, watercolours, gouache, drawing, design and textile art. In the 1970s and 80s they graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz²;

¹ <http://www.galeriasztuki.wloclawek.pl/wystawy/archiwum/98-2012/sala-glowna/323-grupa-plus-minus-malarstwo-rysunek-tkanina>

² About the nature of things – exhibition of paintings by GRUPA PLUSMINUS (exhibition catalogue - Galeria Sześciu Obrazów, Ośrodek Kultury Górna, Łódź, 14.09 - 24.10.2018), introduction by Maria Kępińska.

- **The 0+ group** (Type O positive group) is formed by three women: a graphic artist, a photographer and a painter, who graduated from different schools: the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and in Poznan and The Polish National Film, Television and Theatre School in Lodz. A common feature of their artistic expression is a focus on humanistic values, creation of pure art (interpreted as a form of creation whose final products are works which, apart from their aesthetic and communication value, have no practical application) and attention to the craft itself³. In 2015 the artists created their first group project – *Istność (Utterness)* displayed among others in the National Museum in Gdansk, Poland, and in the Bogenberg District Museum, Bavaria, Germany.
- The **Od... Do...** group (The From... To... Group) is formed by four artists. For years they have worked individually in the area of painting and drawing, sculpture, photography and graphic art. The group's name emphasizes the wide range of creative attitudes/perspectives, art disciplines and techniques employed by its members – from a classical understanding of the craft to a search for new means of expression and experimenting with the language of art. Their 2018 exhibition inaugurated the group's activity⁴;
- **Frakcja** (Fraction) is an intergenerational group of artists and art critics. At the moment it includes nine artists who work with different visual media (installation, performance, video-art, painting, sculpture). The group operates within the Art and Documentation Association. It was formed as a result of cooperation between female artists from Lodz and those from the German Association Endmorane on the project "Rozpakować Walizki/Koffer Auspacken" ("Unpack the suitcases") in 2015. The aim of the group is to promote women's art through exhibitions of the group's works as well as meetings and discussions about the place of women in visual arts.

To sum up, the study included the opinions of 18 artists aged 40-72, from various areas of visual arts: painting, drawing, photography, sculpture and installation, video, multimedia, performance and design – textile art.

Research instruments – leading and supplementary techniques

The authors employed qualitative research instruments. Data were gathered mainly through casual/free interviews, a choice dictated by their effectiveness in supplying information relevant to the subject matter of this study, but also by the margin of freedom and flexibility it allows in the course of the research process. A casual interview enables the researcher to concentrate on certain aspects of the artists' professional experience. On

³ http://bwasieradz.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=263:w-dniu-6-marca-2015-r-odbyo-si-otwarcie-interdyscyplinarnej-wystawy-zatytuowanej-istno&catid=1:latest-news&Itemid=50

⁴ <https://uml.lodz.pl/kalendarz/wydarzenie/oddo-wystawa-w-galerii.../printPage/>

the part of the interviewer, however, the use of this type of interview does not imply a complete arbitrariness, nor does it eliminate the need for prior preparation and adaptation of the interview's design and question order to the dynamic of each conversation. Additionally, the study includes data obtained from group exhibition catalogues and websites which document the artistic activity of the groups in question. The contents of these materials provide a means of triangulation and supplementation of the data obtained in the course of direct interviews which constitute a framework for the analysis of the investigated phenomenon (Wengraf, 2001; Kvale, 2004, 2010; Kaufman, 2010).

Methods of interpretation and data analysis

Rather than formulate generalizations, the aim of the examination and interpretation of the data was to analyse various contexts and mechanisms associated with the participants' operation within female art groups. Material analysis involved categorization of meanings, which all interview transcripts were subjected to. The adopted analysis categories were prepared in advance while additional categories emerged in the course of interview transcript analysis. The following categories were selected:

- Reasons for forming art groups
- Subjective meaning of art groups for the interviewees' creative development,
- The functions of art groups according to the study participants,
- Substantive and organizational aspects of the operation of art groups
- Subjective benefits and difficulties experienced by female art group members,
- The artists' views on female art and women's art (Wengraf, 2001; Kvale, 2004, 2010).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Processes stimulating the operation of female art groups – motives, strategies, stages of development

Since the achievements of art groups rarely become the subject of research and detailed discussion, our analysis has the hallmarks of an exploration of idiosyncratic nature. The authors hope this study will partially fill the research gap. Creative output is predominantly analysed in terms of separate artists' work and achievements as well as the genius of a single artist working individually. In our qualitative analysis of the interviews with the participants we look for common contexts and mechanisms that operate within female art groups. The particular tendencies of professional female artists to form groups described in this study may not necessarily be true for other female art groups.

