

**Issues in the Construction of Identity  
of Some Contemporary Women Artists.**

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## **Abstract.**

Gillian Hugman Perkins.

### **Issues in the Construction of Identity of Some Contemporary Women Artists.**

This thesis is based on an empirical study of forty-three contemporary women artists. The aim of this research was to explore how a number of factors impact on these women's construction of their identity as artists. The women were selected through the East Midlands Arts register of artists, and therefore targeted women who had already identified themselves as practitioners. Although they all registered themselves as painters, their use of such terms as painter and artist, as my research revealed, was fluid, being dependent on changing perceptions of self.

The research was conducted in line with feminist theories, which privilege gender as a defining characteristic of people's experience. This is not to sanction notions of essentialism and therefore the research does not seek to universalise the position "woman", but rather attempts to gain an understanding of the diversity of women's experiences. To that end, the research data were collected through the use of both questionnaires and in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Five main categories emerged from the interviews, which formed the basis of the data analysis and interpretation. These were: issues concerning the conventional image of the artist and the limited availability of role models this provides for women artists; the relationship between women's sense of their identity as females and its impact on their ability to combine that with an artist identity; the role of higher art education in constructing images of the artist; the part played by women artists' social relations, including their relationships and roles within the family; and the models and realities of working practices, including the implications of the site of production and forms of dissemination.

Two patterns emerged in my sample group regarding the various ways of constructing an artist identity. They largely reflected the impact of socialisation which, it would appear, requires women to adopt either a traditional female role around which the artist identity somehow has to be worked, or a traditional artist role which still challenges the adoption of a certain kind of female identity. The women in my sample group, however, showed signs of attempting to negotiate their own pathways towards complex and multiple identities; a process made more intricate for women with an additional identity of mother.

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### **Preface.**

This thesis has been prepared in accordance with the MLA rules governing the writing of research papers (Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 1977. New York:MLA, 1995.)

To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, I have used a system of coding made up of the letters WA, standing for “woman artist”, and a number, from one to forty-three, to identify particular individuals.

### **Acknowledgements.**

I wish to express my gratitude to the forty-three women who formed the sample group for my research. They gave their time and commitment generously to this project which could not have taken place without them. It would give me pleasure to name them all, but guarantees of anonymity prevent me from doing so.

Thanks must also go to Gabriele Griffin who, with constancy, candour and perceptivity, has supervised my work, providing support when it was needed and demonstrating belief in my ability to succeed. Rosemary Betterton, as my external supervisor, has supported my involvement at conferences, encouraging me to share my work with a larger audience. I have had invaluable secretarial help from Rosie Horrocks, Sarah Cockerton and Jennie Ward.

I have a sense of obligation towards Nene University College, Northampton, which provided me with a scholarship for three years, permitting me to explore my research interests with fewer financial concerns than might otherwise have been.

During the writing of this thesis I have necessarily contemplated the role my family has played in my years of constructing an artist identity and, more recently, whilst conducting this research. The contribution of my husband, my daughters and my parents has been complex, including such factors as encouragement, co-operation, distraction, fascination, frustration and motivation. They too have expressed belief in my work, even when it interfered with family time and interests. I wish, therefore, to express my deep appreciation to Andy, Emma, Jennie, Ella and Peter.

## **Introduction.**

This thesis is based on an empirical study of contemporary women artists. It centres on the question of how contemporary women artists construct their sense of self as women, artists and as women artists. Although these three categories may be interconnected, they each carry their own and different cultural meanings. To begin with the term “women”, for example, definitions of that term are premised on relations to “men, masculinity and male behaviour” (McDowell and Pringle 3) and tend to construct women as “Other”. Such meanings, however, are not fixed but historically specific (Whitelegg *et al*; Scott and Tilly). Feminist methodology supports the study of commonality and difference, and the deconstruction of historically specific terms such as “woman”. Feminist analyses of the position “woman” have identified the importance of historic contexts to the realities of this existence (Riley). As Riley states, “It is the misleading familiarity of ‘history’ which can break open the daily naturalism of what surrounds us” (5). Although specific conditions have altered for women in relation to different political and socio-historical climates,<sup>1</sup> women in western society have lived within patriarchal frameworks (Irigaray, “Women’s Exile” 82).

Early “second wave” feminist texts needed to raise the resultant issues of inequality for women and in doing so tended to be passionate and forceful in proclaiming a dominating misogyny in western thought (Evans, Feminist Theory Today 4). As part of equality-feminism, texts such as Greer’s The Female Eunuch claimed that women had equal capability to men, now and in the future. Many feminists rightly challenged traditional concepts of gender and the reasons for women’s subordination. There was a pervasive view that women’s voices had been muted (Ardener 8) and in some cases even silenced (Olsen), resulting in an historical “invisibility” of women, including in academic contexts (Ardener; Thiele; Evans, J; Cameron; Irigaray). Whilst academics were highlighting the existence of female players in the major disciplines, grass-roots feminism was principally concerned with providing women with the space to raise the issues that were directly affecting them in their everyday lives (McDowell and Pringle).<sup>2</sup> The notion

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<sup>1</sup> Changes in the experiences of historically-situated groups of women can be seen in alterations in divorce laws and married women’s rights over children, property and income (Brophy and Smart 209); changes in the employment rights of women (Wickham 152); and changes in the development of education for girls and women (Measor and Sikes 37).

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that academic feminism was not concerned with similar issues, but there were diverse

of an underlying “sameness” between women and men - “If only it was not for social conditioning” - was disputed by some groups of feminists, such as some radical and cultural ones, who tended to perceive women as “different but better” (Evans, Feminist Theory Today 18). This involved a revaluation and celebration of what it means to be a woman. Evans sees this variation as a dualism, i.e. polarised positions of either equality or difference, whereas Riley describes it in terms of “constant historical loops” (2). I prefer the analogy of an oscillating wave which allows for movement between the two polarities of sameness and difference whilst moving the discourse onwards, instead of round in circles.

Identity politics moved the feminist debate on by regenerating awareness of differences among groups of women, taking into account factors like race, ethnicity, sexual preferences, and class. The dominant white and heterosexual feminist movement was charged with the colonial tendency of universalising the experience of women and imposing one set of experiences on all (hooks; Walker; Wittig; Kitzinger). This is generally accepted as inappropriate in the late 1990s, and most recent feminist writing has therefore sought to question definitions of the term “Woman” and its implications for “Identity”. The post-modern concept of “difference” has supported the exploration of “difference *within women*” (Evans 136, italics in the original) and the fragmentation of the self (Flax; Butler; Scott; Griffiths).

Questioning the relationship between sex and gender is a major element in the deconstruction of “Woman” (Butler). Notions of naturalism (“maternal instinct”, “feminine intuition”, etc.) exclude women from some social and political debates through the lack of a search for an explanation of their position. As Thiele argues “it is simply given” (29). Women are often perceived as naturally (biologically) fitted for the caring role. As men have historically been situated as the reference point for women, women’s identity and status have derived “from their relation to the explicitly gendered categories of mothers, daughters and wives” (McDowell and Pringle 3).<sup>3</sup> Whilst feminist theory has sought to challenge ideas of women having a fixed or preordained role in society, women’s material lives are often still dominated by such preconceptions. Even in the late 1990s, after approximately thirty years of second-wave feminism, the role of women is frequently

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ways of approaching the challenges.

<sup>3</sup> It needs to be stressed, however, that this analysis refers to western culture; as Gittins points out, all definitions of gender are “culturally and historically specific and variable, and in no way universal”

still promulgated as that of carer and nurturer (Finch, Family Obligations; Buxton 138).<sup>4</sup> These roles are in opposition to male ones which variously incorporate intellectual pursuits or physical action (Fransella and Frost; Ortner).<sup>5</sup> As little value is placed by society on the roles of caring and nurturing, “woman”, in its traditional definition, is imbued with inferior and negative meanings if viewed from a hegemonic masculine position. Feminist theorists, critics, academics, and activists, however, have provided us in the last three decades with a variety of alternative readings for the category “woman” (Ardener; Evans, M; Riley; Wittig; Butler; Kristeva; Irigaray) enabling women to reinterpret their identities in a more fluid, changing form (Slatkin; Flax).

Similarly the term “artist” is a socio-historical construct which has consistently excluded women from the art historical canon (Pollock, Vision and Difference; Rowe, Spare Rib Reader). The image of the artist, and therefore the meanings given to the term “artist”, have been crafted over more than seven hundred years to raise the male producer to God-like status in his creative capabilities (Chadwick). They have ranged from the notion of the artisan of the Middle Ages, for whom the craft was most significant (Heslop; Ayres); through the artist of the Renaissance, for whom education and social status provided identity (Sorrell; Chadwick; Pollock Vision and Difference); to the Romantic artist of the late eighteenth century onwards (Praz; Levine), shades of which image mingle with the contemporary artist (Oxley).<sup>6</sup> The history of art, as presented by a malestream tradition, represents male artists to the exclusion of female producers. Until the feminist interventions of the 1970s such as those by Nochlin, Lippard, Parker and Pollock, Tickner, Nemser, women artists were not only marginal but virtually invisible.

The word “artist” has ever been synonymous with “male” (Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses; Battersby). Ellmann notes that in “speculations upon the female mind . . . the omission of any reference to *creativity* is noticeable” (15, italics in the original). The socially constructed nurturing role, traditionally accorded to women, is perceived by Ellmann to be demonstrated in psychological terms by the association of the female mind with protective containers, such as the uterus, temple, kitchen or tent. In contrast the male

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(“What is the Family?” 74).

<sup>4</sup> Weekly women's magazines, for example, promote women as the primary carer and consistently “centre definitions of the feminine on the domestic” (Ballaster *et al* 121).

<sup>5</sup> Examples of researchers who have supported such stereotypes include Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, and Bems.

<sup>6</sup> This is a simplistic description of the major identifiable images of the artist in line with Davidson's thesis, which serves as a useful framework for the possible location of other image markers.

mind is viewed as a creative force, giving birth to a work of art without need for fertilisation. When this becomes necessary it is supplied by a female in the form of the muse, the highest point of cultural creative production a woman can achieve (19).

In linguistic terms, the need to make visible but also to qualify i.e. reduce in status, is indexed through the addition of other words or suffixes. This is demonstrated, for example, in the use of the suffix “ette” - when added to the word leather it implies an artificial or inferior form of leather. Similarly, the term “woman” as an adjective reduces the status of “artist” (Olsen 164). When using the term “woman artist”, therefore, there is a danger, in hegemonic terms, that it becomes conflated with the term “woman” rather than with the term “artist”. Just as women are not men, women artists in that sense are not artists, with all the attendant difficulties which such categorisations imply.

My research seeks to explore the implications of the categories woman, artist and woman artist for contemporary women painters.<sup>7</sup> In addition to their status as women and artists, I wished to study the impact of many of the other categories with which women are regularly associated such as mother, daughter, partner, student, worker, and professional, to analyse how women artists arrive at their sense of self. Through their representations of living these roles I wanted to gain an understanding of how women might identify themselves as artists in a particular time and cultural location.

### **The Origins of the Research.**

In preparing the initial research I was in part motivated by my own experiences as a woman artist. It is, of course, the case that the use of my memory in reconstructing fragments of my experience runs into potential epistemological problems. I cannot be sure, for example, if and how I am changing “what happened” in the past, but I do recognise that my analysis and interpretation of “what happened” has altered over time. As Anderson suggests, “vague and fragmented memories . . . can only begin to release their meaning later” (*Women and Autobiography* 7). I know that I read my own past through a different lens from when I lived it. Just as I have asked my participants to search their memories and make sense of what they see, I have been through a similar process.

The construction of a personal history relies heavily on the subject’s memory (Kuhn 2). Criticisms of the use of oral histories focus on the unreliability of memory. It

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<sup>7</sup> Details of the sample are discussed in Chapter 1.2. p.27.

has been suggested that memory is distorted by age, personal bias and nostalgia, although Thomson maintains that documentary evidence can be equally flawed (164). The selective nature of memory (Swindells) is precisely that which is ignored in traditional written Western life histories, i.e. auto/biographies. Instead a “seamless narrative” is designed to “cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations, and blind spots” (Benstock 20).

The alleged distortion of memory may be seen as a positive resource in the construction of (personal) history, subverting the search for a “single, fixed history” which ignores the multiplicity of experience and perspective. Feminist critiques of the biography genre have suggested that psychoanalytical analyses of a personal history search for signs of a differentiated and increasingly autonomous individual as a condition of autobiography. This privileges men. As Friedman argues a man may forget his condition “man” more often than a woman can forget her condition “woman” (39). She is repeatedly forced to remember how being a woman has positioned her in society and coloured her experiences. In Freud’s view, reminiscence and a preoccupation with memory was a feature of hysteria, which demonstrated a woman’s refusal to evolve into adulthood in accordance with historical or linear time. For Irigaray, however, memory is “the place where identity is formed, the place where each person builds his or her ground or territory” (cited in Anderson 10). Memory is thus a space “which allows the imagining of a different time . . . a space in which the subject can create herself” (Anderson 11).

### A Personal Recreation.

In the late 1970s I attended an art college in the north of England. It occupied a converted manor house in an isolated rural setting, with all the associated traditional aesthetic trappings. I mention the geographical isolation because it played a significant part in creating a strong tangible college identity, but it also contributed to a covert reluctance to engage with contemporary issues, artistic or political. Memories of my three years there carry a significance for me now which I barely noticed at that time. The fact that there were no female tutors in the visual arts department went un-noted by us then, although our course was representative of the college gender ratio of five female students to one male. Similarly, offhand and patronising treatment of female students by some male staff was never challenged by us, whilst we watched the same staff establish friendly relations with the male students, creating a “men’s club” atmosphere in half of the studio.



On leaving, it was assumed by staff that female students would stop producing art work, although it was not clear what we were expected to do. As a student I gained no sense of how I belonged in the art world, having been introduced to no women artists, except Barbara Hepworth whose work was displayed in our college grounds. It was indicated that we did not “fit” as quasi men, even though to be a man was the only role model available to us at that time.

As a practising artist I, like so many other women artists (Chicago), worked in spare bedrooms for ten years, working with practical problems such as curtains, carpets and the need to accommodate regular visitors. Although I had internalised the ideal of having a studio outside the home and aspired to such, my finances would not permit this as a solution at that time. Later the constraints were more a function of working around small children. This in itself impacted on the work I produced, causing me to concentrate short bursts of activity into my children’s nap times. The juggling of various commitments described by many women in my sample group was a very real experience for me too. The expectation that having a family would interfere with art production was not misplaced. In addition, for me, there was a bonus in the form of a realisation that there was no utopian tomorrow when the studio, time and ideas would all miraculously coalesce - this was reality. In a contrary way it motivated me to focus on my work when the difficulties were greatest.

I had no female role models to guide me through this period of intense change and the necessary adjustments. In part this was caused by a lack in my education, but I realise now that it also had to do with my attempts to join the group “male artist”. As with early modern feminism I saw men as my role models because they represented all that was “interesting, admirable, powerful and desirable” (Hollway 229). Competing with men as equals required me to undervalue and ignore women artists and their work. As Hollway states, it needed a “negative definition of myself as woman, and it reproduced the signifier ‘woman’ unchanged” (229). The outcome was to put oneself outside the group “women”. Rita Duffy describes how she encountered and resolved the dichotomy of artist/mother by turning to the group “woman artist”. Duffy was very influenced by Frida Kahlo and Artemisia Gentileschi, who helped to validate her experience as a woman artist, until she discovered that they had no children. In consequence she turned to Paula Rego in whom she identified experiences similar to her own (Douglas and Wegner 36). My own personal discovery of other women artists, although relatively late in my development, has been a

source of support in part as a reassurance that my situation is more common than I realised, but also as a source for understanding how one might deal with the difficulties and frustrations of being a woman artist. I remember the excitement I felt on reading about the experiences and seeing the work of women artists. The strangeness of the names and the unfamiliarity of the images created a completely new learning experience for me, but the rewards were an increased sense of belonging and “permission” to persevere with my own efforts. Judy Chicago relates a similar experience of “discovering” women artists and their work, establishing her right to succession.

As a novice artist the desire to “join” the successful group may lead one to accept the dominant belief in the essential supremacy of London as the place in which to work as an artist. It has obvious advantages in the shape of a wealth of venues and a wide, and ever-changing, audience, admittedly lacking in many regional centres. WA11, for example, blamed the failure of non-traditional exhibitions on their provincial location:

I set up and was involved with a lot of alternative shows/schemes for exhibiting when I first left college - however, no-one came to see the work - we weren't in London!

Like WA28, however, I rejected thoughts of moving to London, choosing to make my base in the East Midlands. I share this geographical location with the majority of my sample group,<sup>8</sup> who through reasons of quality of life, family, economics, or irresolution, live in this area of Britain. We, therefore, experience a similar range of services, availability of exhibition spaces, financial support, information systems, and artist groups, although many differences can still be identified across the region.

This research, therefore, was driven partly by questions I wanted to raise concerning my own experience, and that of other women, of being visual artists in an era which has seen an increase in information about women artists and their work without necessarily allowing women to “join” the club of “artists”.

### **Some Contexts for the Research.**

Through an investigation of my participants' lives and work I pursued primary research on contemporary women artists. There is a slowly increasing number of monographs on “successful” women artists like Paula Rego, Louise Bourgeois, Eileen

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<sup>8</sup> Six women of my sample group have moved away from the East Midlands region, three to London, for a

### **Some Contexts for the Research.**

Through an investigation of my participants' lives and work I pursued primary research on contemporary women artists. There is a slowly increasing number of monographs on "successful" women artists like Paula Rego, Louise Bourgeois, Eileen Cooper, and Mary Kelly, but little that engages with the life and works of lower profile, live women artists. Still less is known about women artists as a totality than about male artists.

Previous research I conducted compared the use of role models by female and male art students at higher degree level (Perkins). That study showed that the greater availability of information about women artists and their work, historically and contemporary, was used by the sample group only in a very limited way. The majority of the female participants used role models to support their self-image, predominantly the Romantic artist role model, which created a dichotomy between their image as a producer/creator and their potential as a parent. My female participants' refusal to engage with the work of other women artists raised questions of why they should do so,<sup>9</sup> and how they constructed their self-image. In this PhD thesis I therefore wanted to explore these questions in order to expand the knowledge of how women artists perceive their artistic identities.

The question of *how* women construct their artist identities has significant implications for art and design education at all levels (Dalton), but especially at the level of a higher training (Pollock, "Art, Art School . . ."). If, for example, a woman artist such as WA14 defines her production pluralistically she would be likely to benefit from a training approach which co-operates with her desires. So too in the choice of subject matter, as in the case of WA4. Feminists have long argued that educational research in general has tended to universalise the experience of children, creating a phantom research group whose gender-specific interests are not accounted for (Measor and Sikes; Spender; Weiner; Lloyd and Duveen). Similarly this is the case in art educational research where work can be gender-blind such as Christopher Brighton's study, for example. This means that the voice of women art students cannot be distinguished from that of their male

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<sup>9</sup> "Avoidance of a problem", usually taking the form of neglect of women's cultural values, beliefs and traditions, and "denial of a problem", a similar response but adopted usually by women who refuse to acknowledge a problem or issue which may marginalise them, were considered two possible reasons for the apparent denial of the women students in the study (Perkins).

colleagues, maintaining their silenced presence. As the majority of the sample group in this present study have had a higher art education, their memories of those experiences, although in danger of being accused of distortion (see above, p.4), contribute gender-specific data to the discussion.

Within the framework of a feminist epistemology, this study draws on both early feminist theories of increasing women's awareness and consciousness of our political and social position in any given sphere, our commonality (Friedan; Okin), and on more recent feminist notions of diversity, negotiating the multitude of differences within the group "women" (Flax; hooks; Butler). As women artists, for example, we share the same partial and exclusionary history, but how we respond to that may depend, among many factors, on our personality, our conditioning, our sense of injustice, and our social location. This research, therefore, in part corresponds to the early feminist identification of the need for validation of one's life experiences (Ellman) and support for marginalised views and theories (Lorde). It should, however, also provide an opportunity for women to openly acknowledge their differences from each other, without the need to establish a "collective" life story.

In studying a group of women artists I was inevitably concerned with points of common identity amongst my sample group, and between myself and them, but there is a danger of the "common condition" becoming exclusive if shared experience is one of "privilege rather than oppression" (Swindells 208). Points of difference are important in resisting an alternative mythology to which commonality is prone. Indeed, Anderson states that women's autobiography is defined by those "moments of dissonance between different discourses" (6). My research reflects a continuous under-current of the issues raised in feminist auto/biography through the collection of fragments of my participants' lives and their resonance/dissonance with/from fragments of my own life, establishing our sameness/difference. The relevance of connecting common experience is in the identification of the "personal" experience as a political condition within which lies the possibility that "the situation might be wrong rather than the person." (Swindells 207)

### **Literature Review.**

The available literature on women artists is not extensive but has been expanding continuously since the mid-1970s. These texts can be classified broadly into five areas of

interest: lexicons; historical reviews of women artists through history; monographs of individual artists; critical analyses of the position of women artists and their work; and autobiographical material. All these texts have contributed important elements to the promotion of women in the arts. In this section I shall discuss each of these categories, exploring the part played by some of the works within each group, and relate my research to the whole.

### Dictionaries of Artists.

As reference texts, dictionaries which identify artists through biographical details serve to perpetuate normative structures for establishing artist figures. Those practitioners who are listed become fixed as available names in the popular imagination. The gender-specific nature of the majority of lexicons compounds the disadvantages for women artists and those wishing to research their lives and work. In her study of Peter and Linda Murray's Dictionary of Art and Artists, 1st - 6th editions, for example, Park Hutson found "a paucity of women artists represented, frequently negatively described, in this mainstream reference text." (Unpub. research) Whilst searching for women artists, Petersen and Wilson's methods included looking up the family names of well-known male artists which frequently led to "some account of a wife/lover/sister/mother/daughter who was an artist, too." Sometimes reference to a woman artist can be found under the entry for the male artist. Park Hutson found at the end of the entry for Augustus John that, "his sister Gwen was also a painter." Feminist researchers have identified the bias in many of these types of text, with the result that they are gradually incorporating more women artists, in addition to volumes devoted entirely to women. As I have been working with lesser known contemporary women artists, such dictionaries have had little to offer for my research.

