Making a living, making art (Bremen, 15-16 May 25)

Constructor University, Bremen, May 15–16, 2025
Deadline: Dec 15, 2024

Julia Secklehner

Making a living, making art: Wage labour, class, and the female avant-garde, 1920–1948.

A workshop held at Constructor University, Bremen.

Central Europe's modernist movements in the twentieth century have widely been accepted as middle-class phenomena, driven by figures with the education, time, and financial resources to devote themselves to creative production. Yet, as the First World War shook up the social and economic stability of many, comfortable backgrounds no longer guaranteed support. Women, in particular, found themselves in a new situation, not only gaining new liberties in the post-imperial successor states but often also facing the need to make a living. How did this affect their creativity and access to artistic education and production?

From privately sold goods made in the home to administrative work and wage labour, women artists in the 1920s and 30s followed various professions to support themselves, their (artist) partners, and their dependents. While some of this work was to make ends meet, other activities, such as journalism and editorial work, craftwork, teaching and photography, also played an essential role in developing their artistic practice. Taking this as a point of departure, this workshop addresses the invisible (wage) labour of modernist women artists and how it affected their creative work in different fields. It seeks to examine the ambivalences of paid and creative work faced and negotiated by individuals and their impact on our understanding of modernist artistic production.

The workshop invites proposals for papers exploring examples and case studies that analyse the role of paid work in women's artistic production. Studies can be comparative and historical analyses that take into account questions of gender, class, and race and approach the subject through, for example, art history, visual culture, labour history, or gender studies. While the main focus is on central Europe, contributions that examine examples from other geographies from the 1920s to the 1940s are welcome.

Specific questions that might be addressed include, for example:
- To what extent did the necessity to follow a profession to make a living foster and develop women's creative practice in the first half of the twentieth century?
- Which kinds of professions were particularly important in helping to develop women's artistic practice? Which ones remained invisible?
- How did questions of class impact women artists and designers' opportunities and skills in relation to both wage labour and creative work?

- How did women artists and designers respond to socioeconomic challenges in their creative practice?
- How did the political stances of individual organisers, designers and artists influence their work?
- How did women artists and designers address topics of (women's) work and labour? How did they subvert and reject wage labour through their creative practice?
- In what ways does our understanding of women's contributions to modernism change in light of their multiple activities?

Proposals are invited of 200–300 words for a presentation of 20 minutes in length, accompanied by a brief speaker CV. They should be submitted to jsecklehner@constructor.university and iwuensche@constructor.university.

The deadline for submissions is 15 December 2024.

Notification of acceptance of proposals will be issued on 30 December 2024.

Speakers will be provided with one night's accommodation in Bremen and a modest travel subsidy.

For enquiries, feel free to contact Dr Julia Secklehner at jsecklehner@constructor.university.

Reference:
CFP: Making a living, making art (Bremen, 15-16 May 25). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 12, 2024 (accessed Nov 21, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/42915>.