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## ARTICLES

### In a Changing Berlin, Artists Face Rising Costs and an Inflated Gender Pay Gap

The figures in a new survey by a Berlin artists' association point to the general struggle among artists to support themselves through art in a city that is becoming less affordable every year.

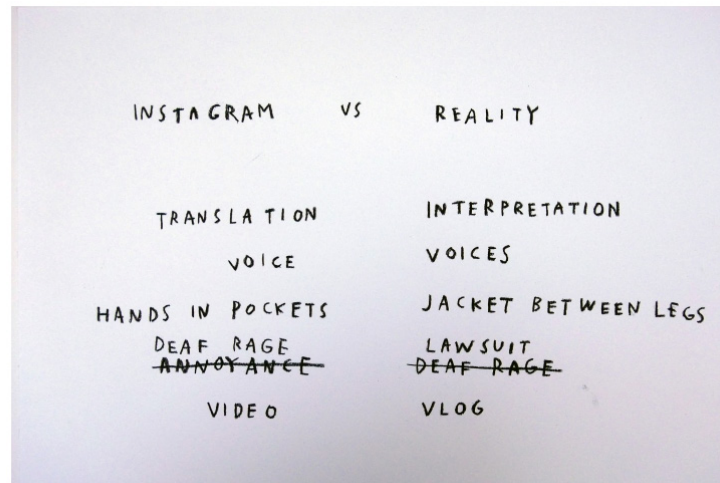
Adela Yawitz September 10, 2018



Portrait of Sophie Erlund (photo by Anna Kott, 2017)

At a performance art event earlier this month, practically everyone involved was an artist: the sound technician and media installer, the journalist covering the event, the photographer, the bartender. With the exception of the exhibiting artist, all were working side gigs, jobs that pay their rent and allow them to live the gritty and glamorous life of a Berlin artist. In Berlin, as in most other big cities, getting by on odd jobs is the rule for artists. A new study by the IFSE in cooperation with the Professional Association of Artists in Berlin (bbk Berlin) recently produced the precise statistics: among the 1,745 artists surveyed (out of approximately 8,000 working artists in the city) a quarter of men, but only a fifth of the women artists in Berlin are able to cover their living expenses through their art. The figures point to the general struggle among artists to support themselves through art in a city that is becoming less affordable every year; it also uncovers a striking pay gap between men and women artists: men are paid an average 28% more. The city's reputation for being "poor but sexy," one of its draws for artists, is slowly becoming "poor and sexist" — a real turn-off.

Costs of living have been rising steadily in Berlin, and artists are among those feeling the strain as studio spaces are being converted into micro-apartments and workshops turn into open-plan tech offices. According to the study, Berlin has the second largest density of artists after New York, and the city is still cheap compared to London or New York. The average artist income of \$10,950 might be enough to support an art student sharing a room in a flat, eating cheap meals, and working with found materials, but it is nowhere near enough to cover a studio space and professional equipment, let alone support a family or sustainable housing.



Christine Sun Kim, "Instagram vs Reality" (2018), charcoal on paper, 42 x 29.7 cm (courtesy the Artist)

As artists struggle to make ends meet, the arts community has been questioning the city's responsibility toward them: Berlin artists have organized to demand the city recognizes their contribution to its wealth, and pays it back. Zoë Claire Miller, a spokesperson for the bbk Berlin, told me, bluntly: "Artists subsidize the city's booming tourist industry and all the booming industries attached to it by subsidizing their own artistic practices with shitty day jobs — the cash-flow needs to be redistributed." Miller sees the municipal government's courting of real-estate investors and openness to speculation as directly responsible for the lack of affordable living and working spaces. The bbk Berlin and other artist initiatives, such as *Haben und Brauchen*, have won some political battles to increase funding for the independent art scene, but as the city becomes more expensive, their fights continue and the burden upon working artists become even greater.

In any case, there is a limit to how much the city can sponsor locally, both in terms of subsidizing studio spaces and in terms of promoting gender equality. Sound artist Christine Sun Kim was not surprised by the survey results. While Berlin is her primary residence, she relies on income from performances and exhibitions around the world to make a living. As deaf artist, she is especially impacted by institutional barriers. She is often expected to share her fee with an interpreter and must insist that the institution cover these costs. Sculptor Sophie Erlund explains why things have changed so quickly: "When I came to Berlin in 2003 lots of people were renting [temporary] spaces at very low prices [...] under the condition that when the owner was ready to develop the building or plot then you would have to go with very short notice. Owners sat on buildings waiting for Berlin to recuperate [...]. This has meant that more or less all the artists I know have lost their studio spaces over the last five years as the city was turned around and many places were developed and sold." Economic growth has moved at dizzying pace, and policy is lagging behind.



Ambera Wellmann, "Now Now" (2018), oil and soft pastel on canvas, 142 x 147 cm (56 x 57 3/4 in) (courtesy of the artist; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlinphoto)

Painter [Ambera Wellmann](#) recently moved to Berlin from Toronto, and was also unsurprised by the survey's results, particularly pertaining to the difference between women and men's incomes. She understands how the underrepresentation of women in galleries and auction houses directly affects their institutional representation, which in turn determines sales prices and income levels. "Money can still be such a secretive issue amongst artists and sometimes it's the thing we don't want to talk about, when we're balancing cultural output in a commodity-driven sphere," she told me. Speaking out about money is even harder for women, who, Wellmann notes, feel vulnerable around male peers, gallerists, or curators. Hanne Lippard, who works in sound, performance and installation, points out that the gender pay gap in the art world is held in place by the lack of transparency of artist fees, so that artists must negotiate their price on each new commission. This results in women symptomatically underselling themselves, while men on the whole demand higher pay, regardless of artistic stature or experience. "There is something fundamentally wrong in our society, not only in the art world, with women not considering themselves worthy of a certain kind of salary or respect in relation to what they do," Lippard said to me by email. "I find it is particularly evident in the art world, because the artistic practice is so intrinsically linked to one's own personal value, and doubts."

For the many artists and activists in the city, the survey provides solid ground to push their lobbying: for sustainable living and working space, for equal representation, and more funding invested back to the city's artists and art spaces. Despite the challenges, all the artists I spoke to are all planning on staying here, and believe Berlin will continue to be an artist hub in the future.