The article selectively addresses the data obtained in the course of the study. The authors focus on information regarding the motives and strategies relevant to the dy-

dynamic of female art group development and each artistic project realization.

Reasons for art groups formation

The artists' are motivated by psychological factors associated with the need for creating an environment, as well as organizational ones which involve the management of their joint projects. They rarely mention any substantive motivation linked to a clearly defined purpose behind the cooperation, as is the case with the feminist Frakcja. Based on their research the authors were able to identify the following reasons for forming art groups:

- Substantive-ideological – reasons associated with the artists' goals, mission and exhibition topics. The interviewees mentioned motives derived from feminist thought, protection of women's interests in art and publicizing their art; others include the creation and publication of craft-based art and work on humanised art with man at its centre;
- Organisational – motives whose aim is exhibition effectiveness and optimisation to promote the recognition of their particular art group. Some galleries prefer to exhibit the works of a group rather than an individual artist. Therefore, as the interviewees point out, "it is easier to find larger and more prestigious venues for a group exhibition";
- Psychological/relational – they involve establishing and developing relationships between group members, based on trust and respect (assistance, experiencing friendship) as well as motivating each other to work;
- Artistic – these pertain to the creative aspect of their activities; according to the artists their creative output gains "additional meaning", "the works complement each other" when displayed together. Working in a group does not imply a lack of creative freedom but gives the members an opportunity for friendly confrontation which may enhance the quality of the creative process or its effects. For instance, while each member of 0+ works with a different medium, together they create unique aesthetic combinations. Photographs gain a graphic aspect in the form of prints on transparent materials, graphic prints become sculpturally three-dimensional.

The table below illustrates the organisational, psychological, substantive and artistic motives within PLUSMINUS group.

Table 1
Motives for Forming Groups as Illustrated by the Example
of PLUSMINUS Group - a Case Study

Motives within PLUSMINUS group	
Organisational motives	The organisational factor was predominant in the formation of the group. The artists formed the group spontaneously to fulfil the need of the hour. At first, they decided to unite for the purpose of one event: a private painting retreat in Budy Lucieńskie, Poland, which culminated in an exhibition of the participants' works. The event's success encouraged them to continue their cooperation. They pointed out that the tasks connected with the organisation of the exhibition were shared by several people in cooperation.
Psychological/relational motives	The artists mention their willingness to know each other better and an interest in their fellow man. Inspiration as well as stimulation of creative activity are of the essence. Having graduated from the same academy and participated in professional retreats (as textile designers) and exhibitions abroad, the artists already knew each other, which undoubtedly facilitated their decision to cooperate. The pleasure and satisfaction derived from spending time and working together gives them a sense that such cooperation may be both enjoyable and fruitful in the future: "(...) when we're in a group, we egg each other on creatively."
Substantive motives	PLUSMINUS – whose members are the oldest from among the interviewees – is the longest existing group participating in this study. Its members were not motivated by a need for a joint artistic ideological statement or promotion of creative output whose message transcends art (lack of substantive-ideological motives). They openly dismiss the feminist context of the group's formation.
Artistic motives	By founding their group, the artists hoped for mutual inspiration, they were driven by a need (perhaps not a fully conscious one) for stimulation and encouragement in their creative development. The group is an example of one whose members are highly independent: they do not "engage in a discourse" with each other but merely share an artistic motif or – which has recently been the case – a common format (a set length of one side of the canvas).

Source: The authors' own interpretation of data gathered in the course of the study.

Cooperation strategies

In the course of their interaction group members devise/elaborate various strategies to facilitate their cooperation. Based on the interviews, the authors identified three types of strategies: inspirational, organisational and supportive. The purpose of inspirational strategies is to break thought patterns, encourage creative thought by provoking stimulating circumstances, activities, meetings. Organisational strategies aim to reduce common,

predictable problems which take time and effort. With supportive strategies, the artists establish a bond and pool their emotional resources encouraging creative output.

Inspirational strategies:

- Conversations on certain topics – sometimes the artists make a conscious decision not to address the topics commonly discussed on social occasions (children, health, politics): “Suddenly, it turned out that there are thousands of great things we can discuss”; they exchange information on art, simply describing the exhibitions one of the members has seen;
- Group meetings with other artists: members of PLUSMINUS, for instance, attend the mass at the local Kościół Środowisk Twórczych (Art Community Church) and the subsequent “afternoon tea” where the guests represent various areas of the art realm; members of 0+ have social meetings, trips, mutual friends, etc.
- Meetings with inspiring people: art critics, gallery directors, etc.; such meetings provide inspiration, broaden their perspective on art and present different points of view;
- Arranging regular artistic activities; in the case of PLUSMINUS it is regular participation in summer art retreats in Załęcze Wielkie, Poland, work with autistic children, which reinforces the bond between group members and gives them a sense of mission. A calendar brimming with planned exhibitions (9 shows in 2 years) required the members of 0+ group to meet frequently to discuss organisational issues at the same time reinforcing their friendship.