### Histories of Women Artists.

Although not the first feminist art historian to explore the existence of women artists, Nochlin is usually attributed with being the first to stimulate a significant challenge to the traditional canons of art history with her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971) In this essay Nochlin questioned the validity of attempting to name female equivalents to "great" artists like Leonardo da Vinci. However, in essence

this is what the majority of histories of women artists undertake. Petersen and Wilson's Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century endeavours to reclaim women artists' place within the canon as prescribed by malestream art history, in a similar vein to Gombrich's Story of Art. This entails an acceptance of the classifying criteria used to establish "greatness", including style of work, subject matter, body of work, membership of an art movement, and significance as a teacher or leader. In Women, Art, and Society, a much later text than Petersen and Wilson's, Chadwick, in response to the intervening critical feminist discourse, explores the socio-historical conditions which affected the production of work by women artists, providing a contextual frame of reference. Art historical literature has been valuable in providing knowledge about women artists who had been written out of history (Pollock, Vision and Difference 24) through digging deep into archives, museums, and historical texts. It is so much easier to discuss the conditions of women's creative work when there are available historical examples of women who have produced such work; work of quantity and quality. In addition many women artists gain support from the knowledge that women artists are not fabulous, mythological creatures, but real people who struggled in their work and their lives. Judy Chicago relates her desperate search for information on other women artists, both contemporary and historical, in her attempt to feel that she "belonged" in the art world (Through the Flower). Early works on women artists stem from a period of consciousness-raising prevalent in the feminist movement generally in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when many hidden individuals and groups were reclaimed.<sup>10</sup>

### Monographs.

After historical reviews, monographs<sup>11</sup> are possibly the most popular type of art literature.<sup>12</sup> Studies on individual artists tend to be highly biographical, following the traditional perception of life stages, that is the artist's parentage, childhood, schooling, artistic training, and finally the endorsement of their position as an artist in the art world. In parallel, the artist's oeuvre is detailed with connections made, where appropriate, to the

<sup>10</sup> Texts like Garb's Women Impressionists and Marsh's The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood provide a balance to the traditional art historical position which privileges male artists' work in artistic movements.

<sup>11</sup> I am using the term "monograph" here to refer solely to studies of individual artists and not in its wider literary meaning.

<sup>12</sup> A review I did of Thames and Hudson's World Art Complete Catalogue (1997) shows that the largest proportion of titles relate to histories (60%) followed by monographs (29%).

life history. Such a focus on individual artists was legitimised by Vasari's Lives of the Artists (1568) in which he helped to raise the status of the artist to the level of "a genius of mythic proportions, a titan, whose life was dedicated to the creation of great art."

(Witzling 8) Vasari maintained Boccaccio's idea that women artists were "atypical of their sex" (quoted in Witzling 8; Pollock, Vision and Difference), presenting them as incongruities who could never be the artistic genius. When biographers have wished to portray women as legitimate artists they have followed the pattern set down in the Renaissance for male artists, i.e. stressing the innate talent, the invention, the dedication, and the sacrifice of the artist. Eldredge's monograph on Georgia O'Keefe, for example, follows the traditional structure of providing a chronological biography, inter-related to her work, displaying the conventional markers for greatness. Whilst Eldredge ostensibly raises O'Keefe's profile as an artist, he subtly undermines her "male" greatness by describing her as Stieglitz's "model, mate and muse" (187), thereby reducing her to the conventional position of all women artists. Although he undoubtedly respects O'Keefe as an artist he appears typical of many male biographers in being relieved, and unquestioning of her stated desire to be remembered "as a painter - just as a painter" (Eldredge 211) rather than as a woman artist.

### Feminist Critiques.

Feminist critiques of women artists who refuse to be identified as feminist, like Bridget Riley, or as women painters like O'Keefe, have to develop ways of dealing with the contradictions between feminist perspectives and women's refusal to embrace them. The imposition of a particular political viewpoint onto the subject of the study is a contentious issue, which has significance for my research as well (see Chapter 1.1. p.21 for a fuller discussion of the epistemological implications of this research). Analyses from a feminist perspective challenge the orthodoxies of form, iconography, media and meaning when exploring the work of women artists. Pollock, for example, examines the work of Mary Cassatt (Mary Cassatt; Vision and Difference), not from the traditional viewpoint of her "membership" of the Impressionist group, but through the issues of gender and space, how this bounded her life experiences and impacted on the content, composition and meaning of her paintings.

Feminist discourse has therefore progressed the study of women artists' lives and

work away from the fixed, unchanging gender-neutral approaches of orthodox criticism towards a more gender-aware area of enquiry. Battersby, for example, explores the historical relationships between gender construction and the image of the genius (Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Perspective). This is one of many feminist texts which underpins my research, providing an explanation for the difficulties faced by contemporary women artists in constructing their artistic identities. Similarly, the seminal work by Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology, based on an exhibition in the early 1970s entitled Old Mistresses: Women Artists of the Past which was concerned with the invisibility of women artists in the history of western art, has been important for my study. Amongst other issues, Parker and Pollock's work questioned the hierarchical status of art forms within the art world. These are the value systems which define what art *is*, and in traditional terms art does *not* incorporate craft. The paradigm shift brought about by such work<sup>13</sup> has enabled later feminist researchers like myself to examine women's art from a multiplicity of perspectives, placing equal value on all work produced by women painters. Sulter's work, Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity, extends the challenge to orthodox definitions of art, in that she proposes her personal interpretation of the term "creative", to include singing, sculpture, hairbraiding and childbearing, which she perceives as central to her existence and a means of survival as a black woman. In addition to continuing the opposition to traditional value systems, this book, as part of black feminist discourse, also serves to demonstrate the differing experiences of women artists by race and ethnicity, and the similarities by gender. Feminist enquiry into art world ideologies, whether of the white, western or multi-cultural variety, provides a framework for subsequent investigations into the material conditions of women artists' production.

#### Texts Based on Primary Source Material.

Boundaries of definition are never absolute, especially when reviewing critical and historical art literature. This last category of texts on women artists and their work is where my research belongs. The use of personal testimony has been made possible

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<sup>13</sup> Other seminal works which have provided a critical foundation for my research include: Betterton, Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media; Deepwell, New Feminist Art Criticism; Nochlin, Women, Art and Power and Other Essays; and Robinson, Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today.



through, and draws on, the work of feminist art analyses, found in books and journals, covering art historical periods and groups, individual artists, and issues of women's production. I have included in this group studies which draw on autobiographical writing, like diaries and letters, and those which analyse oral testimonies in the form of interviews. Marcia Tucker wrote in the Preface to Nemser's work Art Talk that, "The interview is to art history what the private journal is to literature." (xiv) Both the interview and the journal are vehicles for the expression of "those personal aspects of one's life which so radically affect the making of art" (Tucker xiv).

The written word has been particularly valuable in providing a platform for the personal narratives of historical women artists. Women artists' diaries and journals differ radically from those of male artists (Slatkin). She argues that, "Women artists focus more consistently than their male colleagues on the personal, rather than the theoretical." (vii) Witzling suggests that the isolation of women artists gave their writings a special significance both for themselves and for their audience. The isolation she describes was profound: women were separated from other women artists, the art world in general, and from the image of the artist. Writing was a way of communicating, if only with oneself, and thereby generating a sense of belonging.

Published contemporary written life histories tend to have been written as public statements, rather than the more private form of letters or journals.<sup>14</sup> Rose Garrard, for example, published written documentation of her art works, in effect providing her own archive (the making of which is usually lacking for women artists). Because of her concern for the relevance of contemporary art to society she engages with aspects of her life other than simply her work. As Snoddy writes:

By exposing forgotten pasts she [Garrard] reconstructs new futures through focusing on histories, myths and memories which influenced her own conditioning as an artist and as a woman. (cited in Garrard 7)

Chicago, on the other hand, produced her autobiography, Through the Flower, in the conventional style used by male artists, presenting her history in chronological sequence, relating the systematic rise of her work in the art world. Like Garrard, however, she explores personal relationships and private conditions as part of the ideology which informs women's artistic lives and histories.

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<sup>14</sup> Marie Bashkirtseff, however, was one of a minority who expected their journals to be published posthumously, and relied on it being the sole vehicle for ensuring her fame (Slatkin; Witzling).

feminist colleagues (Byrne-Sutton and James), although apparently printed *verbatim*, was heavily edited, distorting much of the meaning intended by Garrard. In addition it was left to the reader to analyse the exchanges printed, and yet the reader did not have access to the complete transcription. The significance of what was said therefore remains opaque. In a similar way, Nemser's book of interviews with twelve "heroic" women artists (3) was presented with a minimum of analysis. The interview of each woman is preceded by a brief biographical sketch and the transcripts are again apparently *verbatim*. The text provides a valuable insight into the working lives of a few "successful" women artists, which information is all too rare in art world literature, and a different historical slant on the art world of the mid-twentieth century. The drawback is that, as with the Garrard interview, the reader has insufficient indicators for ascertaining the "truth", through a lack of deconstruction of the process.

My project has been closest to that of Grace Davidson who interviewed 43 artists, predominantly women, in order to explore their adoption of role models. Apart from similarities of interest in identity construction, both her work and mine seek to examine the testimonies of a group rather than privilege a lone voice, as so many artist interviews do. In terms of the process, our work diverges because of the different criteria used by us for accessing our sample groups. The differences exist around definitions of "success", geographical location and educational history.<sup>16</sup> Davidson's research was conducted a decade earlier than this study, which has allowed me to draw on aspects of her work, whilst bringing the exploration of women artists up-to-date. In content our work differs radically in the approach to its analysis. Davidson's work, for example, establishes a framework for identifying three categories of artistic role models, within which she places her participants. In contrast, I have analysed the interviews with my participants in order to form a thesis of women artists' identity development. Where Davidson imposed definitions of identity on her sample, I sought to establish my sample's sense of self from their contributions.

### **The Structure of the Thesis.**

Current notions of what it means to be an artist may greatly influence how a person perceives her or his image as an artist. Ideas held as common by a society tend to become

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<sup>15</sup> Written material can, of course, be used in this way too, but usually the starting point is different.

definitions of identity on her sample, I sought to establish my sample's sense of self from their contributions.

### **The Structure of the Thesis.**

Current notions of what it means to be an artist may greatly influence how a person perceives her or his image as an artist. Ideas held as common by a society tend to become concentrated in stereotypes, which, in turn, may become internalised as normative (Battersby; Nemser; Griffiths). The most pervading stereotypical image of the artist is that of a male genius (Battersby). Such monoliths are not merely products of contemporary society, but emerge out of historical roles (Chadwick). Davidson's framework of three artist role models, that of the medieval craftsperson, the educated artist of the Renaissance, and the eighteenth-century Romantic artist, serve to identify three of the major historical figures which have impacted on contemporary ideas of the artist.

Stereotypes affect not only the guise of the artist but in addition help to create a hierarchy of permissible forms of expression (Metcalf; Greenhalgh). The historicity of the artist as icon incorporates the changing status of arts in relation to crafts, resulting in contemporary values which elevate the fine arts to positions of superiority, whilst relegating craft-based work to an inferior level. As much of women's creative activity has been centred historically on the crafts such work is effectively devalued (Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*; Callen; Dormer). In Chapter 2 I explore the implications of this hierarchical status for the production of my sample group, and the ways in which the art/craft debate therefore affects their perceptions of self-identity. In Chapter 4, this debate is continued in relation to the perpetuation of ideas of appropriate forms of production within higher art education.

The examination of normative ideas of the artist is continued in Chapter 2 using the testimonies of my sample group. Their responses to stereotypical images of the artist contribute to their self-perception of being women artists through an internalisation of aspects of such iconographic representations. I further explore how these women use notions of other artists as role models in their life and work.

The adoption of an artist identity appears to be less problematic for men than for women.<sup>17</sup> Men, for example, rarely have to question the connections between their gender

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<sup>17</sup> For the opposite argument see Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi.

and the masculinisation of the artist role (Battersby; Ortner). The artist is assumed to be male unless stated otherwise, as I discussed earlier in this chapter. The implications of gender for the fostering of artistic identity are only taken into account by feminist analyses which question normative assumptions of malestream research. It is therefore important to understand how the women in my research perceive being female, an issue analysed in Chapter 3. My examination of their narratives highlights the women's attitudes towards the biological aspects of their identity formation, psychological explanations for gender identity, and indications of the impact of the socialisation process on their development of self. In general terms, women will ally themselves to one of two political positions, feminist or non-feminist (Griffin 'I'm not a Women's Libber, but . . .'). Whilst this is a simplified description of the reality, with many women qualifying their particular allegiance, it broadly covers the case. Establishing their essentialist or relativist positions with regard to the state of being a woman, in all its potentialities, impacts on my sample group's ideas of what it means to be an artist. Chapter 3, therefore, investigates the cultural positions "woman" and "woman artist" from the viewpoint of my sample group.

Women's and men's social identities are in part formulated and reinforced whilst in education. Feminist research, based on socio-historical evidence, has established that schooling provides the framework for cultural norms, reproducing gender (and class) inequalities (Wolff, "Questioning the Curriculum"). Higher art education too has its roots in historical developments which may be used to protect it from criticism, for example, in the sentiment that says, "We have made major changes since 1975, therefore things must be all right". However, the Modernist influences on art educational establishments (see 4.4), for example, have resisted much change. In Chapter 4 I analyse my sample group's experiences of the impact of art education on their sense of self.

The Romantic notions of innate ability were also apparent in many of the women's experiences in art education, which appeared to feed rather than conflict with Modernist ideas of what art is about. The "sink or swim" approach was still alive and well in some institutions, whilst the emphasis on originality was central to all. Much of this was generated by staff members who can be highly influential in an art student's development. The power of tutors in providing positive or negative role models for women students is discussed, in Chapter 4, in relation to my sample group's work and life during the time they attended art college. In addition to the frustrations experienced whilst studying, many

women found that there had been a lack of preparation for life after art college on the part of the various higher education art institutions.

After leaving the structure of an art course, all students, female and male, need to establish their working practice if they wish to continue to produce art work. Important issues become the availability and suitability of a work space, how often such a space can be used, what to paint and how to exhibit the work: these are discussed in Chapter 6. Notions of an artist's working space have varied over time, ranging from a communal workshop; a living room in the artist's home; one that is lavishly decorated; a warehouse space; an architect-designed building in the artist's garden; and most famously "a garret". In Chapter 5 I examine my sample group's working environments from the viewpoint of the gender implications inherent in different work spaces. Since women's traditional sphere was the private realm of the home, questions arise concerning the meanings of a woman *working* at home, other than as a housewife, and how the concept of work as occurring in a public space segregated from the home relates to this.

Stereotyped notions of the commitment an artist ought to make to her/his work are based on the concept of the Romantic artist. This role model exemplifies the approach which calls for the artist to live with her/his work constantly; to work anti-social hours; to privilege the work over social and domestic commitments; and to be driven by the need to work (Honour; Davidson; Kris and Kurz; Mayer). I discuss, in Chapter 6, the prevalence of these ideas, and alternatives, with regard to their internalisation by women artists, and the consequences, if any, for the women's work. In addition, the subject matter of their work helps to indicate their attitudes towards their own position within the art world, that is either the adoption of traditional values or an attempt to challenge orthodoxy. The use of an abstract style has been problematic for women artists, considered by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s as a masculine visual language, and therefore inappropriate for women to express themselves fully (Betterton, Intimate Distance; Thistlewood, American Abstract Expressionism). There are, therefore, gender issues attached to such an enquiry, which are explored in this chapter, in addition to the women's attitudes towards exhibiting their work.

Presenting art work in galleries, museums and other sites, enables those artists who work in isolation to bridge the invisible divide between the private realm and the public world. The notion of the artist as the isolated individual and social outsider, as epitomised

by artists like Van Gogh (Pollock, “Artists Mythologies”), does not fit easily beside that of the woman as at the centre of the family and the object of domestic and other demands (Gittins; Finch). In Chapter 5, therefore, I investigate how women, who wish to perceive themselves as artists, respond to these polarised concepts through their attitudes towards their social roles and their domestic commitments. As mentioned earlier, women frequently adopt several roles such as daughter, mother, worker, partner, student, in parallel. Many, or all, of these roles will impact on the adoption of the role artist for women because of society’s expectations that all should be equally and satisfactorily fulfilled. The daughter role, for example, might exist in conflict with the desire to be/train as an artist, depending on parental attitudes and values; being a mother may interrupt artistic practice through lack of time, space, or money, or because it constitutes a novel life experience; and the expectations of the married role may inhibit or support a woman artist in her practice. Chapter 5 explores these different aspects of women artists’ social framework.

In focusing on women artists for my sample group I accept that there is a danger of adopting an essentialist position. This is a dilemma for all feminist research which privileges accounts of women’s experiences (Isaak 3). Traditional research practices have created an imbalance of knowledge through silencing women’s voices, and at the same time generalising from the single viewpoint of the male. Where knowledge is based predominantly on men’s lives, as in the case of artists, research which focuses on women remains justified in order to facilitate the expansion of that existing knowledge. Social constructionist theories acknowledge the relativity of sex as well as gender, so whilst socio-cultural conditioning causes people to identify themselves as women *or* men, female *or* male, the importance of enquiring into women’s lives will remain.

Where greater experiential knowledge is required, feminist methodologies promote the judicious use of qualitative studies which encourage the collection of personal evidence. Requesting personal testimonies places women in potentially vulnerable positions. This is acknowledged by feminist researchers through a concern for the relationship between researcher and researched. Concern for the participants of a research study covers issues of the power balance experienced by the researcher and her participants; the lack of involvement of the very people who provide the data; and ethical questions about the interpretations and use of the data. I begin this thesis, in Chapter 1,

with a discussion of the implications of researching from a feminist perspective including measures I took to mediate the worst aspects of traditional research practices; an explanation of the method of sample group selection; and the use of appropriate research tools.

## **Chapter 1.**

### **The Research Process: Methodology and Methods.**

#### **1.1. Researching from a Feminist Perspective.**

In line with my feminist agenda my research is underpinned by a view that gender is a defining characteristic of people's experiences. Feminist research has undertaken a critique of the male-centred nature of the sciences and social sciences, exposed as biased because, *inter alia*, it ignored women's experiences (Harding, S.; Evans, J.; Abbott and Wallace 205). The recognition of such omissions led to women researchers studying issues and raising questions with particular relevance to women, thereby increasing knowledge from the perspective of women (Harding; Abbott and Wallace). These, however, were insufficient in themselves, requiring theories with which to interpret and understand that experience. Because of the perceived need to break away from mainstream scientific enquiry, which tended to place the researched as objects,<sup>1</sup> feminist scholars advocated the use of qualitative methods with their emphasis on the individual as subject (Fonow and Cook; Abbott and Wallace; Maynard and Purvis). Gelsthorpe went so far as to describe the qualitative approach to research as "the traditional" feminist methodology (214). With its emphasis on the lived experience of actors in the real world, qualitative methods of research are ideally suited to the process of investigating women's lives within a feminist epistemology:

the use of qualitative methods, which focus more on the subjective experiences and meanings of those being researched, was regarded as more appropriate to the kinds of knowledge that feminists wished to make available, as well as being more in keeping with the politics of doing research as a feminist. (Maynard 11)

Qualitative approaches to research involve open-ended explorations as opposed to the use of pre-defined categories of enquiry, such as surveys and questionnaires for example. More recently it has been argued that the assumption that *all* feminist research should be driven by qualitative methodology is flawed, that in fact quantitative research also involves social construction and can be a useful political tool in indicating the scale of particular phenomena in women's lives (Marsh, C.).<sup>2</sup> Although much feminist research is still

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally called the "research subject", she/he "is one on whom research operations are performed, rendering him/her passive, in essence 'an object'" (Reinharz 180).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the significance of violence in women's lives is highlighted by quantifiable statistics, demonstrating the severity of this phenomenon (Maynard 13).



antipositivist, many women have embraced the advantages of working with quantitative as well as qualitative approaches, often combining the two as appropriate (Kelly, Burton and Regan 35).

My intention was to explore the experiences of a particular group of women artists, their training and sense/s of self, in order to increase our understanding of the position of women painters working and living in an androcentric art world (Parker and Pollock; Nochlin). I aimed to gain insights into their understanding of themselves as artists, which necessitated that I talk with my participants in some depth, in a form which remained open to what they were saying. The qualitative approach was likely to achieve such aims. Miles and Huberman describe qualitative research in terms of its local groundedness, its flexibility, the richness of the data collected, the elucidation of meanings that people place on their lives and the assessment of causes of events and experiences. Similarly, Shimahara stresses the importance of context in qualitative research: "human behaviour, experience - is shaped in context and . . . events cannot be understood adequately if isolated from their contexts." (5) Common features of qualitative research include key words such as holistic, direct experience, context, explanation, description, understanding, interpretation (Cohen and Manion; Burgess; Miles and Huberman; Sherman and Webb). By conducting face-to-face, semi-structured interviews I intended to allow the women in my study to give a personal and individual perspective on what it is like for them to be a painter and the meanings they attach to this.

Within traditional research methodologies there is much criticism of feminist approaches because the emphasis on the subjective appears to mean the loss of "critical, rigorous and accurate" results (Hammersley 215). Objectivity is valued as a process of separating the particular viewpoint of the researched as well as the researcher from the research process in order to prevent bias (Acker, Barry and Esseveld 140). Accusations of bias on the part of the researcher and researched have been challenged by feminist academics "tear[ing] the veil from scientific pretensions of neutral observation or description" (Stacey 115). Research which was apparently objective took the masculine standpoint as normative. As Haggis writes, traditional research can systematically misrepresent the documentation of society by "leaving half of the participants of that process with the task of having to 'read' themselves into the story as 'other' than its real content." (69)

In response to her fears about distorting the experiences of the women she interviewed, Reay placed importance on the reflexivity of the researcher. She regards this process as one solution to the dangers of bias in research where the researcher and researched share common features in their personal accounts. Similarly, Fonow and Cook list reflexivity as one of their five epistemological conditions of a feminist methodology, and Stanley and Wise include it as part of their definition. Even in her argument against the use of experience in research, Gelsthorpe cites personal and theoretical reflexivities as providing “a foundation for the production of good quality knowledge” (Hammersley 216).