Organisational strategies:

- A selection of a common topic for their next exhibition; the egalitarian nature of the studied groups forces their members to vote in the case of any disagreements;
- Assigning the organisation of a given exhibition to certain individuals while limiting the possibility of interference from the remaining group members;
- Regular collection of previously agreed membership contributions to cover the cost of exhibitions; appointment of a treasurer to manage the group’s finances;
- Organisation of annual art retreats or other forms encouraging creative cooperation.

Supportive strategies:

- Assistance in case of any random events, such as loss of employment (financial assistance) or illness (organisational assistance, emotional support).

The greatest benefits, apart from the aforesaid organisational assistance, involve an increase in work motivation (“Painting just for pleasure is different from being able to actually show your work”; “It’s definitely motivating. When you have a deadline, a topic, then everyone tries to meet their obligations”) and inspiration drawn from an interaction with

various strong artistic personalities. The process also encourages tolerance and openness to different views, regarding both art and ideas beyond it:

I guess it taught us all a kind of tolerance, not narrowing our views.

Artists are megalomaniacs, they are conceited, close-minded, but we have learned to accept other people's distinctness.

Apart from the fact that we like each other very much and we're never bored in each other's company, the greatest achievement in this group is tolerance and compromise.

After many years PLUSMINUS members assert/claim that their participation in this group has contributed to their artistic development:

Any group also means competition, right? This rivalry made us progress a lot, which you can see in our work, because we once compared the catalogues from our first exhibitions and the works from that time, well... (...) Let me put it this way: we've reached a certain level, we're good.

Hypothetically, one can assume that both the motives and the strategies discussed above stimulate the processes of formation and development of the art groups described below.

The process of art group formation and development

The processes of development of the studied art groups are sequential in nature, but progress with an uneven dynamic, they differ in terms of the length and intensity of each phase. Based on the narrative of the participants, the authors have identified two main stages of art group development – the initial phase and the proper phase.

- I. The initial phase consists of two stages. The beginning stage requires certain initial conditions to occur, such as formal art education of the potential members, their creative activity and establishing contacts within the community. The initiating stage consists of key moments connected with difficulties in promoting one's own artwork and/or with particular artistic events; these result in a decision to form a group.
- II. The proper phase consists of two parallel processes:
 - Negotiation of the group's structure;
 - Realization of the group's art projects.

Negotiation is associated with the psychological and functional development of groups, i.e. group role emergence, establishing ways of communication, distribution of responsibilities, identification of the needs and goals, the group's working rhythm. A characteristic feature of the analysed groups is their non-hierarchical functioning structure/arrangement, described as: "working out", "getting along", "learning from one another".

I wouldn't say we have a leader, rather it's someone who gets everyone together, and we make decisions as a group, there are differences of opinion, but we always work things out, not everyone is happy with all the arrangements, we have a respectful discussion.

The interviewees identify three vital prerequisites for cooperation to occur: harmony among the group members / willingness to cooperate, shared responsibility for the commonly selected goal and consideration for the abilities and prior experiences of each group member.

DISCUSSION

The issue of female art group activity is a topic rarely discussed in the context of education and the psychology of creativity. Also, the scientific literature on art history and art sociology provides little information on the topic. The research presented in this article may therefore give rise to further scientific discourse regarding the studied phenomenon.

An analysis of several art groups' activities, carried out mainly from the perspective of their members, enabled the authors to identify certain procedural regularities, despite the discrepancy in artistic styles and age differences between the study participants. The fellowship motivates group members to cooperate and encourages individual creativity. All the interviewees elaborate strategies which are only partially connected with their creative output; in the majority of cases, these strategies stimulate the development of the artists' social and socialization skills. Group work requires different skills than individual activity, and to a certain degree it also becomes a source of satisfaction of another kind.

The fact that all participants highly valued their activities as part of an art group appears to be particularly noteworthy. They are all satisfied with such forms of activity and appreciate the organisational benefits, artistic inspiration and collective support associated with it.

This article does not exhaust the topic of the activities of female art groups. The issue warrants further investigation and the presented results may serve as the basis for future research. In line with feminist thought, a valuable addition to the issue discussed here would be a comparative study of all-female, all-male and mixed-gender groups involving both their internal workings (key moments in group development, group dynamics) as well as external functioning (interaction with the community, perception of other artists, art critics and the audience). Coupled with an analysis of the generation variability of such phenomena, this would enable researchers to formulate conclusions regarding the dynamics of gender differences within the art community.

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