A central issue within feminist debates has been the relationship between researcher and researched (Berger Gluck and Patai; Maynard and Purvis; Stanley, Feminist Praxis), focusing on issues of power between them and the situating of the researcher in the research. Early feminist researchers like Ann Oakley (“Interviewing Women”) adapted the traditional form of interviewing in order to approach the interviewees as equals, reacting against the advice of social science researchers that in order to eliminate bias the researcher should remain detached, whilst still attempting to generate rapport with the subject. Influenced by Oakley, Finch believed that the rapport she experienced with her interviewees and the ease with which she got them to talk stemmed from the fact that she was also a woman (“It’s Great to Have Someone to Talk to”). This is now seen as too simplistic (Kelly, Burton and Regan 37; Phoenix 50) and has, in its turn, been challenged by feminist debates around the power of the researcher over the researched (Woodward and Chisholm; Reay; hooks; Maynard and Purvis). Although the feminist researcher may “actually share the powerless position of those she researches” (Finch, “It’s Great to Have Someone . . .” 86) this view lacks recognition of women’s differences, in that all women in a research process have different levels of power (Phoenix 58). The female academic is in a privileged position in relation to many of her participants (Patai 143; Olson and Shopes 193), even if she exists in a differential hierarchy in academia. This makes attempts to “conduct culturally sensitive research” (Benmayor 169), for example, often fall short of its aims.

The power relations between myself as researcher and the researched women in my specific study varied both within and between situations. Whilst my choice to contact certain women by telephone gave me much initial power, I was also a petitioner, wanting

women to participate and therefore felt at “their mercy” to accept me or turn me down. Simultaneously, being rung out of the blue put the women in question into a particular situation. In the early stages of the research, when I was contacting women by telephone, I was very conscious of the variety of reactions they might experience. I imagined that other people might also have experienced being plagued by telephone salespeople keen to sell double glazing or holiday deals, so I expected the women I telephoned to be at least cautious in the first instance, if not totally hostile. Because the first telephone contact was so important in the process of recruiting participants to the study, I tried to mediate negative responses by explaining who I was, the name of my educational institution, where I had obtained their details and giving a concise description of my research. Although some people find it hard to refuse any reasonable request I hoped that the distance created by the telephone would allow any woman to refuse to participate if she so wished. This view was further strengthened by my sense of having no immediate power over the women, in the way that an employee of East Midlands Arts might be seen to, and by my sense of gratitude when the women agreed to take part. The difficulty some women experience in turning down requests for help, irrespective of distance, is a reflection of their position in relation to power within society generally (Phoenix 49). As the research progressed and my confidence in the process, myself, and my sample group increased, my sense of power changed. I was frequently aware that I approached my participants as a white, middle class, feminist academic, with all its attendant dangers of “‘knowing better’ rather than *knowing differently*” (Reay 62). On the other hand, my commonality with my sample group, as a painter, gave me an equality with them reminiscent of Janet Finch and her clergy wives, and Clara Greed and her women surveyors (cited in Roberts). We had, probably, shared some experiences in our years of training and in our struggles to become professional artists. Indeed, as Woodward and Chisholm found, the balance of status was often in favour of my participants by virtue of their “greater” standing in the art world than mine (as judged by traditional standards) - although possibly only in this respect.

Abbott and Wallace suggest that the ideal feminist research model would be one of “non-individual co-research, where the researcher helps the women involved to undertake their own research” (207). They go on to state that this model is rarely adopted because of practical difficulties for the researcher in sharing her knowledge and expertise. My research progressed in a number of stages, namely the decision regarding the sample, initial

telephone calls, preparation and dissemination of pre-interview questionnaires, an analysis of the questionnaire responses, the preparation of the interview framework and questions, and conducting the interviews. At each stage of the research the power dynamic varied, depending on who had control. Although I was in control of formulating the questionnaire and interview questions, the latter were partially influenced by the participants' answers to the former. In addition the semi-structured nature of the interview schedule allowed for the development of topics raised by the women, placing some control with them. In fact, on some rare occasions I lost control of the interview, as the participant avoided answering my questions and took the conversation into areas totally unrelated to my research although of great concern to her. Ultimately, the interpretation of the interview material rests with me.

The ease with which many feminist researchers such as Finch and Oakley have collected narratives and experiences from women has created concern about the moral responsibilities associated with this. Phoenix suggests that rapport between researcher and researched creates a "situation of easy intimacy" (50) which, whilst feeling less exploitative, may ensure a greater quantity of collected data. Stacey goes further in her belief that the "ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and 'masculinist' research methods" (114).

There are two basic problems with what researchers might do with their data. The first centres on the responsibility of sociologists producing work on women to anticipate any use of the material which is different from their intentions (Finch, "Values, Ethics and Politics" 207). The aim of my research, for example, is to provide an account of a certain group of women painters' experiences in a way which will be beneficial to them, but the information that many of the women's creativity takes the form of a variety of media could be interpreted in a traditional art paradigm as evidence of dilettantism, thereby once again placing women artists outside the mainstream. By demonstrating, however, through the re-readings of feminist art history, that such practice is rooted in previous, if little-known, periods of artistic production, with their own attendant values, this may in turn contribute to a paradigm shift.

The second problem is associated with the interpretation in feminist research of data on non-feminist women. Much debate has arisen around the early assumptions by white, middle class feminists that all women suffered equally under patriarchy (hooks;

Phoenix; Dill; Reay).<sup>3</sup> Stanley and Wise suggest that women shared a “set of common experiences” and that the “shared experience” is not a biological one but their “common experience of oppression” (21). Maynard, however, warns that “most women are not feminists and would not necessarily agree with accounts of the social world generated from a feminist stance.” (20) Where does feminist research find itself when some of the researched women do not acknowledge that oppression, or do not agree with the researcher’s interpretation of the data? Borland writes about the rift this issue caused between herself, as researcher, and her grandmother, as participant. Borland’s feminist interpretation of her grandmother Bea’s narrative was totally denied by the grandmother who wrote: “your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation.” (70) Borland believes that a major problem for Bea was the label “feminist” which carries strong negative meanings for many women, and is often rejected by them. Many of the women painters I interviewed gave no overt indication of perceiving a problem with the structure of the art world, frequently “denying” the existence of a gendered inequality, and although they are all “women” they would not all assume the label “feminist”. As Stanley and Wise suggest, “within feminism” is not necessarily the same as “between women” (21). Feminist research must take into account the differing experiences of being female:

[W]omen are never *just* women - they are old or young, mothers or daughters, black or white, partnered or unpartnered, employed in public life or employed at home . . . and all these “positions” . . . make for “uniquely valid insights”. (Gelsthorpe 215)

Skeggs also questions the automatic assumptions that “the women who we research desire or are in need of conscientization” (79). In her research on young white working-class women, she found a scepticism about feminism and its value in their lives. Because of the differences in their life experiences, the young women did not share Skeggs’ perceived need for change.

This raises the question of who benefits from the research? Feminist research involves the study of gendered inequalities *for* women, not just about women, for the purposes of effecting social or political change (Maynard and Purvis; Stanley and Wise;

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<sup>3</sup> This is a criticism particularly levelled at early liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan, Alice Rossi, and Susan Okin. It is argued that the “sameness-equality” feminism that they espoused was based on “having the same” as middle-class males (Evans; Bowlby).

Fonow and Cook; Mies). Change can be effected in a variety of ways, through consciousness-raising, the alteration of institutional structures, increased awareness on the part of educators, to name a few. In the course of my study, although unintentional, there was a certain amount of raising individuals' awareness of their social and political position as women artists (Fonow and Cook). Many women, for example, said during the interviews that they were thinking through ideas and issues that they had failed to grapple with before our discussion. One benefit, therefore, may have been an increased self-knowledge, on the part of some women, of their own values and desires; an opportunity that their position, or lack of it, within the art world does not afford.

Working with the knowledge that traditional research has been frequently guilty of taking from research participants and giving nothing in return (Acker, Barry and Esseveld; Skeggs) I planned an opportunity for giving feedback to my participants. I intended that the meeting should give them the chance to respond to my findings and my analysis through providing them with an increased knowledge about their position in my research. In addition I intended to provide a space in which women artists, many of whom work in relative isolation, could meet and talk. In this way I hoped to avoid the worst excesses of qualitative research, described by Reinharz as "a rape model: [where] the researchers take, hit, and run" (95) in which the research process causes disruption, dissatisfaction and in some cases distress to the subjects. In order to mediate this process I held a follow-up meeting to which I invited all the participants. The aim was to present a précis of my findings and to generate an opportunity for discussions about issues arising from my research. The opportunities for networking were also of great importance. Approximately one-third of the sample group attended on the day, producing a lively, interested and stimulating meeting.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2. The Sample Group.

The background against which all women artists work is that of a patriarchal structure within art education (Dalton; Skelton; Dossor; Brooks; Burman; Pollock, "Art, Art School . . .") and the history of art as it is presented in education (Brighton; Walsh; Pollock, Vision and Difference), the media and popular myth. The emphasis on the artist as male creates difficulties for women artists in accessing role models in the way that male

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<sup>4</sup> The entire group subsequently expressed interest in meeting on a semi-regular basis.

artists can (Robinson, H; Davidson; LaChapelle; Grimes, Collins and Baddeley). There have been two studies which indicate that women artists need role models (Davidson; Perkins) but there is still relatively little knowledge of how they use such models in the development of their identity as artists. Although there is a valid methodological base for researching men to further the knowledge about women (Stanko) where that knowledge is still rudimentary the most obvious starting point is the experience of the women themselves. As Condor argued, when ~~the~~ researcher is aiming to reach an understanding of women in their own terms ~~male~~ responses are secondary. This decided the focus of this research project on women artists.

Through my previous MA research (Perkins) into first degree level painting students, and as a painter myself, I have a particular interest in the situation of women painters, and their experiences. Further, painting (as opposed to sculpture or photography, for example) is still one of the most dominant art forms, including within art education, in spite of the increased interest in categories such as film, scripto-visual or multi-media work. Proportionally more women and men are educated in painting practice rather than any other art form<sup>5</sup> and there is more available information about painting and painters than other media.<sup>6</sup> I, therefore, decided to focus specifically on women *painters*.

Much art historical research has focused on “successful” male artists, as individuals and as instigators and perpetrators of significant movements within art history.<sup>7</sup> Professional success has been defined in various ways in different historical periods, from obtaining aristocratic patronage during the Renaissance (Ayres), through acceptance by the academies in the eighteenth century, to the degree of critical and/or public acclaim of modern art (White). These models of “the artist” have been replicated by the majority of work on women painters (Petersen and Wilson) which has tended to apply the same criteria for success and to focus on individuals who are “established” in terms of their exhibitions, reviews, education etc. In choosing my sample group I decided to focus on women who define themselves as professional artists, but rather than imposing that label on them I selected my participants through their own self-identification as such.

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<sup>5</sup> I deduce this from the number of painting, as opposed to other, courses on offer in higher, further and continuing education.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the Thames and Hudson complete catalogue, books referring to painters, paintings and movements in painting account for 25% of the total list.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the vast quantity of texts which, by their sheer numbers, imply that Monet was *the* Impressionist movement. Similarly, Cezanne is usually credited with being the “Father of modern painting” in the tradition which perceives all art as successive (White).

practising women painters (Registers being separated into different media) with the added advantage that by giving contact addresses everybody on the Register has already agreed to be contacted by those who see the Register. The East Midlands Arts Register of Artists was chosen for sampling by virtue of its geographical coverage: it deals with four counties which together have a sizeable population (3,258,000 approx., Multimedia); each of the counties has at least one higher educational establishment, although only two of the counties (Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire) have major art educational facilities (Nottingham Trent University, De Montfort University and Loughborough College of Art and Design), which in itself might provide points of comparison; and the area covered is sufficiently distant from London to have its own clear identity.<sup>8</sup> Being located in the same geographic region the women are, at least to some extent, subject to similar surroundings, experiences and social expectations, providing a level of commonality amongst them. In addition, on leaving higher education many students choose to remain in the area where they studied, which coupled with the existence of three major art establishments, allows for some consideration of an educational experience common to at least some of the women.

Much of the research into women artists has analysed their experiences of a higher art education irrespective of when that was, finding that women were disadvantaged in the old 'art college' atmosphere of many institutions (Dossor; Skelton; Walsh). This has been described as a machismo world constructed around the Bohemian model of the artist,<sup>9</sup> to which women students in the majority of cases struggle to adapt (Davidson; Pollock, "Art, Art School . . ."). With the merging of the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design with the Council for National Academic Awards in 1974, the Dip AD became a BA with Honours. One of the results of this move was the increased standing art and design gained in the academic environment: it became an integral part of higher education rather than an isolated subject with its own institutions and procedures (Ashwin), supposedly eradicating the worst teaching practices of the previous system, which had contributed largely to the overt masculinity of the college experience. By concentrating my sample on those who had graduated after 1975 I thus removed one variable from the research. As all of the sample group graduated after 1975 they experienced a broadly similar era in art

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<sup>8</sup> Although many artists working in the East Midlands region may seek exhibitions in London, the facilities most readily accessible are local art galleries, museums and other spaces, providing a distinct regional art arena.

<sup>9</sup> A useful definition of the Bohemian artist is Levitine's description of Alexis Grimou as "constantly penniless and improvident, he is endowed with an unusually developed ego, he is a resolute non-



than an isolated subject with its own institutions and procedures (Ashwin), supposedly eradicating the worst teaching practices of the previous system, which had contributed largely to the overt masculinity of the college experience. By concentrating my sample on those who had graduated after 1975 I thus removed one variable from the research. As all of the sample group graduated after 1975 they experienced a broadly similar era in art education, including the supposed exclusion of the sexist bias evident in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Following higher art education many artists take some time to discover if they are going to be professional artists, with quite a few giving up within the first two years of leaving education (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi). In other words, people's commitment to being artists may change quite drastically in the first two years immediately after they leave art education. For this reason all participants in the study had to have been practising artists for a minimum of three years at the point of interview. The assumption was that if they had been practising artists for at least three years, they were more likely to have a serious, long-term commitment to being (professional) artists. Since I began this research in 1996, this meant that those who had had a higher education, had, therefore, to have graduated by 1993.

Although the selection criterion of graduating between 1975 and 1993 might appear to preclude older women from the study, and certainly a few who fitted other criteria were excluded, because of the phenomenon of the increase in mature students since 1975 (Edwards), the sample group ultimately included women between the ages of 25 and 67. It would have been possible to access such a group of women painters through educational establishments, but this route would have maximised the impact of the institutional experience on the selection of the sample group and precluded the possible existence of a sub-group of women painters who have no formal art training, but who nevertheless are professional artists, like Monica Sjoo, for example. To deny that being self-taught is an acceptable background for professionalism would be to reproduce the patriarchal constraints which feminists have been working against.

#### 1.2.1. Contacting the Sample Group.

Using the Artists' Register gave two options for the initial contact with the women; either sending out letters and questionnaires to all the women on the list, or telephoning

individuals first. My initial investigation, which entailed phoning some of the women on the list to ascertain the viability of using the Register as a tool, demonstrated clearly that many of the people on the list no longer lived at the addresses given. The effect of sending out letters and questionnaires “blind” would, therefore, have resulted in many not reaching the intended addressee. Further, the return rate for this type of distribution is very poor (Woodward and Chisholm; Cohen and Manion). From the initial investigation I also learnt that once I had explained what the research was about and what it would entail for the women their responses were very positive and in some cases very enthusiastic. Personal contact appeared to give the women a level of commitment impossible to match through “blind” distribution, supported by the “good” initial return rate of 66% and a final return rate of 100%.<sup>10</sup> Telephoning also provided a swift opportunity to sift out those women who did not fit the criteria specified above (although many were disappointed when told that they could not be included because they had graduated too early or too late).<sup>11</sup>

I decided to use random sampling techniques by working alphabetically through the Register. This resulted in an initial sample group of thirty-three women, obtained over approximately a two-month period. Having originally decided to aim for a sample group of fifty in order to generate a sizeable and representative sample, I had to apply other sampling methods in order to gain more participants. I returned to the names of women who had moved, using various techniques to track them down. I contacted the Women’s Art Library, London,<sup>12</sup> with a list of the women in case they were also registered there, with no results. There is a recognised difficulty in tracing women as they move (Woodward and Chisholm) because many unmarried women choose not to be listed in the telephone directory; they rarely appear under their own initials if married; and finding women who have changed their name through marriage is virtually impossible. Women’s visibility is thus a serious issue. As many painters belong to studio groups, especially in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, all the studios in those two counties were contacted, providing telephone numbers for a few of the women painters. I also networked through people I already knew who knew others, or through women I had already contacted

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<sup>10</sup> Woodward and Chisholm considered their final return rate of 80% good.

<sup>11</sup> Having to exclude some women because of the sampling criteria was one of the drawbacks of the research. However, this leaves scope for further research.

<sup>12</sup> The Women’s Art Library is a national organisation for the purposes of maintaining slides, archives, catalogues and other data on women artists. The address is Fulham Palace, Bishop’s Avenue, London, SW6 6EA.

through the Register, that is, I used snowballing as a means of finding potential interviewees (Woodward and Chisholm; Cohen and Manion). Through these methods contact was made with a further ten women who fitted the criteria of this study, giving a total of forty-three participants in the sample group.<sup>13</sup>

On first contact, many of the women were very unsure of their value to the project. When I explained that the study was about women painters, some said that teaching, children, working, illness, lack of facilities, etc. were preventing them from producing work at the time I was telephoning them. One advantage of speaking personally to such women was in the reassurance that I was able to give that their perception of themselves as artists was an important factor in the study, whatever, or however much, they were producing at that precise moment in time. This demonstrates two issues; the situation that many women experience of an (art) career break owing to family demands or the necessity of earning a living; and the lack of confidence that many women (artists) have in their own worth (Skeggs), making them reluctant to involve themselves in such research and further denying themselves a voice.

### 1.3. Commencement.

In order to generate some initial information on my sample group, I developed a questionnaire. Questionnaires can be seen as a quantifiable tool (Jayaratne) with possible responses converted to numbers in order to “facilitate analysis” (Jayaratne 143). Harding, however, argues that the questionnaire can be “constructed to elicit qualitative data in preference to quantitative, both in order to gain as much information as possible . . . and to allow group members to express their own interpretation . . .” (103). The function of the questionnaire in my study was to collect facts, ideas and views on issues related to visual art, its pedagogy, its presentation, and the participants’ place and production within that (Spradley). To achieve this I used open-ended questions. In addition to supplying data for analysis, I intended to use responses to the questionnaires as a means of constructing the interview framework. The questionnaire was, therefore, another analytic tool, both as a data source, of factual information and beliefs (Miles and Huberman), and as a possible triangulation device (Cohen and Manion), against which could be balanced

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<sup>13</sup> This coincidentally matches exactly the size of Davidson’s sample group in her study on women artists in London.

data from textual sources and the interviews; cross-referencing, substantiating and challenging each body of data.

Answering questions in written form requires a different type of response to the face-to-face conversation. The opportunity to reflect on some of the questions might prove valuable for the research and useful to the respondent. At the same time, it was always possible that some respondents would dash off their answers very quickly and with little thought. Because of the wish to interest the respondents, the questions in the questionnaire were chosen to stimulate the women to begin thinking about themselves (if they had not already done so) in relation to their lives as artists and women, and the work that they produced, in a form that allowed for their responses to be as extensive as necessary.

#### 1.3.1. The Questionnaire.

The questionnaire (Appendix A) consisted of four sections dealing with issues of biography, training, lifestyle and work. It contained twenty-five questions which were designed to obtain brief information about the women's art education, if they had had one, where they worked and other practicalities surrounding their working practice, how work fitted in with their lives, and their views on current issues in art.

The section on training asked respondents to record the age when they first showed a clear interest in art. I expected that some might answer this as the age when they first remembered being interested in art, but that others would possibly refer to the "family myth", when parents believe their children demonstrated clearly that they were "artistic". It is part of the Romantic image of the artist that artistic ability is innate (Davidson; Kris and Kurz) and will therefore be visible from a (very) young age as, for example, in the case of Leonardo da Vinci. Factual information concerning the participants' formal art education post-sixteen was dealt with in the second question in this section. I requested information about institutions attended, qualifications gained and the main subjects studied, which was designed to provide the background for the interview about the importance and impact of the women's education on their art practice and self-perception as artists.

The eight questions contained within the section on "lifestyle" covered the participants' workspace, their attitudes to work, their view of the image of the artist,

whether they read about art and artists, and possible (life) role models. The majority of these questions were intended to create interview information, allowing the interview to be personally focused, and weighted to specific issues.

The section of the questionnaire on “work” consisted of nine questions covering (work) role models, other artists’ exhibitions, work contacts and the meaning the women place on being an artist. The questions about exhibitions were intended to provide a point of comparison to the answers given in the interviews concerning the participants’ attitudes towards exhibiting. Issues around work contacts and (work) role models were to be raised in the follow-up interviews, but lists of artists’ names could also be analysed quantitatively. It was expected that the final question (What does being an artist mean to you?) would give respondents the opportunity to reflect (at whatever length they wanted) on the significance, and the effects on them, of being an artist. This gave them a sense of their voice being heard (Slatkin) and added to the overall picture of their perception of themselves as artists, a central question in the research.

### 1.3.2. The Pilot Study.

A sample of ten was chosen as a suitable number on which to base the pilot of the questionnaire, as this would allow for a variation in responses, indicating if the questions were appropriately worded and where any gaps existed. The pilot sample group was obtained randomly from the first ten names on the Artists’ Register that I was able to contact. After the initial telephone contact, the ten women who agreed to participate were sent the questionnaire with a covering letter (Appendix B) explaining again what the research was about and how it would involve them, and giving a deadline for the return of the completed questionnaires. By the due date only half of the questionnaires had been returned. I then telephoned the five women whose questionnaires were missing to check that there were no problems and to ask them to complete them. Of these five one had not received her copy because I had sent it to her previous address, one had been very ill and one had very complicated and time-consuming family problems. In spite of these difficulties they all responded positively to this second contact and agreed to return the questionnaires. I left messages for the other two women on their answerphones. The telephone calls proved effective in that all outstanding questionnaires were returned within the following week.

In addition to the twenty-five questions on the questionnaire, the pilot sample group was asked three extra questions:

1. If there were any questions which you thought were not worded clearly, please state which ones and how they might be improved.
2. Were there any questions which you would have preferred to answer in an interview?
3. Were there any questions which you thought should have been included?

An analysis of the way that the main questions were answered and the responses to the extra questions suggested that there were some problems with three questions (numbers 8, 14 and 18) in that a few participants were unsure about how to interpret them. This was particularly evident with question 14 concerning a possible stereotypical image of the artist. The original wording of the question presupposed that the respondent had a view of the “conventional image of the artist” and that this was universally understood. As this question was to form a major issue within the whole study it was important to construct the question clearly to prevent possible misunderstandings. The re-structuring of this question into three parts had the effect of leading the respondents through in stages, allowing for differing viewpoints:

- a) Do you think there is such a thing as a conventional/stereotypical ‘image of the artist’?
- b) If yes, can you briefly describe it?
- c) What is your view of that image?

Question 18 and the last section of question 8 only required minor alterations for greater clarity. The majority of the questions produced a range of answers and were not identified by the sample group or by myself as problematic, so were left unchanged.

In response to question 3 above, four women wrote some very interesting suggestions for additional questions, but I decided that they would all be most effectively included in the interviews. Two of the women specifically wanted the opportunity of registering the importance of their children as factors in their creative development. Whilst this might be of significance to some of the sample group, to have included in the questionnaire questions concerning the respondents’ children might have suggested a normative experience based on an essentialist reading of woman (Rich). From my own experience as a mother, I recognised that my own children had contributed to my

development as an artist (see Introduction). I thought, however, that in order to avoid assumptions around every woman's experience this question could be handled more appropriately during the interviews.

The style of response varied from very extensive answers covering all available space, which suggested an interest in and enthusiasm for the issues raised by the questions, to one word answers. This last, however, may have been caused by factors other than reluctance of involvement, for example, lack of time or difficulty in expressing ideas in written form. Two of the women made it very clear that they did not enjoy/find it easy to respond in the written form, and would have preferred the whole contact to have been face-to-face.

### 1.3.3. The Sample Group Responses.

All participants were given a turn-around time of about two weeks, giving them enough time to complete the questionnaire without pressure, but not so long that it would be forgotten. There was an unusually high initial response to the questionnaire (Cohen and Manion), with 66% (twenty-two of the first group of thirty-three) being returned by the deadline. This could be a result of the amount of time given, but it could also be a reflection of the level of commitment felt by the women towards the study following the telephone discussions. Initially I hesitated to chase up those who had not responded because I expected from personal experience that non-response would be most likely owing to pressures of work, rather than a deliberate refusal to be involved, and I was reluctant to add to their pressures. All of the non-returners, however, had appeared initially very enthusiastic at the prospect of being involved in the research which encouraged me to follow them up. It took time to re-contact the eleven women, but discussions with them were encouraging, as once again they were all positive about their involvement with the project, in spite of heavy work loads (six), illness (one), moving house (two), and family problems (one). Completed questionnaires were subsequently received from all eleven women. The final eleven women who made up the sample group were sent the questionnaire individually as they were contacted, because of the length of time taken to trace them all. At this stage there were forty-four women artists in the sample group who had received and returned questionnaires.

The questionnaire was designed with at least three lines for replies to be written

and approximately half of the sample group (twenty-two) answered the questions with phrases and/or sentences which suggested that they had given the form some time and engaged sustainedly with the questions. In answer to Question 25 “What does being an artist mean to you?”, WA15 wrote:

After ten years of making, work, being poor sometimes, slightly better off occasionally, I still have no desire to stop or give up my practice. To some extent, I feel as if I’m only just beginning to make the work I really want to make. I find painting, drawing - working practice the most stimulating activity. Compared to other areas I have interest in, working as a visual artist is the one that I can’t get away from. I don’t know how different my life would seem if I stopped - I think that I would feel something enormous was lacking. In another sense, I feel a great deal of responsibility when making work. I am aware of the fact that I will be judged as a woman artist, and not just an artist. This is something I have always been aware of and indeed attempt to deal with within the work I make. Much of my work in the past has dealt with images of the female figure or ‘sign’. . . . I hope in some way to raise questions and hopefully get some sort of reaction to the work. It is vitally important to me that the work be seen and responded to. I enjoy the idea of dialogue, even if the reactions are not always good. For me it is essential to get work out of the studio - and let it live away from the artist.

Six of the returns (14%) were completed in a very brief style, that is one word answers, or the minimum necessary in order to answer the questions, which (possibly quite unfairly) gave the impression that the respondents had not engaged with the project at this stage, for whatever reason. (There was, however, no correlation with the quality of interview later on.) On the other hand, fifteen of the women (35%) responded very extensively, writing long answers, filling every available space on the form, appearing to work out thoughts and ideas that were important to them. Inevitably this gave the impression that they had spent considerable time and effort completing the questionnaire, and expectations of the subsequent interviews were heightened but, as above, this did not always follow.

In addition to returning the completed questionnaires many of the women included notes and letters, often hurriedly written, apologising for a delay or a “badly” written form, and often sending me notices of exhibitions or events that they were involved in. Personal touches of this sort once again reinforced my sense of the commitment held by many of the women to the research project. The level of interpersonal interaction displayed by many of my participants is regarded by some theorists as a dominant female trait (Chodorow; Gilligan) and was evident throughout the research process.

After clarifying three questions through the pilot study, the majority of answers



given in the main study were within a range of responses, suggesting that the wording of the questions was understandable for all the respondents. Three answers, however, to Question 24 (What are your views on the traditional gallery system?) indicated that the wording of the question was unclear; two wrote “I don’t know what you mean”, and one challenged the idea of a single gallery structure, asking if this was about commercial or public galleries. Although it could be frustrating to respondents to feel unclear about what a question “meant”, the way that the majority of the women interpreted the question demonstrated something about their perspectives on galleries and exhibiting, and often opened up quite personal feelings, for example, “Seems to prefer conceptual and abstract work, still appears elitist and male” (WA12). Three women wrote that they could not comment on the gallery system (in later discussions it was apparent that this was because they had no gallery exhibition experience and believed this precluded them from having an opinion on the subject).

Question 16 (Please name any artist(s) whose life has influenced how you work.) raised the most controversy, with only twenty respondents citing any such artists. Twenty-three of the respondents did not name any artists, either leaving the space blank or writing challenging comments such as:

I am far more influenced by the work than the life of any artist.  
(WA11)

Their *work* influences my work, not their lives. (WA28)

These types of responses indicated lines of enquiry for the subsequent interviews, attempting to tease out attitudes and beliefs regarding the issue of influence.

As a research tool the questionnaire can be valuable in terms of the numbers that can be reached (Harding, T; Dicks) and the type of information that can be obtained (Harding, T; Marshall). This was evident in this study, but in addition there is the interest from the respondents in the issues raised in the questionnaire and in the project as a whole. One reason for the commitment of the women may be that the questionnaire engaged them on a personal level, giving them the feeling that the questions asked were of interest to them and requiring them to think about themselves and their working practice, which had been the intention behind the design, leaving the more factual (and regularly requested) questions concerning awards, exhibitions, etc. to a shorter questionnaire to be given on exit from the study (see section 1.5. p.47).

The success rate of returns, the information gathered and the commitment

generated suggest that the pilot study and questionnaire combined provided an appropriate data collecting tool.

#### 1.4. The Interview.

##### 1.4.1. Interview Structure.

This research was designed to allow women painters to speak for themselves about their experiences of being artists and what meaning that had for them. This qualitative aim required me to use interviews in order to explore the “everyday world” (Smith 106; Owen 63) of the women in my sample. In order to find answers to the research questions it was necessary to explore the areas of their lives in which women painters might gain ideas about how to be artists (Griff; Pollock; Dalton; Walsh). Some of these areas are directly related to the production of work, but others play a more covert part in the learning process (Kris and Kurz; Davidson; Brighton). I identified eight main categories containing a variable number of questions or issues to be raised in the interviews. These were: art education, working process and approach, the product, exhibiting, image, artist influence, domestic situation, and views on feminist theories (Appendix C).

An art education provides students with more than just a technical ability in a particular medium, allowing them to “try on” the image of being an artist to see if it “fits” (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi; Brighton). It is where an aspiring artist may learn how to dress, behave and think appropriately in order to adopt the role of artist. As a possible source of role models education is therefore very significant, and it formed the first section of interview questions.

The structure of these questions was informed by responses given on the questionnaire which were of a factual nature; institutions, dates, qualifications and courses taken. Knowledge gained from the questionnaires made the interviews more personal from the start, allowing the time to be spent exploring issues lying behind the facts. A question about the importance of various subjects taken in a course, for example, might open up a discussion about the attitudes of the college staff to different art forms, or about an interviewee’s personal progress through her course, or what her aims were at that stage in her development. Sometimes it was sufficient to begin with a general question about courses, for the interviewee to offer extensive comment which answered other questions. As the participants’ answers derived from a familiar and factual base, this section of the

interview functioned as an ice-breaker (Yeandle), allowing both interviewer and interviewee to relax (Stephens).

An obvious potential source of role models during an art education are the staff who work alongside students on a regular basis. Lecturers in fine art are usually employed because of their “professional” status as painters (or sculptors, printmakers, etc.). This picture of professionalism is built up through factors such as their education, which institutions they attended, the number, range and prestige of exhibitions they have had, the type of work they produce and previous teaching experience (Brighton). There were, therefore, several questions built into the interview concerning the interviewee’s relationship with her tutors, the gender of her tutors and whether they were relevant as role models.

The work that art students produce is expected to be individual and original, but in the course of their learning they will be directed towards different artists and movements of art for sources, reinforcement and extension of ideas, technical support, approaches to working etc. which will affect the style and content of their own work to some extent. Information about themes of work produced whilst at college might suggest where the interviewee placed herself at that time within the art world.

Information concerning the age of the respondent on attending college was available from the questionnaire, making it possible to ask those individuals who had been mature students why they had gone to college later. Points of change can be illuminating (Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life) and the decision to possibly give up paid employment to attend an art college course can provide clues to the way a woman perceives herself as an artist. This also ties into the last question of this section about parental attitudes towards studying art. Parents are often pleased with a young child’s artistic ability (Kris and Kurz), but discourage older children from pursuing a career in art, through fears about the lifestyle that they believe is inevitable on becoming an artist (Griff).

The studio as a working space has long been part of the trappings of being an artist, epitomised in the Romantic image of a cold garret, and in more recent times by the large, airy “lofts” of New York (Chicago). These are part of the masculine structure of art production, possibly creating expectations in budding artists that to belong to the art world it is necessary to have a “proper” studio. In Chicago’s description of visits she made to women artists in their working spaces she found them working in “bedrooms, dining

rooms, and porches more often than [in] two thousand square feet of commercial white space” (98). Questions concerning the spaces in which the women worked were asked in the interviews, to explore how they saw and expressed their positioning in the art world through their working environment.

Questions about issues of professionalism were included in this section as part of an attempt to unpack the women’s views of themselves as artists, what professionalism might mean to them, how they define it and describe themselves to others. Chicago asserts that the status of many women artists is undermined by being placed on the fringes of acceptable male performance models, that is where they work, how much time they devote to their work, how single-minded they are about their work, in addition to the more obvious measures such as the work that is produced. Various questions were used to get at these issues; questions about working time, inter-relation of work with life, types of response to the work and difficulties within the work. All participants were also asked if they thought they would be different if they were not an artist.

Issues around the product itself centre on factors such as the preferred medium, form, subject matter and theories. Tutors on an higher art education course tend to encourage their students to use oil paints (WA10). Where this is for anything other than creative reasons, for example the thickness of the paint, the slow drying times etc., it can be seen as adopting the mainstream values of the art world, and perpetuating an existing hierarchy. Participants needed to be asked what media they used and why, to see if they equated being an artist with the use of particular media, and if they were affected by their art college training. Debates around formal issues such as the scale of work, abstraction, formalism, etc. are relatively modern, arising out of twentieth-century Western art movements dominated by male artists. Many art students are encouraged to work in a very large scale, giving them the message that to be taken seriously work must be big and therefore in keeping with the dominant male ideology (Pollock, “Art, Art School . . .”). If women artists concur with this whilst studying, do they continue to think and work in this way once they are working alone? Participants were therefore asked about the importance of these issues in their work.

Just as the women had been asked about themes in their art college work, they were also questioned about their current subject matter, where their ideas come from, and how their ideas progress into their work. This is in itself of interest, but also valuable as a

comparison to their work at college, to identify changes that take place and what this might suggest about their developing identities.

The Romantic image of the artist is someone who lives entirely for their work, driven to painting in order to release his creative urges (Honour; Levitine), so at this stage I was also interested to know if the participants had any other creative outlets, or if they focused all their energies into painting, adopting the values of the dominant paradigm.

An artist's *curriculum vitae* is largely dependent on the exhibitions s/he can list, where, with whom, and how often. For many artists these days (probably in the last ten years) the first exhibiting experience is during the Degree Show, where they present themselves and their work in as professional a manner as possible, often hoping that business will be done.<sup>14</sup> The aim for many after that is to get as many exhibitions as possible, increasing the prestige of venue over a period of time, until they reach London. As mentioned above, staff in higher art education are selected partly on their track record which reinforces its importance to students. Galleries, public and commercial, have consistently favoured male artists' work over that of women artists (Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism; Olin and Brawer), reducing the opportunities for women artists amongst established, accepted and possibly prestige venues. Behind all this lies an assumption that all women artists would like to exhibit in just such places, and yet there is little knowledge about this and what it means to women artists to exhibit their work. Probing these issues during the interviews was designed to add information about the overall image the women had of themselves as artists within the current art world.

Many of these earlier questions explored aspects of the women's self-identity as artists. It was equally important, however, to confront the issues around stereotypical images of the artist against which all artists live and work, but which may create special difficulties for women artists due to their cultural, social and educational conditioning. The interview was designed to elicit the participants' views of, and reactions to, stereotypical images of artists. Their responses show to what extent the women try to enter or resist those images, and what that means in terms of their own identity.

Amongst this group of questions the participants were asked for their views on

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<sup>14</sup> An example of the development of art students' business acumen was demonstrated by Damien Hirst who organised the exhibition "Freeze" (Aug-Sept 1988) whilst still a student at Goldsmith's College, London. The show consisted of a group of second and third year students and past students and was "praised for its professionalism, Thatcherite enterprise and slick marketing." (Shone 17)

whether or not there is a different status for different art forms. The aim was to open up discussion about the hierarchies that might be perceived to exist in the art world, regarding painting, sculpture and printmaking, for example, or arts and crafts. Much of women's creative production through history has been invisible because of its "craft" orientation and its social position within the domestic space (Petersen and Wilson; Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses): when such work is given a public platform it is labelled "craft". It seemed relevant to establish where the women placed themselves within this framework and how this affected their development as artists.

Denial of any effects of gender difference amongst women artists has been recorded (Perkins). If the normative condition of being an artist is male then to identify with the female is to undermine one's chances of being accepted as an artist. I was interested to see if the women's view of their own work was gender-specific, that is, if they used "female imagery" or "female issues" in their work, but to ask them directly would possibly create a denial situation, so I asked in a more oblique way if their work would be different if they were a male artist.

The questionnaire requested that all participants list three different categories of artist: those whose lives had influenced them, those whose work had influenced them and those who were in their opinion the most important contemporary artists. Their responses permitted the questioning of why particular artists had been listed and in what way they were influential. In conversations I have had with various artists concerning the idea of another artist's life being influential, male artists have denied any relevance of such a position, maintaining that it is only, possibly, the work that is important. As Bloom argues, "Every major aesthetic consciousness seems peculiarly more gifted at denying obligation as the hungry generations go on treading one another down." (The Anxiety of Influence 6) I was therefore not too surprised when, as mentioned previously, over half of the participants avoided, or reacted against, the question on artists whose lives had influenced them, which meant that more work was necessary during the interview to tease out their attitudes around issues of influence, finding other ways of asking the same question, for example, have you ever felt motivated by any aspect of someone else's life? Although such denial by these women artists may be a reflection of their actual position, it was also possible that they had internalised a typically male attitude towards notions of influence.

Adopting patriarchal attitudes in relation to social expectations of women, artists, both male and female and as diverse as Carel Weight and Berthe Morisot, have frequently pronounced on the inadvisability of women artists marrying and/or having children. Laura Knight (1887-1970), for example, is quoted as saying: “A woman can’t wash up her brushes in the same water that she washes the baby’s bottles.” (Grimes, Collins and Baddeley 48) A wish to remain single or not to have children can have many reasons and, with the social changes that have taken place during the last thirty years, many women would not see marriage or a long-term partnership as an obstacle to a career in art, but the same women might still perceive having children as detrimental to their work. On the other hand, two of the participants in the questionnaire pilot study wanted the chance to discuss the importance of their children to them in their artistic development, suggesting that at least for some women having children had been an experience which influenced their work. Social expectations of women as predominantly responsible for the welfare of the family (Barrett and McIntosh; Gittins, The Family In Question) make questions about the participants’ family situation significant. This section of the interview was designed to generate discussions with the women about their perception of the emotional and physical impact of their families on their work as artists, and the way in which they negotiate the realities of both.

Cultural stimulus and artistic support can vary geographically, so choosing to live in a particular area may affect the availability of studios and studio groups, awards and grants, teaching opportunities, galleries and exhibitions, but did the participants choose where to live on the basis of these factors? As very little of the East Midlands region is famous for its natural beauty (apart from north Derbyshire, where there were no participants) it was anticipated that few, if any, answers would relate to the draw of the local landscape. This has been an important factor for artists, especially those who are at liberty to choose their home location, such as John Piper, Joan Eardley, Peter Lanyon and Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, for example. Landscape as a subject rose in importance during the Romantic period of Western art and was treated as the key to “sublime mystery, and impenetrable depths.” (Honour 34) Those of my participants who identified their immediate landscape as important to their work may, therefore, be following the Romantic tradition.

The last group of questions were designed to elicit information regarding the

participants' views and experience of socially constructed gender roles and the political framework of these. It was anticipated that by this stage in the interview any strong feminist tendencies would have become apparent, but questions such as: "Have you ever been involved with the Women's Movement?" and "Has the Women's Movement changed anything for women artists?" would provide an opportunity for further exploration of these issues.

The final question of the interview "Do you enjoy being a woman?" was intended to end a lengthy discussion on a slightly lighter note, and had relevance to the gender theme of the study. It was introduced for the first time during the third interview, arising spontaneously out of conversational exchanges that had occurred there. As the question led to a further clarification of the participant's view of herself it was included in all subsequent interviews.

#### 1.4.2. In Practice.

The structure of the interview questions was such that each interview could be expected to take slightly different paths. It was necessary, however, to ascertain the effectiveness of the questions in gaining information from the participants. The interview was piloted on one of the questionnaire pilot group, WA1, who had placed herself on the Artists' Register prior to a formal art education. Being relatively inexperienced in conducting interviews, this was also an opportunity for me to practise the advice from feminist research sources: create a relaxed atmosphere, establish rapport, consider the use of body language, methods of questioning, be alert to discrepancies and follow them up (Spradley; Maynard; Finch; Cohen and Manion).

The pilot interview indicated no major problems with the schedule as it had been originally devised, except for two questions towards the end of the interview. I asked WA1, "Why do you live where you do?" She became quite defensive in her body language, obviously interpreting my question as a criticism of her house or surrounding area, bringing in the issue of class<sup>15</sup> between us, but when I re-worded the question to "Why do you live in K.?" she answered without hesitation. This suggested that the manner of asking this particular question in the future needed care to prevent participants from taking unintended offence.

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<sup>15</sup> In general I did not deal with matters of class in this study.



The second difficulty arose around the questions concerning WA1's possible interests in feminist ideas, to which she answered, "I don't know what you mean by that". On reflection, whilst some of the women I interviewed would happily deal with this issue, in order not to exclude those who had not particularly considered this subject the question needed restructuring. This was divided into more accessible questions:

- Do you think men and women have different roles in life?
- How does this affect you?
- Have you ever been involved with the Women's Movement?
- Has it changed anything for women artists?
- Do your feminist views have any relevance for your work?

The sharing of gender is not always sufficient to eradicate misinterpretation between interviewer and participant (Kelly, Burton and Regan; Phoenix) and issues of class and education can interfere with the effective gathering of information:

Simply being women discussing "women's issues" in the context of a research interview is not sufficient for the establishment of rapport and the seamless flow of an interview. (Phoenix 50)

There were times during the pilot interview that the issue of education could have become an inhibiting factor for both myself and WA1 because, amongst other anti-establishment comments, she expressed antipathy towards the institution to which I was attached. Her knowledge of my position did not appear to affect her expression of her views, however, and similarly I decided not to pretend that agreement existed where it did not. The pilot interview thus served to remind me not to make assumptions about participants' understanding of the questions, or about my level of commonality with them.

One pilot interview may seem very limited, especially in comparison to ten pilot questionnaires. It would be impossible to standardise an interview schedule on one pilot, for example, which is a necessary practice for structured interviews (Miles and Huberman). As I stated earlier in this chapter, the methodology of this research required an openness to individual voices in order to gather information about the participants' experiences and the meanings they attached to those experiences. All the interviews, therefore, were individual in character, albeit based on the interview schedule that I had piloted with WA1. I had a list of points that I wanted to cover with each participant, but the order of discussing those points frequently changed, as individual women chose to relate aspects of their lives in their own way. As far as possible I allowed conversations with the women to flow naturally, finding often a richness of narrative when talking in this way (Finch; Oakley).

Ease of communication may have been aided by the fact that all the interviews took place either in the participants' home or their studio, placing them on "home ground" and me as the visitor. In addition to the familiarity of "their" space, the place of work for women artists, whether home or studio, often carries a significance for the construction of their artist identities (Chicago; McEwan; Slatkin; Witzling) and allowed them to involve their work in our conversations.

### 1.5. The Exit Questionnaire.

Questions about the participants' factual work record were kept until last for two reasons: firstly, because they were thought least likely to engage the participants' interest (Cohen and Manion), and if used on a preliminary questionnaire, might have discouraged some of the sample from contributing; and secondly, feminists have consistently argued against the traditional system of validating an artist through their *curriculum vitae*, that is, there is need of a paradigm shift (Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism; Sulter). To have placed initial importance on their exhibition record, their ability to get grants, in effect a certain version of their status as artists, would have been to judge the women against patriarchal values which are at odds with my feminist concerns.

Although it was intended that this research would not support the patriarchal structure that exists within the art world, the information given on a *curriculum vitae* is a potential analytic tool, providing further points of comparison in the triangulation method (Cohen and Manion). I foresaw the possibility that some of the women interviewed might perceive their status as artists within a framework that accepts as normative such measures for denoting success. This might be visible, therefore, through their answers on the exit questionnaire.

The exit questionnaire (Appendix D) consisted of ten questions typical of those asked on official forms such as East Midlands Artists' Register applications, and covering grants and awards; travelling for education or work purposes; the participants' studio; membership of artists' groups; main employment; exhibitions, individual and group; publications; and reviews.

In order not to prolong appointments with participants unnecessarily the exit questionnaires were distributed at the end of each interview, with a stamped addressed envelope for ease of return. Although an informal indication of return time was given no

deadline as such was mentioned. No-one seemed too concerned at this additional work, but I found it difficult to ask people for their return after they had already been so generous with their time. The initial response rate was 60%, (slightly lower than the main questionnaire response rate), and after reminders were sent the total rose to 86%. The majority of my sample were very busy people, often juggling several commitments which made a continuing dedication to my research problematic. I decided, therefore, not to pursue further any outstanding exit questionnaires.

#### 1.6. On Reflection.

Points of commonality between my sample group and myself allowed me to approach the women, on *one* level, as equals. We were all women painters, defined by our self-perception as such and our presence on a register listing; we all lived in the same art region; and those of us who had a higher education had experienced it after major changes were made to art and design education. This gave me a basic understanding of certain types of experiences these women had. But there the similarities ended. It was, therefore, a partial and intermittent commonality.<sup>16</sup> Women of a similar age to myself, for example, who were juggling the demands of a family with their desire to create, directly reflected my own experience. Between myself and other women in the sample group there existed obvious differences, such as those who had greater exhibiting success than myself, those who had external studio spaces, even those with a stronger sense of their self-identity as artists.

The term “woman artist” implies a cohesiveness and potential homogeneity which in reality is an impossible condition. Early forms of second-wave feminism focused on the sameness or difference between “men” and “women” (Evans, J) which forms one element of my study of the similarities and differences between the experiences of my women painters and that of men. Identity politics raised awareness of the differences among groups of women, through sexual preferences, race, ethnicity, culture (Evans, J; hooks) in response to criticism of the mainly white, heterosexual women’s movement. This concept begins the erosion of a sense of group identity, broken down even further by postmodernism’s notions of the fragmentation of self (Flax). It is to be expected, then,

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<sup>16</sup> Mies refers to this as partial identification, a recognition of that which binds, in conjunction with that which separates (“Women’s Research . . .” 79).

that a group of forty-three women, albeit grouped under the umbrella “women artists”, should demonstrate fragmentation of self and group.

A final point: my sample group provided a diversity in age, class, economic status, educational experience, and political commitment. The method of sampling failed to provide the study with an ethnic variability, necessarily making the study Eurocentric. I had anticipated a greater ethnic mix within my study, and had not foreseen such a bias. The list of painters which forms part of the Artists Register held at East Midlands Arts does not reflect the ethnic mix of the geographical region.<sup>17</sup> There are several possibilities which might account for this, especially as it relates to women painters. Firstly, it is possible that women painters from ethnic minorities may not perceive themselves solely as painters (in line with so many of the women in my sample). Secondly, women painters from ethnic minorities may be reluctant to promote their status in this way, either because it is seen as a Western structure unsympathetic to their aims, or because it requires them to put themselves forward in a way that is unacceptable to them. Other possibilities may include lack of knowledge about the Register of Artists or Regional Arts Associations. There is thus a need for greater knowledge of why such women painters are not represented on the Register so that action can be taken to redress the balance.

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<sup>17</sup> This has recently been recognised by the Arts Board in an internal report based on their index of artists, grants and funding.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **The Image of the Artist.**

Post-modern arguments suggest that there can no longer be a normative reading of what it means to be an artist (Kuspit). In spite of this there is still a commonly held notion of the Romantic image of the artist as the “individual genius” (Meuli 202). White, however, succinctly describes the changing status of the artist through time:

Long ago, artists emerged as the agents who led the rest of us to artworks, and they developed thereafter as specialist members of distinctive art worlds. In the past few centuries, artists in some fields gained the status of professionals, with claims for cognitive training and expertise greater than that of their clients. Just in the past century, in some arts certain artists also were proffered as geniuses . . . (*Careers and Creativity* 1)

In the next section of this chapter I shall briefly explore how the image of the artist has changed over time.

Davidson maintains that women artists today have three role models available to them, namely the Craftsperson, the Renaissance artist and the Romantic artist.<sup>1</sup> These relate to various stages in art history. Davidson’s categorisation suggests the possibility of a variety of role models which may be available to women artists, in contrast to the singular role model provided by the Romantic image. Further, Davidson raises the issue of craft within the debate, an element marginalised by Modernism.<sup>2</sup> Feminist critiques have challenged the orthodoxy of a clear art/craft divide, demonstrating the gendered nature of the debate (Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*; Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*). How women artists engage with the issue of pluralism as it relates to art and craft is discussed in the second section of this chapter.

Feminist critics have also identified the significant part stereotypes play in the formation of images of the artist (Battersby; Chicago; Nemser; Nochlin; Robinson). These stereotypes may be internalised by individuals in the formation of self-identity. Griffiths suggests that exclusions help to shape self-identity and that stereotyping is one effect of exclusion. Stereotypes may not be underwritten by all people but they tend to be

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<sup>1</sup> The image of the Craftsperson places importance on producing skilful creative works; the Renaissance artist emphasises scholarly knowledge, especially during the initial stages of production; the Romantic artist stresses the inspirational aspect of creativity, including originality (Davidson 96).

<sup>2</sup> “As Clement Greenberg, the foremost spokesman for high Modernism, still says, ‘Craft is not art.’” (Metcalf 42).

recognised by all (Griffiths 96). I thought that how my sample group perceived these stereotypes - their acceptance or rejection - and their sense of inclusion in/exclusion from the group “artist” might indicate how and what kinds of alternatives to the apparently dominant Romantic artist myth they construct. In the third section of this chapter, I shall therefore discuss my sample group’s perceptions of the artist image. This involves an analysis of their definitions of the terms “woman artist”, “professional artist” and “artist” as a means of identifying my sample’s self-images, and how these relate to society’s expectations of the ideal of the artist.

The period of training to be an artist is a stage when many artists adopt definitions, including stereotypes, of art roles. It is a requirement of the majority of art educational establishments that students should strive for individuality and originality (Pollock, “Art, Art School . . .”; Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi). Within this paradigm questions of influence may become problematic for many artists.<sup>3</sup> The Modernist criterion that to be “great”, art should be unique is perpetuated by art colleges and their students. Even those who work within the post-modernist paradigm continue to strive for originality.<sup>4</sup> Producers are, therefore, reluctant to be seen as “copying” the work of others (Bloom). Where influence is accepted as valid, however, it is often a function of the view that it is “The Work” which matters, not “The Artist”, and yet it is “The Artist” (male) who is the subject of biographies, monographs, historical texts, and myths.<sup>5</sup> The results of my previous research (Perkins) suggest that a reluctance to acknowledge the lives of other artists as significant in their development is a particularly masculine approach. I was, therefore, interested in the possible responses of the women in this study through their choice of artists as role models. This is explored in the last section of the chapter.

## 2.1. Historical Overview.

Art practice in medieval Europe developed from two main traditions: the Classical tradition which was concerned with the life-like representation of a subject, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition which saw the visual arts as a means of promoting divine

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<sup>3</sup> Post-modernism, however, encourages appropriation (Sarup).

<sup>4</sup> Damien Hirst, for example, produces work within a post-modern canon, which advocates the recycling of previous art works and ideas. This does not detract from, or preclude, an idea of his “originality” as an artist.

<sup>5</sup> Although it is the work of an artist which is commonly referred to and discussed, a style, a technique, the colour sense, or meaning; yet the artist’s life is elevated through a plethora of titles such as “Picasso: His Art and Life” or “Cezanne: His Life and His Art”.

authority (Heslop 56). In the early Middle Ages creative production was a family concern, with workshops in the home, and no obvious distinction between “art” and “craft”. The women of the families, who contributed greatly to the production of work, were as highly skilled as the men, but it is difficult to attribute their work “because signatures are rare in medieval art” (Parker and Pollock 16). During this period, Guilds were established, within which the activity of making was controlled by men, excluding women, who had been in the vanguard of craft production, from holding any power (Kowaleski and Bennett). Heslop suggests that the structuring of artistic training during the late Middle Ages slowly eroded the view that artists associated with religious craft production were touched by divine inspiration. This helped to create a fluctuation in the prestige of figurative art (painting and sculpture) over what later became known as decorative art, or craft work (Heslop 54).

By the sixteenth century, the gradual change in the status of art was reinforced through artists breaking the links with the artisan class. In order to raise their social standing they aspired to the attributes of the aristocracy, that is “learning, knowledge and accomplishment” (Pollock, *Vision and Difference* 42) rather than purely skill-based production. Patronage, which was still the means by which artists made their living, had also changed from being exclusively the role of the Church to include the aristocracy and landed gentry. Educated women painters were socially acceptable as artists, provided they “were born into the nobility” (Parker and Pollock 17). Sofonisba Anguissola (1532/5-1625), for example, became a Spanish Court painter. She depicts herself in self-portraits as well-dressed, cultured, beautiful, suggesting that she was able to fulfil the dual requirements of being an artist and those of being a woman. Many of the women artists of this period, whose work is now available to us through their rediscovery,<sup>6</sup> were the daughters of artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) who was trained by her father. Even though it was ostensibly possible to combine the roles of artist and woman Gentileschi’s status as an artist has been overshadowed, in art historical terms, by her biology, that is, the rape she suffered.<sup>7</sup> Examples such as this suggest that Davidson’s assertion that the Renaissance artist role is easily adopted by women is too facile and does

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<sup>6</sup> Feminist recovery of women artists was the first stage in creating change in the art world. Key texts include: Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage*; Sutherland Harris and Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*; Petersen and Wilson, *Women Artists . . .*; Greer, *The Obstacle Race*; Heller, *Women Artists: An Illustrated History*.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the television drama-documentary, “A Reputation: Artemisia Gentileschi”, explained the whole of Gentileschi’s work in relation to her rape and subsequent court case.

not acknowledge that gender overrides art as soon as one talks of *women* artists. The status of women artists was further undermined during the Renaissance period by the aspirations of artists to divinity, as supported by Judaeo-Christian mythology (Parker and Pollock; Heslop). Such lore supports the heroic notion that artists experience a divine force, derived from God, seen as the ultimate creator.

The Italian Renaissance forms only part of the story of European art history; its dominance was challenged by Dutch seventeenth century painting in terms of “spectatorship, content, and patronage” (Chadwick 107). In Northern Europe a combination of Protestant restrictions of religious imagery and increased domestic ideology, moving the focus from the church to the home, leading to a general shift in hierarchical status of the subject matter of paintings, from the (still officially) superior history painting to genre and flower painting. In contrast to the “heroic” concerns of the Renaissance, male and female painters in Holland were engaged in portraying the activities of women and children, and “the realities of domestic spaces” (Chadwick 107). Women were able to portray the spaces which they normally inhabited. This meant that, although not entirely free from social constraints, women painters at that time were involved in a practice which conflicted less with their status as women. The painting of everyday life took as its subject the families and homes of the artists, recording “the activities of women and children, as well as those of men” (Chadwick 107). For contemporary women painters, in the late twentieth century, who are looking for role models this period of Dutch genre painting is not readily available because the hierarchy of subject matter has again altered within the mainstream, away from the personal and back to “heroic” concerns.

The founding of official Academies of Art as educational establishments in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was a further move away from the Guilds, and an affirmation of the artist’s intellectual and social position in society. It also effectively removed the education of future artists from the individual studios, causing the artists to teach/learn within a larger structure. The Academies were one way of segregating the sexes as women were excluded from influential groups such as the Royal Academy of Arts, England and the Academie des Beaux Arts, France. Places for female members were greatly restricted ensuring that the few female artists who were admitted to the Academies, for example, Rosalba Carriera and Elisabeth-Louise Vigee-Lebrun in France, and Angelica



Kauffmann and Mary Moser in Britain (Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses; Chadwick) were regarded as “exceptions”. One major effect of this restriction was the exclusion of women from the anatomical study of the nude (male) model, making it virtually impossible for them to paint historical pictures, which for almost three hundred years were considered the highest form of painting (Pollock, Vision; Chadwick; Wolff). Women were not prevented from painting, however, but the majority were restricted to the genres of still-life and portraiture. These came to be seen as “natural” subjects for women to paint, confirming the general view that this was all women were capable of doing. According to Chadwick there were a few professional women artists at a time of vast numbers of amateurs, all of whom colluded, deliberately or otherwise, in the developing patriarchal construction of femininity (138).

Until the mid-eighteenth century the patron was the major instigator of artistic works, which were seen as representative of the patron’s identity rather than the artist’s (White 72). Changes in patronage around this time were a factor in shaping the new independent image of the artist. Although the Academies retained considerable power, the dealer-critics became very important in the success or otherwise of artists. Artists received fewer commissions and were free to produce work of their choice (Wolff 44). This new-found freedom also included the possibility of poor financial remuneration and led to the image of the artist “starving in a garret”. According to Praz, “a new current in taste can be discerned right from the beginning of the eighteenth century” (12), with the gradual rise of Romanticism and its attendant concepts of individuality and originality.

In addition to this, during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was an increasingly bourgeois attitude towards the family and women’s role within it, with a marked polarisation of women and men (Pollock, Vision 48; Gittins 27).<sup>8</sup> Working class aspirations were fuelled by the “new emphasis on the father/husband as sole earner [which] was a powerful factor in the development of modern notions of ‘masculinity’” (Gittins 27). It became important for a man’s sense of success to “keep” his wife at home, pursuing accomplishments, amongst which were included water colour painting and embroidery. Women who wished to be professional artists were usually considered unfeminine and unnatural (Parker and Pollock). Artists were believed to live outside of conventional

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholson describes a very similar process happening concurrently in the United States (Gender and History 44).

society, leading to the bourgeois concept of the artist as everything anti-domestic and anti-social. The artist “had become” the Romantic model of “the Bohemian Outsider”: a free-living, free-thinking man indulging in numerous sexual relations, as epitomised by Augustus John (1878-1961). This led to an almost total contradiction in the social construction of “the artist” and “the woman”, making the fulfilment of both an impossibility for women (Pollock, *Vision* 49; Battersby). It became the accepted model for subsequent generations of artists (Davidson; Parker and Pollock; Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi). The Romantic model of the artist placed great emphasis on the innate talent of the artist, stressing the inspirational aspect of creativity and “genius”, with artists being expected to have excessive work habits and a desire for solitude (Battersby; Davidson; Pollock, *Vision*).

## 2.2. Art or Craft?

The original intention of this research was to study women who identified themselves as painters. In asking the same question of all the participants in the interviews (“Do you think there is a different status for different art forms?”) I was expecting responses around the issues of the hierarchical status of various art forms within fine art, that is, painting, sculpture, printmaking. The participants frequently, however, introduced the binary of art against craft: twenty-six (60%) interpreted the general question in this specific way.<sup>9</sup> They recognised the prevailing status of fine art as superior to crafts but were distinctly uncomfortable with it:

I often wonder if people have a clear idea of what the difference between an art and a craft is . . . I think perhaps people think of a craft as slightly lower down the scale, it’s not quite as academic, perhaps . . . I’m not sure that that’s very true . . . I think there is a lot of cross-over between art and crafts, probably some of the best work is where it’s got a bit of both. (WA7)

The view that the art/craft divide is one of ideas-versus-skill is a significant aspect of the debate (Dormer 18). Metcalf explains this divide through a description of Western culture being modelled on “the classical Greek hierarchy in which the mind, being closer to the realm of pure absolutes, is held to be superior to the body, which is rooted in lowly actuality” (“Replacing the Myth of Modernism” 46). Greenhalgh argues that the moment

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<sup>9</sup> The possibility exists that men might have interpreted this question differently from women, which leaves scope for further research.

of greatest connection between art and craft was the time when all aspects of creativity were brought together in the Arts and Crafts movement in the late nineteenth century (34).<sup>10</sup> From the Edwardian period onwards<sup>11</sup> the revolutionary ideas of the movement were diluted and fragmented so that by the Second World War the split between art and craft was established in the conventionally accepted manner of today. Five of my participants perceived a difference between art and craft but believed this difference to be “natural” and based on the opposites of expressing ideas and making something utilitarian:

I think some of craft is very functional and therefore has a very utilitarian purpose in its design, or function, and paintings have no function, in that sense, and so by their very nature they are very different . . . Paintings are not utilitarian, and so there is a major intellectual difference between them. (WA8)

I don't know why a lot of crafts people can't just be honest and say it is a craft and enjoy it for that. I don't think that demeans it, because I think the fine art side is very different, it has a different history, it has a different location . . . they're not coming from the same place. (WA6)

These were women who focused solely on painting, although one had come to fine art through three-dimensional design, one through embroidery and another did garden designs for other people. All five of these women had internalised particular ideas of difference regarding art and craft. Such a dissociation from conventional areas of “women's work” could be read as a form of denial. Parker and Pollock suggest that this is an understandable stance for painters:

Any association with the traditions and practices of needlework and domestic art can be dangerous for an artist, especially when that artist is a woman (78).

None of them wanted to say that art was superior to craft, but in stressing the “differences” that is what they implied.

The connection between the art/craft debate and gender was made by nine (21%) of my participants: “I think the crafts are still seen as needleworkish bits, and that women do crafts” (WA10). A gendered reading of the differential status of art and craft has been one focus of feminist art history over the last twenty years (Parker and Pollock; Callen;

<sup>10</sup> William Morris saw craftwork as an antidote to factory labour and capitalist exploitation. For him handmade objects were a social critique of the inhumanity of the increasing mechanisation. He hoped that by bringing together craft, design and art the lives of the masses would be enriched (Metcalf 46).

<sup>11</sup> There was a resurgence of a collective philosophy with the Bauhaus School and Workshops, Weimar, Germany, intended to be a fruitful meeting ground of craft and aesthetics (Naylor 74).

Ortner), and was incidentally only referred to by one participant (WA43). One woman thought that the formation of this gendered ideology began in childhood with the encouragement of girls to pursue crafts in school:

hundreds of girls have gone into textile designing who were terribly good at sewing soft toys at school, . . . and their mums said “Oh, yes, she’s very good with a bit of fabric”. (WA30)

When a man works in a similar way it may be described in a different terminology. Claes Oldenberg’s work, for example, is referred to as “soft sculpture”, thereby conferring a higher status on the activity, suggesting a level of intellectual engagement supposedly not present in the making of much fabric-based work. Parker and Pollock discuss such a manipulation of the meaning of products to enable craft to become art, with the example of the exhibition of Navaho blankets: “geometric becomes abstract, woven blankets become paintings and women weavers become nameless masters” (*Old Mistresses* 68). By suggesting the need to elevate craft to art the notion of an in-built hierarchy is perpetuated.

As part of the gendered debate, there was a recurring belief amongst my sample group that craft equals women’s work equals lower status:

I personally think that a lot of women’s art is bracketed with that title [craft] and was belittled because of it (WA35).

painting is still seen to be slightly elitist . . . crafts are meant to be something more particularly for women (WA9).

The supposedly inferior status of activities which can be designated as feminine is defined by the place in which the work takes place (Parker and Pollock 70). As one woman in the study said:

it hasn’t got quite the integrity that fine art has, because it’s mainly do-able at home. A lot of craft gets a bad name because people can do it at home . . . basically it’s a women’s thing and I really feel that even now that it’s seen as such and it’s not taken terribly seriously (WA36).

For one of the participants, however, who had come into painting through working initially in textiles, the higher status of women’s contributions to fabric-based work had been a positive source of encouragement and inspiration. She described enthusiastically her discovery of the possibly radical nature of some textile work<sup>12</sup> by female practitioners

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<sup>12</sup> In his critique of the Tapestry Biennale, Denvir declares, “The boundaries between painting and sculpture, between printmaking and three-dimensional forms, between music and the visual arts, between literature and art (*pace* Tom Phillips) have been eroded, and a new aesthetic ecumenicism [*sic*] has taken over.” (“Bursting the Bonds” 20).

at the 12th International Biennale of Tapestry,<sup>13</sup> which helped to turn what she originally saw as a disadvantage into a positive awareness of her abilities as a creative producer:

[The Biennale] has these huge textile sculptures . . . that's where Magdalena Abakanowicz was first shown . . . Really very important work . . . I was knocked out by that stuff. We were already doing work a little along those lines. (WA13)

Her painting has and continues to be very influenced by her early training in fabric art.

A possible reason why so many women interpreted a general question about hierarchies in art as a conflict between art and craft could be that a large proportion of them work in a variety of media and are aware of the potential stigma of doing so through a negative response often articulated by college staff (for further discussion, see Chapter 4, p.113). Some of these women worked in traditional fine art media, for example, printmaking, in addition to their painting, which I shall discuss in Chapter 6 (see p.180), but fifteen (35%) of the participants had at some time worked in areas normally classed as craft like silk painting, ceramics, and quilt making, and for many it was on-going, giving them an interest in the status of such activities.

Two of these women worked predominantly in painting, but appeared to validate their own work through either identifying with craftworkers or their work:

I know I don't really feel like a fine artist painter anymore . . . I don't feel comfortable with that, and I've found myself with a lot of craft people, . . . and I'm wondering whether that's because I feel more comfortable with that sort of title that goes with it (WA12).

I got interested in looking at the surface decoration [and began to] look at things like embroidery, quilt making and the . . . means in which women had created work, which is very undervalued as high art . . . I was doing direct references to things like that (WA32).

The women here use the image(s) of the craftsperson to support and inform their own production within the field of painting specifically because it is not part of mainstream art, even though they do not make "craft" objects. According to Davidson the image of the craftsperson is one who rejects the traditional roles of artists and women, and "seeks alternative definitions" (14). Both of these women had constructed alternative domestic relations in keeping with their feminist beliefs, in addition to adopting a working pattern which incorporated a business-like and industrious approach.

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<sup>13</sup> Lausanne, 14th June to 16th September 1985.

The dominant art world view of a hierarchical difference between “art” and “craft” causes some women to suppress the value of their “craft” work whilst at the same time believing in it as an activity:

I did say to her . . . could I show my patchwork quilt as part of an exhibition . . . but I didn’t because it wasn’t good enough . . . I don’t see them as my art (WA3).

Although WA3 accepted quilts could be exhibited, for her it was less relevant because quiltmaking was something she just did, it did not count as her “art”. She had internalised the values which deem such products as inferior in status to art. For many of the others “craft” was a significant activity. They claimed that all their work, for example, in embroidery, papier mache, hand painted scarves, was as important as their painting work, although there was a general awareness that others might not think so. There was a general view amongst this sub-group of women that all creative activity was valid and valuable to the quality of life:

I’m one of the William Morris sort of . . . I believe that everything creative is art . . . because I think the more beautiful things you’ve got around you, that you live with, the better . . . fabrics and everything should be the best . . . should be beautiful. (WA4)

The concern expressed by these women for an holistic approach to creative production is a reflection of the ideology of the Arts and Crafts movement (Callen 214) which “looked to the past for authenticity in design and had attempted to establish a new social order through the redemptive role of craftsmanship in an industrialising society.” (Naylor 25) It is possible that these women’s interest in an all-encompassing approach to arts and crafts is part of a greater social unease about the perceived erosion of the quality of life in society now (Gablik, *Reenchantment of Art* 169), just as it was for the originators of the Arts and Crafts movement in the late eighteen hundreds.<sup>14</sup> As a role model, however, it has its limitations because in spite of its radical socialist aims, within its structures it maintained the oppression of the women active in the movement, echoing the society which inspired the “moral, aesthetic and political revolt” (Callen 214). For many women today the pattern repeats itself through the marginalisation of women artists who also work within the craft sector, reinforcing patriarchal myths that women’s work is inferior in status. This could be seen as symptomatic of Thatcherite principles which have

<sup>14</sup> The Bauhaus philosophy also arose at a time of social unease and unrest in 1920s Germany (Naylor).

attempted to reconstruct “woman” in terms of nineteenth century values and ideals (Barrett and McIntosh; Finch, Family Obligations).

Very little has been written critically about women artists who work in more than one medium, especially where their pluralism crosses the art/craft boundaries.<sup>15</sup> Monographs on women painters follow the traditional pattern of validating male painters’ work through an image of dedication to one single creative form. One reason for this may be women’s need to hide their breadth of creativity in order for their painting work to be valued by an art world which places great emphasis on “mastering” a medium. It is possible, however, to argue that advantages may accrue for women who work on the margins.<sup>16</sup> Part of the dilemma for women artists has been the Modernist philosophy of the autonomy of art, excluding the possibilities of work with a message. Lippard maintains that feminists are better able to deal with this dilemma, precisely because of their historical isolation which allows them to resist taboos (“Some Propaganda for Propaganda” 186). Many women artists have long argued that art work which deals with issues in their lives, i.e. work with a personal message, is aesthetically valid in contradiction to Modernist values.<sup>17</sup> Craft has existed on the edge of high art as practitioners have attempted to justify craft work in modernist terms (Janeiro). Metcalf suggests that “craft is inherently a contingent art form, and its aesthetic value must be located in the ways craft is intimate, useful and meaningful” (“Replacing . . .” 44), which is exactly what many women artists claim for their art work, whatever form it takes. Working on the margins can therefore be potentially liberating.

### 2.3. Perceptions of “The Artist”.

The Romantic artist figure is the popular image of the artist today. As feminist critiques of women’s position in the art world have argued (Robinson; Byrne-Sutton and James; Gouma-Peterson and Mathews; Sulter; Nochlin; Battersby; Pollock, “Artists Mythologies”) this image has been, and continues to be, inappropriate for women artists.

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<sup>15</sup> An exception to this is the recent compilation of interviews with some contemporary artists Artists’ Stories edited by Anna Douglas and Nicholas Wegner.

<sup>16</sup> hooks, for example, discusses the unique position for people of colour in living both in the centre and on the margins, which provides social and political opportunities not available to those who live within a single experiential position (Feminist Theory: From the Margin to the Centre).

<sup>17</sup> Examples include artists such as Paula Rego, Sutapa Biswas, Lubaina Himid, Sonia Lawson, Eileen Cooper.

It would appear, however, that the acceptance and/or rejection of this image is a subtle process.

In their descriptions of the “conventional image of the artist”, the women in my study detailed the various strands that combine to form the Romantic image. These were the most frequently reported characteristics in their responses, suggesting that the majority of the sample group had internalised stereotypes of the artist image. The traits identified by the women seemed to fall into three categories: the biological, descriptions of physiological elements such as sex and race, for example, “white male”; the psychological, issues around the mind set of artists on a scale from “dizzy” to “mad”; and the social, characteristics of the artist which impact on society and vice versa.

Seven of the participants specifically defined the artist as male, with three of those mentioning the Western expectation of the artist as white and middle class. This does not necessarily mean that all the other participants are able to see the artist as either male or female, just that these seven were aware of some of the gender expectations involved here. When asked in the interviews if the participants thought there was a different stereotypical image of the woman artist, sixteen (37%) were unable to give an answer. The image of the woman artist, in contrast to the male artist, is not so readily available. The sexuality of the artist was also mentioned by four participants, referring to sexual promiscuity, being randy and virile etc. These are not terms conventionally used to describe women and conflict with the socially acceptable characteristics of “woman” (Pollock, *Vision*; Fransella and Frost; Skevington and Baker).

Psychologically, stereotypical images of the artist were described as “irresponsible” by six women, “single-minded” or “obsessive” by four women, “temperamental” by two and “controversial” by two. The single largest category was that of “mad” or “eccentric” with eleven women making reference to this myth. According to Pollock this idea of “madness” covers a range of conditions, real or imagined, and is best exemplified in the Dutch artist Van Gogh, whose reputed “madness” is the subject of his greatness (“Artists Mythologies” 69). Psychologists testify to the sensitivity of the artist, who is vulnerable to external forces (Rogers, C) and the possibility of neurosis when creative drives are frustrated (Cholst). Freud states that “people fall ill of a neurosis as a result of *frustration*” (*The Complete Works* 316). Cholst expands this argument in that neurosis is “a mental condition produced by the frustration of mental, physical and design creative activities”



(19). He goes on to assert that such a condition is more common in those people with an “artistic nature” who are prevented, by various reasons, from practising their art (19).

The perception of a psychosis is used to support a sociological interpretation of the artist-as-genius, which itself stems from early Greek biographies, representing the artist as the divine Creator (Kris and Kurz 21). Six of my participants referred to the artist in terms of “genius” or “god-like” (including one who felt that the modern artist image is like that of a pop star, which shares the same heroizing tendencies).<sup>18</sup> Four women specifically described the artist as “Bohemian”, a term which refers to the idea of originating from elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> The “artist as outsider”, described as such by seven women, is a modern Western definition prevalent from “the time of Courbet to the present day” and is, again, typified in the figure of Van Gogh (Hall and Metcalf xiii). It stems largely from the effects of a split between artist and patron and a changing role for the artist who was seen to exist outside of the conventions and mores of society (Wolff). Ames suggests that Western art culture is more separated, more specialised and more “removed from daily life” than anywhere else in the world (258). Appositely, Gablik argues that complicated global changes have caused the artist to stand alone, being unable to relate to historical factors: she states that “models and standards from the past seem of little use” to the artist who can find no direction from society (13). This describes the views of many women artists today and may account for the contingency valued by so many of them.

Comparisons between the descriptions given for “the artist” and “the woman artist” show far less consensus amongst those relating to the woman artist. As there are fewer visible, well-known women artists the pool of characteristics from which to draw a model must necessarily be much smaller. The lack of a stereotypical image for women was interpreted by two of the participants as proof of equality in operation, and a state they aspired to; a kind of androgyny as the answer to women’s position in the art world. Collins, however, argues that if art is a “complex interaction between numerous variables, then gender must be, at some level, a factor in art production and response” (86).

Two women suggested that there exist a number of different images of the woman artist. Unlike the list of characteristics for the (male) artist, which integrate to form one

<sup>18</sup> This is also a symptom of post-modernism: as Oxley claims, “The rush now is not to get into the art studio but to get into the television studio” (69).

<sup>19</sup> One definition reads “(Native) of Bohemia, a former kingdom now part of Czechoslovakia” (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

heroic image, the qualities given for the woman artist are not homogenous. Where similar phrases are used in the interviews to describe women and men artists, such as “eccentric”, “sexually promiscuous” and “individual”, they are used by only one or two participants when relating to women artists but at least fourfold when referring to men. This suggests that these are characteristics more commonly viewed as “male”.

The majority of the comments about women artists can be divided into two categories: the deprecatory, recognition of possible humiliations; and the threatening, belief in mythical intimidation. One method of subjugation is to belittle a person ontologically, which was recognised and reflected in the descriptions many of the participants gave about women artists, using words such as “patronised”, “whimsical” and generally considered “inferior to men”. Unlike the male artist female artists were often defined by their work, which was referred to by three women in derogatory fashion as “women’s subjects” of “babies and moons”,<sup>20</sup> but tolerated by a fourth. They were also thought to be expected to paint flower subjects and treat their work as a hobby, both attitudes which relate directly to the Victorian ideal of female creativity (Chadwick).

Many of the participants believed that women artists are seen as a threat, although whether to men in general or artists in particular was not clear. Eight felt that women artists are perceived by society as either feminists or quasi-men, and so as militant, aggressive, and challenging.<sup>21</sup> Their supposed eccentricity, individuality, sexuality and appearance are all viewed as negative features for women artists, reflecting society’s expectations of differing behaviour according to gender. This again accords with the Victorian sense of values and moral expectations for women (Chadwick; Pollock, *Vision*).

In analysing the responses of my participants it is important to retain the sense that they were describing what they believe to be society’s perception of the artist. Their own view was often a strong repudiation of such stereotypes. When asked specifically what meaning stereotypical images had for them personally, 52% denied any relevance:

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<sup>20</sup> Since the 1960s such subjects have been important for many women artists. Mary Kelly, for example, through her work based on a Lacanian reading of her relationship with her young son, has given “a voice to the pain and pleasure women have lived as mothers [which has been] taboo as a subject for art in male dominated culture” (Mulvey 100).

<sup>21</sup> This superficially agrees with the findings of Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, who found female art students were significantly more dominant than other women of their age. They failed to question, however, whether these traits were intrinsic to the women, or assumed to fit preconceived images of the artist personality.

I don't see it as relevant at all. I think it is the individual and what they express . . . I think other people have an image (WA16).

I don't care. I'm not bothered, because often people look at me and say, 'You don't look like the art teacher' . . . what am I supposed to look like? (WA9).

Such a rejection of possible connections between oneself and stereotypical images may be related to an idea that stereotypes are about someone else. It may also be a protection of the self.

Others (20%) felt that they had to work against the available stereotypes, expressing a consciousness of how society reacts to them, and a desire to change dominant views of women artists particularly, and of artists in general:

if you're going to get a professionalism and be an artist as well . . . I work quite a lot in schools, so people employ me to work, and they have an image of the artist as a very laid back person, who stays in bars till eleven and twelve at night . . . but it's to try and change those ideas and let people have confidence in you. (WA12)

Contesting the (perceived) prevailing assumptions around women artists' subject matter was also seen as important by some of the participants:

I'm very wary of being called a woman artist because my work has no real relevance to me being a woman . . . there's no feminist element, I mean I'm quite feminist myself, but it's not in my work. (WA7)

This participant wanted to be accepted as a painter without gender and saw the possibility of feminist subject matter as threatening to her aspirations. Such an approach, however, requires the artist to separate art and life, which is precisely what feminist artists argue against. Through internalising dominant values regarding appropriate subject matter for art WA7 also rejects traditional "female subjects" such as flower painting.

One woman who makes her living out of flower paintings was driven to reinforce her sense of being an artist through the quality of her work and the intention "to spend more time doing my own work and doing more experimental work, and perhaps moving more towards having work in that particular type of market" (WA34).

This is partly about validating one's experience and supporting one's self-image as an artist. For some this happened through the pleasure gained from other people's reaction to the knowledge of their status as an artist, and for others through a sense of ontological connection with the stereotypical images perceived. One woman, for example, often felt like an "outsider" and believed this state originated both from herself and from

society and was about “being an artist” (WA38). Another participant thought that women artists “are all kind of a bit dizzy and like ageing hippies I suppose, much the same as myself” (WA17). There is an identification here with the masculine stereotype of the Bohemian artist, as played out by Augustus John in his gypsy fantasies of the early twentieth century (Chambers). This is a positive model when applied to the male, as with WA17’s father, but it is contradicted by the negative connotation of ineffectual femininity, as exemplified by Burne-Jones’ “High Art Maiden”, a shallow, non-productive, female icon (Anderson).

There was much ambivalence expressed by the women in my study, with conflicts appearing between the images of artists as constructed by society and the art world and the women’s self-image. This was evident in their responses to a question about how they would wish to be seen by other artists (gender unspecified). Except for four women who claimed not to care about such matters, putting it down to age, the overwhelming desire was “to be taken seriously”, “be respected” and to be seen as “committed”, “hardworking” and “professional”. These are all positive attributes, and probably indicate how the women see themselves. No-one in the sample group, however, had used these words in their descriptions of the stereotypical images of women artists. This suggests that whatever common views there may be of the woman artist, they are highly inappropriate for the majority of women artists in constructing a view of themselves. Neither do the attributes cited above fit the stereotypical images of the (male) artist, evidence of the unsuitability of such models for the women. The implications here are that women artists may have to formulate their own working models of the artist.

In analysing the myths and legends which surround the idea of “the artist”, Kris and Kurz identify a common theme in the biographies of artists: that of “early accomplishments of talent”. They go on to assert that “a master’s genius already strives for expression in childhood” (28). They suggest that this aspect of the myth is a phenomenon generally accepted by society. As a feature of the condition “artist”, I thought it would be instructive to discover whether women artists subscribed to this motif in their construction of their identities as artists. During the interviews for my study the participants were never directly asked about childhood talent, but were given various opportunities to volunteer such information, and many did. Twenty-four women (56%) offered unsolicited biographical images of their artistic abilities as children:

I think when I was four I was fascinated with painting, that is the key time I can remember, I loved painting. (WA38)

I have this strong passion for painting which I believe is my vocation in life and have done since I was quite a small child. (WA26)

This can be seen as both a justification for following a particular path, especially one which differs from parental choice as in the case of WA26 above, and a source of guilt when not working creatively:

sometimes I wish I didn't have to do this, because life would be much simpler . . . you wouldn't feel guilty . . . when you weren't doing anything. (WA4)

For some women the issue of childhood artistic ability was bound up with society's approval of indications of future achievement, with anecdotes of school teachers' responses or parental praise: "When I was younger I used to draw quite a lot and they always used to say, 'You're going to be an artist'" (WA15). This supports Griff's argument that there "exists a whole social paraphernalia for getting persons committed to their artistic identities" (147). Four of the women were the daughters of artists<sup>22</sup> and saw their innate ability as part of an hereditary process:

there is a slight hereditary thing in that my grandfather was also a painter so we have this kind of - and my father, and then myself and in fact now I think my son - we have this sort of inherited liking of these sort of still-life objects and so on. (WA33)

Although biographical details of innate ability were not supplied by all the women, many indicated more subtle commitments to such a self-image. In response to a question about whether they would be different if not an artist, several women described their creativity as being an integral part of their personality:

It's impossible to separate out, isn't it? It's absolutely impossible. (WA10)

it is really part of my identity . . . it's not really a job, it's an identity, even though I treat it as a job . . . I don't think you can stop being creative. (WA34)

being an artist is being as I am . . . it is being an intuitive, creative type of person. (WA3)

Whether creative ability is sociologically or biologically based is difficult to determine, but many of the women indicated a strong sense of themselves as artistic and

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<sup>22</sup> Two of the women had painter-fathers, one had a painter-mother, and one had a painter-father and a sculptor-mother.

creative beings. This, however, could be further supported or contradicted when issues of professionalism were raised during the interviews. Although all of the participants had voluntarily and actively placed themselves on a professional register of painters, only 42% (eighteen) perceived themselves as professional artists.

A multiplicity of definitions of “the professional” exist. The current view of the professional was derived from medicine, law, the ministry and scholarship, and has historical roots in the social position of medieval crafts, guilds and clerical orders (Bennett and Hokenstad 22). It has the following characteristics: skill based on theoretical knowledge; provision of training and education; competence assessment of members; adherence to a professional code of conduct; and a service ideal (Witz; Bennett and Hokenstad). Variations on these points of definition include the positioning of “knowledge” in opposition to “craft”, with a tension created between acquiring knowledge for its own sake and practising the skill (Jackson 5). Denzin suggests that professionals abide by a code of ethics and an ideology covering work and life, and have a sense of vocation and lifetime commitment to their work. A more radical reading of professionalisation incorporates a view of a hegemonic power structure. Feld, for example, suggests that professionalisation concerns the construction of boundaries which become a method of exclusion and inclusion (cited in Jackson 10). Hugman argues that “professions are not types of occupations but historical forms of controlling occupations” (82). Similarly, Witz describes the concept of professionalism as a tool for closure.

Against this background, of the eighteen women who perceived themselves as professional artists, three believed that professionalism was predominantly connected with financial remuneration. This factor was not included in any of the above cited definitions of “professional”, and cuts across ideas of “humanistic orientation” (Montague and Miller 143) and “altruistic service” (Witz 6). These three women were unusual within the sample, in that they made their living through their art work, which may well account for their focusing on the remunerative aspects. The other fifteen women defined “professionalism” in terms of attitude to the quality and integrity of the work, and of a total commitment to art, more in keeping with the definitions cited above:

I am a professional artist *per se* . . . because it's what is my main concern in life, it's what I do . . . and because of my mental idea of it is this is what I do. (WA13)

I don't try to sell it so much but just in the way that I work, and the way I have organised it into my life makes me feel that I am a professional artist. (WA7)

Other forms of employment, for example teaching, illustration, curtain making, were often seen as an expedience to enable the women to continue to produce art work. For these women the concept of "professional artist" was one they were able to adopt, often accepting their own particular way of being an artist as consistent with a view of professionalism, rather than adopting a different persona in order to be professional. In other words, they saw their personality traits as denoting professionalism.

Griff discusses the difficulty of defining the word "artist", questioning whether it is connected to the amount of time spent working creatively, the focus of the artist's efforts, or contemporary recognition by galleries and institutions (145). He concludes with a conventional definition of the term "professional artist": "Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Alberto Giacometti", men [*sic*] who "devote their time and psychic energy to creative endeavours or would do so if circumstances permitted" (146). A feminist reading of this highlights the difficulties for many women artists contained within such a definition; that of devoting oneself to the exclusion of all else to one's work. Social demands, such as those of the family, prevent many women artists from an all-consuming commitment to art practice. Against this type of model many of my participants are unable to define themselves as professional artists:

I think I can only think of myself as a professional artist as long as I'm actually painting and the trouble is that I'm not getting into my studio and managing to get working [so] I feel as if I'm going backwards. (WA33)

a professional artist would have a studio that they would work at and they'd be there all the time, and dedicated to the exclusion of all else. I mean it's very stereotypical. I have other demands on my time. (WA10)

Possibly those women who can identify themselves as professional artists, whatever their current levels of involvement with art practice, can be accounted for by using the second half of Griff's definition in respect of intention, that is they would devote themselves entirely to their work "if circumstances permitted" (146).

The reactions by the sample group to the question of their perception of the status "professional artist" demonstrated a confusion on the part of many of the participants. Amongst those who rejected the term "professional", their first response, usually, was to

assume a financial reference, creating difficulties for their self-image as so few of them generate an income through their art work. After further enquiry these same women would usually extend their definition to include attitude or intention, but still felt uncomfortable with the idea of themselves as “professional artists”. For some, therefore, the difficulty was with the word “professional” but for ten women, interestingly, the obstacle was the word “artist”, which was variously seen as embarrassingly grand or an honour which is achieved after years of commitment:

I'd be very reluctant to say 'I am an artist', you know. You feel silly somehow or it's just . . . it's rather a grand term for something that . . . it's too grand to kind of describe what I do. (WA39)

people say, 'You're an artist' and I say, 'Leonardo's an artist, I paint'. There's a difference. (WA5)

One example which typified the dichotomy experienced by these women was that of WA37 who, prior to training as a practitioner in art, owned and ran a gallery in London, during which time she represented male practitioners whom she, and they, thought of as artists. However, in spite of making her own living now by selling her paintings at a London gallery she is unable to perceive herself as an artist. WA37 seems to place herself below the male artists of her acquaintance, believing the status is something she has “to earn and work [her] way up [to]”. During her time as a gallery owner she provided support for her stable of male painters, conferring the status of “artist” on them, and is now waiting for someone to do the same for her.

It is not clear how many of these women were applying a gendered reading to the words “artist” and “painter”, but this was not universal amongst the sample group. Ten of my participants preferred the word “artist” because for them it covered everything they produced, or their state of mind, irrespective of production:

it encompasses just . . . I just like the word and I feel that it's more . . . I haven't really chosen a material or a discipline, I still like experimenting . . . I don't think I'd categorise myself. (WA38)

One woman explained that her self-image was a progressive phenomenon, culminating in her putting “artist” on her driving licence, an important gesture for her, the more so because her first training and career had been as a scientist, working in a laboratory (WA19).

Although there was no consensus about the meanings of words used to attempt clarification of the self-image of my participants, many of the women were struggling with



the ideas and their relevance to them, in their efforts to validate their belief in themselves and their abilities. I was able to obtain further clarification of these issues during the post-interview seminar (see Chapter 7, p.214). The group attending the seminar<sup>23</sup> neither wished to be seen as “amateur” nor as “professional” artists. They appeared to have a clearer idea of what “amateur” rather than “professional” might mean, regarding the latter not as the opposite to “amateur”, but rather considering it in opposition to “artist” in the manner of WA37 above. Reasons given for the rejection of the term “professional” included the fact that the women saw their work as “in progress”, which was consistent with seeing what they do as an integral aspect of their lives rather than as a separate issue.<sup>24</sup> Although the women in the seminar group thought that they had less confidence in defining themselves as professional, they also believed that they had less interest in status *per se* and regarded the term “professional” as an expression of status. Historically there has been little support for women artists to construct a model of professionalism for their own and others’ use (Nochlin; Chadwick; Pollock, “Art, Art School . . .”), so who provided the artistic role models for the women in my study?

#### 2.4. Artists as Role Models.

Although many of my sample group believed in their innate creative ability, there is a strong argument that artists are not born but socially constructed (Wolff; Griff; Kris and Kurz). In order to participate in the art world artists need to adopt the behaviour and work patterns of their “significant others” (Berger and Luckmann). Part of this socialisation process occurs in art education, as discussed in Chapter 4.6. (125) during which time aspiring artists learn to relate their activity to that of artists who are seen as “successful”, who have “arrived”, and whose “name” is known widely, at least within the art world.

In order to attempt an understanding of how artist role models are significant for the women in my study, how they are used to support, inspire, validate, or challenge the women personally and in the production of their work, I requested each individual to list separately artists whose lives and those whose work had influenced their behaviour. As

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<sup>23</sup> Sixteen women attended the seminar.

<sup>24</sup> This point is exemplified by the choice some of the women artists make regarding their working spaces (see Chapter 6, p.167).

each category raised slightly different issues amongst the participants I will deal separately with the two.

#### 2.4.1. Artists as “Life” Role Models.

The written portrayal of artists’ lives developed during the Renaissance with such works as Vasari’s Lives of the Artists 1550 and 1568, which demonstrated the fact that “the Renaissance was proud of its artist personalities” (Sorell 38). The biography format was used to venerate the artist, in line with the ideology of the day (Kris and Kurz). In contemporary society biographers make repeated attempts “to link the character of the artist with that of his [*sic*] works, and to infer the nature of the man from his works” (Kris and Kurz 119). Feminist critiques warn that an artist’s biography may overshadow her/his work as in the case of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652/3). Parker and Pollock argue that it is

only when we escape this disturbing fascination with her life  
and return her work to its context within a specific time, place  
and school of painting that we can fully appreciate her activities  
as a painter (Old Mistresses 21).

Women artists may be justified in being cautious of the overemphasis on artist biographies which have been the source of women’s exclusion from art history, with a personal attribute, sex, becoming the over-ridingly important characteristic (Pollock, Vision). Feminist art history, however, has in a sense re-valued that characteristic by making it the basis on which to select/discuss an artist’s work. Feminists, therefore, have an ambivalent attitude towards the use of and utility of the personal in the discussion of artists’ work. However, without available references to the different approaches, attitudes, success and disappointments of (women) artists, role models are necessarily limited.

The concept of artists’ lives being influential in the participants’ attitudes and behaviour raised some debate among my participants. In response to the initial question (on the questionnaire) only twenty women, less than 50%, mentioned any artists whose lives had been important for their self-image. Further probing during the interviews raised the number to thirty-two (74%). There was a general feeling that to be influenced by others’ *work* is acceptable, but not their *lives*:

I am far more influenced by the work than the life of any artist,  
although when I was much younger reading about Van Gogh  
profoundly influenced me. (WA11)

The implication here is that to be affected by the non-work aspects of someone else's life is an immature act, tolerable for adolescents but inappropriate for adults. This idea arose with some of the older women in the study, who would suggest that at their age they had no need for role models (even though some had studied art late). Freud's theory of narcissism, that is, connecting with others who reflect characteristics similar to ourselves, also argues the connection between narcissism and the undeveloped personalities of children and most women (The Complete Works 90). To subscribe to the idea that another artist's life might have significance may thus mean to infantilise oneself.

Combining the data from the questionnaires and the interviews thirty-two different male artists were mentioned but only twenty different female artists (see Appendix E). Of the thirty-two participants who cited any artists as 'life' models only fourteen (43%) acknowledged any women artists, and only three of those named more than one. This means that only 32% of the *total* sample group were able to use women artists in the construction of their own identity as artists. But is gender a significant factor in the choice of role models?

An analysis of why the participants chose their examples of "life" models indicates five different reasons for the choices made: affirmation, providing confirmation of life choices; aspiration, desiring to be like someone else; inspiration, being (divinely) influenced; admiration, regarding others with approval; and emulation, zealously imitating the behaviour of others. A review of the responses by women who cited *only male* artists indicates that the largest of the above categories is "affirmation", where the role models are used to support a belief in oneself. WA1, for example, came to art in her late fifties. She believes she is seen as eccentric by her friends and neighbours, and has limited means:

I like Van Gogh because I just liked the way he lived . . . he had a patron . . . he went a bit cuckoo . . . of course he didn't sell any thing until he was dead . . . [Alfred Wallis] only started painting when he was about seventy, and he only did it because he was bored. (WA1)

The characteristics she chose to highlight about other artists coincide with aspects of her own life which she emphasised during the interview. She used information about famous artists to validate her self-image and justify her actions.

Some examples of role models may be used to affirm an individual's way of life, but might also be used as "aspiration". WA30, for example, is a mural painter who feels particularly isolated from the mainstream art world because of the relatively low status of

mural work within it. She believes her type of work is undervalued, but knows she is very proficient at it. Her choice of the American painter Wyland, a mural painter of the same age as herself, both reinforces her belief in herself and her work, but also demonstrates a desire to be more like him:

so he's doing what I'm doing, he's looking at photographs and copying them, so he's photorealistic, so it's not really art. He just did it on a grand scale, which is something I would love to do. And this guy has made a fortune . . . and I think it's because he started the way I started but he stuck his neck out. (WA30)

Although some women talked of a particular artist as being “inspirational” there is no evidence that any action followed from this. Such a lack of action separates the idea of “inspiration” from that of “aspiration”, in that the latter moves the individual to action.

WA25, for example, said:

I quite admire Louise Bourgeois because of the fact that she's carried on for so long. I think that could be quite inspirational because . . . she worked and there's a continuity and I think I'd like to be working when I was [her age]. (WA25)

Three of the women described their “life” role models in terms of “admiration”, a detached respect for others. It is more difficult to identify any effect this type of role model might have on the individual, lacking as it sometimes does any direct connection with the latter's own life:

it's not so much an artist, I tend to admire these Victorian women who went off and travelled . . . I tend to admire them having the strength to overcome social stigma at the time and the risk of being ostracised . . . I think they were very powerful figures. (WA10)

It is tempting to imagine that there is a hidden message of desire in this passage, but there was nothing elsewhere in the interview to support such an interpretation.

Three of the participants described a role model in terms of trying to emulate their behaviour, none with total success. WA6 and WA27 both related how as impressionable students they attempted to imitate some of Van Gogh's suffering, presumably believing that this was the point of entry into the art world. More successfully WA8 consciously adopted Mark Rothko's working pattern of nine-to-five, but as a further role model he was problematic:

he found that essential to do . . . I mean he was married and had children, I suppose he had lots of other problems, but he did believe that working on a regular time basis kept his family life more stable . . . his alcoholism probably didn't but . . . (WA8)

A survey of the responses by the participants who cited at least one woman artist amongst their choices shows a different pattern of use. In addition, even where male and female artists were cited by one person she usually chose to discuss the significance of the female artist. The use of role models to affirm life experiences was again the largest category, but with almost twice as many participants using their ‘life’ role models in this way. WA12, for example, a trained fine art painter, generating her income through mural painting and community workshops, related to Frida Kahlo, another painter who worked on murals and had a strong sense of community:

I’m still doing [self-portraits] now, but look towards somebody like her and she carried on doing it . . . that’s what she did, self- portraits, and looking at somebody like that you think, “Yes, I can, there’s nothing wrong with doing that” . . . so in that sense her life has influenced mine. (WA12)

During the interview it was apparent that WA12 lacked confidence in her position within the art world in a way similar to WA30, but instead of validating her experience through a male artist, who by gender is closer to the mainstream, WA12 perceived a stronger connection with a female artist, effectively rejecting the dominant hierarchies in the manner of Davidson’s Craftsperson.

Affirmation worked in a different way for WA25, a woman painter of Indian origin. She thought her work was inferior to that of other students at university, and wanted to work on Indian subject matter but there was no multi-cultural input on her course. Finding a book on the Mithila women of India reassured her that her cultural experience was valid and suitable subject matter.

An equal number of participants in this sub-group aspired to be like another artist, selecting character traits which the individual perceived to be lacking in herself. WA31, for example, experienced difficulty in continuing with her work, without a dedicated work space. Separated from her artist friends and work contacts, and generally lacking in confidence, she had selected a woman painter, Joan Eardley, who worked whenever and wherever she could, often in complete isolation for long stretches. Similarly, WA38 was attempting to establish a working life for herself as a woman artist and single mother, and chose a woman ceramicist (the medium in which WA38 originally trained):

She thought as a woman, as a mother and as an artist and it worked. She set up her own studio. She produced very individual work and she sold it to top galleries. That, to me has always been a dream which I’m sure I could do, but I haven’t. (WA38)

Inspiration was less relevant as a characteristic with this sub-group of women.

Only one woman acted on the inspiration of another, a contemporary of WA43. Through her friend's influence she became involved in a feminist art group which in turn politicised her art work. Interestingly she then affirmed her choice of life experience through the role model of Käthe Kollwitz:

I was impressed that she worked in a sort of strong political way, but that her concern sort of as a woman, as a mother, grandmother, came through her work as well. (WA43)

Three participants admired their choice of role models without seemingly being driven to act on this response. WA39, for example, referred several times during the interview to Louise Bourgeois, whom she talked of as a "very tough character" and who has "been successful in what is still . . . a tough context for a woman to succeed in". Similarly, WA27 was "impressed by the kind of dedication that individuals have given to their work, like Gwen John".

None of the participants tried to directly emulate any female artists. They seemed more interested in using female role models to affirm their position in the art world, their interests, and their concerns, in short, the lives they were living.

#### 2.4.2. Artists as "Work" Role Models.

When asked to list the artists whose work had influenced the participants, only one woman gave no names. No-one argued with the concept of finding "work" role models as they had done with the idea of "life" role models, and twice as many artists were named here compared with those of the "life" models. This may be owing to the customary practice in art education of encouraging students to refer to other artists' work, especially that of the "Masters"; historically this was obligatory (Brighton; Thistlewood, "National Systems and Standards"). Conversely, and perversely, students are also trained to produce original work that breaks new ground (Pollock, "Art, Art School . . .") in line with the Romantic notion of portraying one's "own (very individual) soul" (Battersby 35).

If the figures for the "work" and "life" models are compared by gender nearly two and a half times as many male artists as female artists were named as "work" models (83 to 36), as opposed to one and a half times for "life" models (32 to 20). This suggests that in spite of an increased consciousness of, and accessibility to, women artists, women still select far fewer examples of other women artists for use in the development of their work.

Twenty-four participants (57%), however, gave the names of at least one woman artist; sixteen (38%) gave more than one example; and four (10%) predominantly gave the names of women.

A much wider historical range of artists is cited for “work” models than for “life” models, which suggests that the women found it easier to relate to those artists from the modern or contemporary period<sup>25</sup> when looking for models from which to gain support for their lives. The issues and concerns experienced by artists living in the twentieth century may be more easily understood than those from earlier historical periods, and, therefore, provide greater affirmation. If the “work” model examples are analysed in terms of gender, women artists are still only able to relate to the work of relatively recent women artists, the earliest being Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1902), compared to male artists, where the earliest was Titian (1487-1576). This may be a result of fewer historical examples of women artists being readily available.

Of the eighteen participants who cited only male artists as “work” models nine (50%) wanted to learn from their work. They were interested in the formal qualities of the artists’ paintings, that is, their use of colour, line, composition, space, etc. This learning often continued after the women’s formal art education had ended:

Matisse for excitement and design, Monet for colour and spiritual feeling . . . Degas for his satisfying compositions . . . Hockney for style . . . Matthew Smith, rich painterly approach. (WA29)

Some of the participants deliberately worked from particular artists to consciously learn:

it’s a purely aesthetic thing that I’ve taken from the work and actually copied their work and tried to find out how they’ve used certain colours and how they’ve used certain compositions, to understand how they actually do that. (WA7)

This type of influence adheres to the traditional pedagogy of learning art by copying from the “Masters”, which was the manner of learning experienced until the 1960s (Brighton; Thistlewood). Some women believed that the influence of other artists’ work was more subconscious; seeing the work and allowing it to be filtered through the subconscious over a period of time, for example:

artists very often . . . you have to realise that I think they’re subconsciously affected. They don’t always notice. (WA33)

<sup>25</sup> I have used Brighton’s categorisation of historical: before 1900; modern: 1900-1945; and contemporary: 1945-date (312).

you latch onto certain ones, and when you're interested in that particular artist it tends to affect what you do, I think, and it's sort of accumulated, and then you look at your work and think, "Yes, that's got a certain . . ." you can see where it's come from. (WA4)

The alternative way that male artists' work had influence was to affirm the type and manner of work produced by the participants, although only three (17%) could be said to use others' work in this way. WA30, for example, as well as using Wyland and Peter Tate to affirm her way of life, also used them to support her category and style of painting. She could have related to Frida Kahlo, in the same way that WA12 did, in order to support her position as a mural painter, but stylistically Kahlo's work is very different from WA30's and, therefore, might not have seemed appropriate.

Artists may gain affirmation of working issues through the content of another artist's work which they perceive as spiritual. WA8, for example, works in a Minimalist style, one usually associated with a concern for formalism (Read 294) and part of a dehumanisation process (Chadwick 312), but she perceives a connection between her own work and that of the Minimalists:

I really like Minimalism, I think the statement "Less is more" is very true . . . and I find that Minimalism can be looked at almost like a religion, you know, it's a very soothing thing . . . it gives a religious sort of feel to it. (WA8)

Similarly, WA24 relates to Ben Nicholson's work, reading into the content a transcendental element. She said, "I think that Ben Nicholson . . . I feel very attuned to the kind of spiritual quality that comes in his work."

Of the twenty-four participants who cited some women artists amongst their "work" models, a smaller proportion (46%) referred to the formal qualities of other artists' work. The reasons for doing so, however, were similar to those given by women using only male role models, that of learning from the work:

Just little things like techniques or the way they use colour or compositions, particularly Elizabeth Blackadder's, her compositions . . . although it's quite difficult if you try and do something similar. (WA34)

Twelve (50%) of these twenty-four women, as opposed to only 17% of the participants who listed only male artists, were seeking support other than a form of technical advice. Of these twelve, four were simply using their choice of role model as an affirmation of their approach to working, their style, and their concerns. WA10 had taken



the unusual path in higher education of working only in water-colour paint which, as she said, “is still linked in with the weekend painters . . . the retired painters.” She was very keen to disassociate herself from these, gaining strength from the knowledge of the work of Richard Parkes-Bonnington, a member of the English school of water-colour painting. WA10 was already painting in water-colour when she found his work, and responded to the respect accorded him as a professional artist.

On being questioned about her reference to Georgia O’Keefe, WA26 described her struggle to connect her work and her development with the history of painting:

So that’s what I’ve been lacking, I feel, is a link with a continuity in the development of fine art prior to this, but I can feel a rapport in the way I’m actually working and the images I’m producing and the context in which I’m working. (WA26)

Although WA26 felt that, according to her art education training, she should be striving to produce unique work, she recognised her need to connect with the work of other (women) artists. As I discuss in Chapter 4 (132), the training artists receive at art college is based on a developmental model requiring the eventual separation of the individual from any supportive structures (Pollock, “Art, Art School . . .”). Gilligan argues that traditional theories of psychological development are dangerous, promoting “the illusion that disconnection or disassociation from women is good” (xxvii). WA26 was representative of the women who recognised their need to find a connection between themselves and other artists.

For eight women the affirmation was related to the content of their role model’s work. There were no examples of this amongst the participants who quoted only male artists as “work” role models. Modernist paradigms effectively eradicated content as a legitimate concern of fine art (Pollock; Sarup) and it is Modernism which has dominated art education, and thereby the thinking, of the Western art world during the second half of this century (Dalton). It is possible, therefore, that women who adopt the normative paradigms of referring to male artists only in order to contextualise their work, are unable to recognise as valid the part content plays in the formation of a painting.

The content of another’s paintings may be used as straightforward validation of subject matter:

I like how [Paula Rego] uses a female form in her work and she also . . . I’m not saying my work’s like hers, in style, but the way she uses figures and quite distinct from background, and I’m quite

impressed by what she does and how she's evolved as well as an artist. (WA42)

There is, incidentally, here a reference to the artist Rego being used simultaneously as a "work" model and a "life" model, as if the two are inseparable. An alternative use of content as affirmation was to respond to another artist's painting by adapting subject matter to explore feminist issues:

I was doing some work where I actually looked at [other] painters . . . there's a painting by Fragonard, it's like a really odd sort of story . . . there's an image of a woman on a swing . . . and there's a man hidden in the bushes who's actually looking up her dress, and I tried to . . . I did different versions of it. (WA15)

This demonstrates a questioning of the content as used by other artists, subverting the traditional acceptance of Western artists' subjugation of women to the male gaze (Betterton, Looking On 11). Challenging normative conditions was more apparent amongst the participants who listed women artists amongst their "work" role models. To do so, in itself, is to undermine the patriarchal structures which have marginalised women artists, but it appears to be the start of a process of change.

### Summary.

Although the available image of the artist has altered many times, reflecting the changes between the "great" periods of art, the descriptions given by my sample group of the stereotypical artist combined to form the Romantic image of an obsessive and temperamental genius, on the edge of madness and standing outside of society. In contrast there was little consensus in the responses of the women in my study to the image of the woman artist. The majority of comments could be divided into the derogatory or the threatened, and reflected a perception that society views women artists negatively as feminists or quasi-men. Stereotypes were seen by the group as relating to someone else and not relevant to their images of themselves. Conflicts were experienced, however, between the images constructed by society and the art world and those constructed by the women themselves.

Attitudes towards issues of professionalism varied, even though all the participants had placed themselves on a professional register of painters. A few women believed that professionalism was predominantly connected to financial remuneration. Others, however, defined professionalism in terms of an attitude to the quality and integrity of the work, and

of a total commitment to art. The term professional was rejected by some women because they were unable to devote the majority of their time to their work, and by others because it may be placed in opposition to the term artist. This last term, however, gave some women difficulty, being seen as too grand for their perceived status. Conversely, some women preferred the word artist as descriptive of *all* their activities.

In relation to the use of role models in their construction of their identity as artists, there was a general feeling expressed by the women that to be influenced by others' *work* is acceptable, but not by their *experiences*. "Life" role models were used by the women predominantly to affirm their way of life or aspects of it, to inspire them to create, or to aspire to a way of living as an artist. Where female and male artists were cited it was usually the female artists who were chosen as the significant point for discussion.

The entire group was comfortable with the idea of using other artists' work as role models, drawing as it does on early training. Both male and female artists' work was used as a reference for technical and formal issues. There were nearly three times as many male as female artists cited in this way. Access to the work of female artists is still much more restricted than to the work of male artists, in both gallery situations and in terms of publications. Only female artists' work, however, was used by the sample group as validation of subject matter and content in their own work. This may be because they feel greater affinity with the content of female artists' work, or that their work lends itself more readily to such an interest because the content of their work is of a different order from that of male artists.

Those women of my sample who listed women artists amongst their "work" role models demonstrated a desire to challenge traditionally acceptable conditions in the art world. The ability to reference the work of women artists appears to be a key element in creating change, and may open up potential for the subversion of patriarchal structures which have marginalised women artists.

If we accept that the Romantic notion of an artist identity is seriously flawed in what it negates of the possibilities for difference (that is, the emphasis on the eccentric genius working on the margins of society, identifying only with the work of male artists, and utilising women as helpmate and muse), then constructing an identity as an artist must involve the way that artists perceive themselves as human beings in the broader sense. This may be especially so for women whose attributes as people have so consistently

denied them their status as artists (Battersby). In the next chapter, therefore, I shall explore the construction of gender identity of the women in my sample group.

### **Chapter 3.**

#### **Issues in the Construction of Female Identity by Some Contemporary Women Artists.**

Historically, women have been denied the right to practise as artists, prevented from doing so by the guild structures, changing family patterns and conditions, and by educational frameworks (Parker and Pollock; Pollock; Chadwick; Witzling; Slatkin). The question of the influence of gender positions, therefore, has been central to and explicitly articulated in feminist discussions of women artists. Overt discussion of gender has been absent in the traditional histories of art history, to the point where women who have succeeded in establishing themselves as artists have been systematically written out of history (Parker and Pollock; Witzling; Slatkin).<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that gender only became important with the advent of feminism, but rather that its impact and import were hidden. Histories of art which dealt exclusively with male artists created a gendered agenda which remained unacknowledged. For artists, then, being female is a major factor which impedes the ability to create. In this research I wanted to investigate what role gender played in my sample group's perceptions of themselves as artists. What factors, for example, do they see as important in constructing their gendered artist self?

Many women's awareness of the gendered notion of their experiences has been associated with an understanding of feminist ideas. I was aware very early in the research, however, that many of the women in my sample group did not identify themselves as feminists. Further, an analysis of the interview material reinforced the contemporary feminist argument that there are multiple readings of the term "woman" (Harding, Feminism and Methodology 7) in her "everyday life" (Code, Rhetorical Spaces xi; Smith, The Everyday World as Problematic). I went on to analyse my participants' attitudes towards issues of feminism as one factor in the interpretation of their identification with the group "women". Knowledge of their acceptance and/or rejection of such an identification contributes to an understanding of their gendered identity construction (Griffiths).

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<sup>1</sup> Major history of art works, such as E.H. Gombrich's Story of Art (1961) and H.W. Janson's History of Art (1962), which were standard texts for art students during the period of this study, mentioned *no* women artists.

In Chapter 2 I explored my participants' construction of their artist identity in the context of available artist role models. In this chapter I shall therefore also deal with my sample group's perceptions of the connection between "being an artist", "not being an artist", "creativity", and the value they place on these identities as women. Male artists have formed their identities in opposition to women, using the binaries of culture/nature, rational/irrational, active/passive (Ortner; Rosaldo; Pollock; Code), allowing them to construct dominant models of the "artist" in relation to women's "Other". This paradigm is inverted, at the end of this chapter, with the women being asked to position themselves as the subject and maleness as "Other", thus questioning gender differences and their impact on their sense of self as artists.

### 3.1. The Impact of "Biology" on my Sample Group's Sense of Identity.

Traditional definitions of gender are based on physical characteristics, allocating biological males and females to the social roles of masculine and feminine (Battersby; Chodorow; de Beauvoir; Di Stefano). As Ortner writes "every human being has a physical body" ("Is Female to Male . . ." 71). In reviewing de Beauvoir's survey of woman's physiological situation Ortner concludes that

It is simply a fact that proportionately more of woman's body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at some . . . cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species (75).<sup>2</sup>

In discussions on gender with my sample group, participants often raised the issue of procreativity as significant. A general awareness of the importance of women's physiology informed my participants' responses. Asked about the possible differences between the roles of women and men, many women introduced issues of biology, for example:

They're bound to [have different roles in life] because of their biological clock. (WA9)

There are the inescapable biological roles. (WA10)

I think it's biological basically, I don't think there is anything we can do about it. (WA17)

you can't really get away from this baby thing. (WA3)

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<sup>2</sup> Although not acceptable as traditional subject matter, many contemporary women artists are painting about their experiences of motherhood, for example, Eileen Cooper, Susan Wilson, Laetitia Yhap, Kim Tong ("Reclaiming the Madonna: Artists as Mothers" Exhibition Catalogue, 1993).

This type of reaction would suggest that for some women reproductive capabilities define femaleness, which in turn makes giving birth a significant process. In these discussions there is no acknowledgement that viewing gender in biologically based terms is itself a particular kind of cultural construct. As I discuss in Chapter 5 (150), all of the participants who had children claimed that it had been a very important stage in their lives, and many of the “non-mothers” hoped to have children at some time in the future (although not all subscribed to some of the social expectations of motherhood, such as needing a live-in partner, or sacrificing work-time for mothering). According to Mitchell, Freud showed that people are born psychologically bisexual but acquire sexual identity through cultural laws:

A primary aspect of the law is that we live according to our sexed identity, our ever imperfect ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’.  
(Psychoanalysis and Feminism 403)

In other words the biology we are born with defines our sexual identity and therefore our role in life. If this is true then the majority of my participants had internalised the cultural laws which demanded that they fulfil their “service” to the human race. Butler argues that the process of identity formation begins with “gender” which defines “sex”:

Beauvoir is clear that one “becomes” a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from “sex”. (Gender Trouble 8)

Although the “naturalness” of woman-as-mother (either in terms of motherhood being an essential condition, or having children being a “natural” process) has been challenged by feminists arguing that biology-is-destiny is essentialist and monocausal (Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism without Philosophy” 28), biological differences have been used to underpin much influential feminist work. Firestone, for example, explained women’s oppression through gender differences of biology, advocating the reclaiming of reproductive practices for women by the use of technology (The Dialectic of Sex). One of the limitations of this argument is the assumption that all gender inequalities will be balanced out by eradicating one problem. Even though many of my sample group acknowledged the difficulties which had arisen around balancing the social demands of motherhood with work practices of the artist, none claimed that it was the sole feature of their struggle for professionalism. A further problem with Firestone’s theory is that it conflates the physiological processes of procreation and lactation with the social aspects of rearing and training children. Like many couples in the changing social climate of the

1990s, one of my participants, WA30, spoke of the conscious decision she and her husband had taken to separate the essentially biological aspects of having a family from the practical, everyday organisation of raising a family. Gittins points out that notions of motherhood, such as Firestone's, attribute a social construction to 'biology or 'maternal instinct'' (The Family in Question 66). Further, these constructions of motherhood and the family are specific to the Western world whilst being presented as universal experiences (Gittins 65; Barrett and McIntosh 82).<sup>3</sup> The majority of my sample group had, therefore, adopted a Western, patriarchal model of the "mother", in addition to the Western, male model of "the artist". In other words they had subscribed to an essentialist notion that gender be defined in biological terms.

### 3.2. Socialisation Processes Experienced by my Sample Group.

Amongst the women in my sample group, biology was just one of the factors which they identified with themselves as women. There was a generally unquestioning attitude towards the physiological aspects of gender identity. In contrast to their acceptance of biological constructs of gender identity, my participants appeared to be more willing to recognise and challenge the contradictions inherent in social expectations of the role "woman" which they saw as instrumental in their lives and work. Theories of gender identity as produced through social constructs provide a broader framework for analysing the attitudes and beliefs of this group of women from their perspective.

Socialisation is the process by which individuals are brought into active participation in a society. Berger and Luckmann define it as "the comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or sector of it" (The Social Construction of Reality 150). The social structure, into which the individual is born, is mediated by that person's significant others, who interpret and modify the social world in which they exist. Significant others include parents, or full-time carers, siblings, teachers, and peers. The mediation experienced by the individual may include class, race and gender perspectives in their development of identification.

Beckett defines identity as "a self-structure - an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organisation of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history" ("Adolescent Identity

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<sup>3</sup> To counter the notion of universal interdependence of the biological and social roles of motherhood, Gittins describes the *choice* Tahitian women have regarding their role as mother and involvement with their children (The Family in Question 67).



Development” 41, quoting Marcia). Berger and Luckmann, however go further by including the idea of an external reality; they state that identity “is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (The Social Construction of Reality 195). They go on to say that this dialectic is continuous, starting with the beginning of socialisation and progressing throughout the “individual’s existence in society” (195). This allows for a process of change, not possible (for most people) within the biological construct of identity, and it is the idea of change which formed one of the significant features in the interviews with my sample group. One of my participants, for example, described her early socialisation as:

[not being] expected to go to University, I was expected to get married . . . and all my friends are the same, you know, this is what happened. (WA29)

She fulfilled the expectations of her family, married, had children, and then finally as a mature student went into higher education to study fine art.<sup>4</sup> As I suggest in Chapter 5 (152), such a change requires a significant shift in self-identity as this woman took on new roles, negotiating her way through the multiplicity of connections and conflicts among various roles. By the time of the interview she had sufficiently altered her acceptance of the role “woman”, defined by society as wife, mother and homemaker, to contemplate living alone:

I’ve said to [my daughters] - “I think I could easily live without all of you now. I could live alone” and then they say, “You’d be ever so depressed in a few days, mum. You would be really lonely” and probably she’s right, they’re right. I shan’t try now! I think I’ve left it too late. (WA29)

Although she is unable to resist the further socialisation attempts of her daughters, there has been a great change in her belief in the socially correct way to live life. One factor which may enable her to contemplate living alone is the increasing number of single-person households. She appears no longer to assume that living in a social group is the only way to live one’s life, whilst recognising that her family continues to demand her conformity.

Certainly many of the participants in my study experienced similar early socialisation, especially the older women in the group. Amongst this group there was a general sense of the women internalising the stereotypical image of “woman” and fulfilling the role, irrespective of a higher education or not:

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<sup>4</sup> See Edwards for a discussion of social expectations as a factor in the entry of mature students into higher education.

I met my husband when I was fifteen. It never entered my head . . .  
 I went to a secondary modern school, had no GCEs, left school  
 when I was fifteen, got engaged when I was eighteen, married when  
 I was twenty, did all the things I was expected to do as a woman.  
 (WA4)

The two main vehicles for the maintenance of normative social codes for the different sexes, which are specifically relevant to this study, are the family and education: the justice system is usually taken to be significant too, but has no direct relevance for the experience of my participants, as described in the interviews. I discuss at some length in Chapter 5 the way in which the family works to preserve sex role identities, with varying amounts of success, as my participants negotiated between expectations and aspirations, which exemplified an ability to change and reconstruct self-identity in response to life situations. I return to this theme below when I discuss the family in psychoanalytic terms.

The educational process is one way of transmitting the common stock of knowledge held by any particular society and relevant to specific institutions.<sup>5</sup> In order for the institution to be recognised by society the “institutional meanings must be impressed powerfully and unforgettably upon the consciousness of the individual” (Berger and Luckmann 87). Feminist educational theorists have demonstrated the historical sexism of Western schooling which accepted and encouraged gender difference, taking as “natural” what was a convenient social and cultural construction (Measor and Sikes, Gender and Schools). Before the 1980s the curriculum in schools usually reflected social expectations of suitable training for girls to take their place as women in the adult world, stressing the need for subjects such as typing, domestic science, childcare and needlework, equipping girls for work in offices and nursing before running a home and family.<sup>6</sup> Some of my participants identified these values as significant in their education; for example, one woman who makes fine art embroidered work said, “I was taught [embroidery] at school . . . I wasn’t all that struck on it really though, but we had to do it” (WA1). Other women began their working lives as secretaries (WA2 and WA38), care assistants or nurses (WA23 and WA35), seamstresses (WA21 and WA20) and waitresses (WA27). All these women had to recognise a point in their lives when change became possible for them, in

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the process in the context of specific institutions see Griffiths; Lloyd and Duveen.

<sup>6</sup> For example the Crowther Report, 1959; the Newsom Report, 1962; and the Plowden Report, 1967 all assumed the importance of maintaining traditional sex roles in British schools, seeing the majority of girls’ ambitions as family orientated (especially girls of the working class) (Measor and Sikes 48).

order to shed the traditional roles and values they had adopted, and develop an alternative for themselves.

The younger women in the group tended not to raise issues of gender inequality from their schooling, although they recognised plenty from their art education (for a discussion of this see Chapter 4). This may be a result of the very real changes which have taken place in primary and secondary education to eradicate sexist practices and structures, and even to encourage girls to follow career routes previously designated as “male”. Conversely, one woman resisted pressure from her father and teachers to go into engineering,<sup>7</sup> but felt liberated by having a choice and the knowledge that she could go in either direction, which she put down to an all-female education:

I think this whole thing of feeling that I could do anything I wanted to do came from my first education, because I was taught by nuns . . . and I remember reading something Germaine Greer wrote about [being] a convent girl, and she said, “Of course I never thought there were going to be any boundaries to what I could do, because from the age of four I just had women as role models.” (WA32)

These educational strategies, however, have only succeeded in removing overt discrimination, that is, in a common curriculum and an equality of opportunity for both sexes. Hidden inequalities in areas such as sex-differentiated subject choice, teachers’ actions and career patterns, assessment and external examinations, and social codes, may not be recognised by women, whilst successfully reinforcing the normative values of a patriarchal system (Measor and Sikes, Gender and Schools; Arnot and Weiner, Gender and the Politics of Schooling).

### 3.3. The Psychology of Identity Development.

Much of psychoanalytic theory explains gender development in a partial way, by omitting the contextually specific aspects of identity formation. Butler criticises Freudian theories of gender development thus:

By grounding the metanarratives in a myth of the origin, the psychoanalytic description of gender identity confers a false sense of legitimacy and universality to a culturally specific and, in some contexts, culturally oppressive version of gender

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<sup>7</sup> This was during the 1970s and 1980s when several national initiatives and projects were launched, such as “Girls Into Science and Technology” (GIST) and “Girls And Technology Education” (GATE) which were designed to encourage greater numbers of girls to go into “traditional” male jobs and careers.

identity. (“Gender Trouble . . .” 330)

Barrett and McIntosh also think that Freud’s theories of female sexuality and psyche are “less satisfactory than his account of masculinity” (The Anti-Social Family 123). They take issue with the marginality of women in his view that the primary relationship, the one with the mother, only prepares women for narcissistic object relations and that “traits such as dependence, immaturity, rigidity, and masochism” are conflated under the term narcissistic (124).

Friedan, whilst acknowledging the great breakthroughs made by Freud, contextualises his discoveries and explanations within his historical position: turn-of-the-century Vienna. She argues that the literal application of his theory of femininity is inappropriate for women in the latter half of the twentieth century:

no social scientist can completely free himself from the prison of his own culture; he can only interpret what he observes in the scientific framework of his own time. (The Feminine Mystique 93)

Further, she suggests that if such theories are truly timeless, and therefore unchanging, there should be visible a continuous effect, irrespective of the changing of cultural frameworks. Barrett and McIntosh argue that the “processes of socialisation through patriarchal authority - as described by Freud - are not eternal” (124). Early psychoanalytic theories, therefore, whilst contributing to a developing knowledge of the psyche, can be ahistorical in that a literal interpretation of such theories does not allow for change, either through successive cultures or within the individual. Berger and Luckmann assert that

Radical changes in the social structure . . . may result in concomitant changes in the psychological reality. In that case, new psychological theories may arise because the old ones no longer adequately explain the empirical phenomena at hand. (200)

Some feminist psychoanalysts have approached issues of gender development through object-relations theory. The differences between various psychoanalytic approaches “are reflected in theories of personality and development that give varying weight to innate and social factors” (Chodorow, Reproduction of Mothering 45). According to Chodorow, object-relations theory incorporates biological drives and social relations in ideas of development. This allows for the significant inclusion of different experiences of social relations between gender groups when explaining power relations and structures:

early experiences common to members of a particular society contribute to the formation of typical personalities organised

around and preoccupied with certain relational issues. To the extent that females and males experience different interpersonal environments as they grow up, feminine and masculine personality will develop differently and be preoccupied with different issues. (Chodorow 51)

There are dangers, however, in theories of difference in that the argument can become essentialist. For example, Chodorow's thesis is that women's experience of being mothered causes women to develop a "deep sense of self as relational and men whose deep sense of self is not" (Fraser and Nicholson 29). By "elevating one pattern of difference between men and women, characteristic at most of a particular historical period and form of family organisation, to the status of an essential 'gender reality'" (Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism . . ." 138) Chodorow is potentially denying change. For example, one of my participants was brought up in a "traditional" family as an only child with two parents, the primary carer being her mother. She is in a stable relationship with a man and would "eventually" like to have children. At the same time she perceives herself as

quite a tomboy, because my father's always been in building and doing houses up and stuff, I've always mucked in there . . . drive tractors and diggers . . . I started a fencing company in February with a friend and it was really odd to see people's faces, a woman working on, like, fences and driving a digger. (WA31)

Her sense of identity as a woman appears to be fluid as she draws on a variety of early experiences to formulate her view of her present and her future. Although her mother apparently fulfilled the role of caregiver other factors have been brought into the construction of WA31's identity.

For many women in my sample group, however, their construction of their identity appeared to be based quite significantly on their perception of the differences between men and women: differences in attitude, behaviour, and expectations. In response to questions concerning their opinion on possible differences between men and women, many of the women said that they did not believe there should be a difference but (often sadly) in their view many real differences existed. From their own observations of friends and families some women believed that there was a separation/connection binary in operation amongst men and women:

I think women end up more as the caring, understanding person, and men end up more as the "I'll do as I want" . . . not in a horrid way, but I think that's what happens, and I see that with almost every couple I've ever known. (WA8)

Like, I mean, Robert out there, he believes in his work and he'll bulldoze through everything to get there. Women are kind of a bit more concerned with things either side as they go through life . . . I think perhaps there is a difference there. (WA24)

I think they're driven by completely different things, and often those things are fairly dangerous and misguided . . . very rarely do I come across a chap that I feel is, has a real understanding, or a real sensitivity, you know I'm not talking about just a softness, just that level of understanding, or way of operating in the world. (WA28)

Even though many of the women gave these questions great thought and were aware that they could be accused of stereotyping, they believed very strongly that these differences were observable and therefore real.

Domestic relations were identified as one arena in which some of these differences were played out. Like so many of the other women WA27 had believed that her role as a mother should only be equal to the role of her male partner in caring for their children, to the end that they shared childcare and both worked part-time, but as she said: "in the end I felt very, very strongly that I didn't want to be separated from them and I just wanted to be around". Eventually her partner took on full-time work and she took on full-time care. The reality of motherhood for WA27 was in conflict with her ideology. She wanted to break with traditional concepts of the mother as primary caregiver. On finding herself unable to establish an alternative approach to mothering, however, she attributed it to being female, to her psychological condition as given, instead of social conditioning.

Similarly, WA35 considered her multiple-role identity given and part of her femaleness:

they're inbuilt into me, that I am the carer, I am the servicer, I am the manager of the home, I mean all my work's like this, the number of roles that women have . . . I am the one who considers the consequences of some domestic upheaval and sorts it . . . I am the one chiefly concerned in emotional well-being of every single person in this house.

WA23 also found herself being required, by the difference she perceived as existing between herself and men, to be caring and supportive:

the men [who I've lived with] . . . people think they are so charming, so interesting, but at home they are so demanding it's quite ridiculous.

Although there was a general assumption that this is "how things are" there was a great deal of resentment that men and society assumed such a situation as normative. The

women in my study appeared to be proud of the caring role they identified as female, as long as it was not the only identity they could claim. A refusal to be cast in a unitary identity may be one reason for so much suspicion amongst feminists of the work of theorists like Chodorow and Gilligan. Bordo believes that much of the criticism is “directed against what is perceived as their romanticisation of female values - empathy, mothering, and so forth” (149). Many of my sample group had subscribed to such female values, which added to their sense of a dichotomy between their identities as women and as artists.

In discussing gender differences one participant concluded that the reason all her friends were female was because they were more open and easier to talk to, in fact that they talked in different ways. Gilligan has argued that when we attend fully to what women are saying we will hear, not deviance from the norm, but a completely new narrative. In listening carefully to how women talk Gilligan discovered a difference between men’s “ethics of justice” and women’s “ethics of care” (*In a Different Voice*). Wetherell goes further when she states that through listening to the way in which people talk we may find a more complex structure by which identity is constructed:

if we look at how people talk about gender and sexuality and draw upon received notions to account for their own and others behaviour, we might well find fragmentary rather than coherent references to ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. A multitude of contradictory and inconsistent self-characterisations depending on context might emerge, as opposed to one stable identity. (“Linguistic Repertoires . . .” 85)

Such multiple and, apparently, contradictory self-perceptions of their identity were repeatedly visible in the interviews with my sample group, as they endeavoured to balance the diverse facets of their selves that they recognised.

### 3.4. The Sample Group’s View of Feminism.

Membership of a particular group may aid an individual’s sense of identity but provides no guarantees of identical experience. Feminism of the 1970s and early 1980s drew on ideas of sharing a common experience, necessary in the first wave of contemporary politicisation, in order to demonstrate that individual women were not alone in their experiences. The feminist scholarship of this period, however, tended to replicate the universalising of experience of traditional academic work (Nicholson,

Feminism/Postmodernism 1). Feminists and women's groups contested the limited vision of women's experience, created by consciousness-raising and academic research, which reflected the viewpoint of white, Western, middle-class women.<sup>8</sup> The result of this was that "the voices of many social groups had been silenced" (Nicholson 1). In addition to an awareness that no identical experience exists among all women, Griffin warns that care should be taken not to see all women as latent feminists ("I'm not a Women's Libber, but . . .").

Gurin and Markus raised questions about the effect of the cognitive centrality of gender on women. If a woman makes gender central to her life, does this "ensure that she will develop ideas about the politics of gender relations?" ("Cognitive Consequences of Gender Identity" 156). They go on to suggest that political awareness comes from a sense of being connected to and interdependent on other group members; that there is a sense of shared fate and an acknowledgement of the disparities. There was evidence of this amongst my sample; for example, WA32 had been proactive in forming a women's group at art college to share a sense of common gender history in art, not supplied elsewhere in the course. Another participant helped to form the N--- Feminists Arts Group, at a point of great change in her life, a time when she recognised a personal need to share her experiences as a woman and an artist with others.

Of the participants who identified themselves as feminists, approximately half had specifically joined a women's group of some sort, usually connected with their art work. This allowed them to adopt a group identity of perceived similarities in personal characteristics and awareness of a common fate (Griffin). The other feminists amongst my sample, however, saw their commitment to a politics of gender through the values they adopted and the way in which they lived their lives. For example, in response to a question about her involvement with the Women's Movement, one woman said

I can't say I went to Greenham . . . I had three kids and was trying to make a living . . . and funnily enough I can't say I did anything, except I lived it and I think that, in some ways, is as important as going to Greenham . . . and this has affected four males . . . and that has a ripple effect, I think. So I lived it. (WA13)

Even amongst this group, who saw themselves as committed to changes for women, there was much suspicion of "institutional" groups, which accounted for some of the apparent

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<sup>8</sup> See, for discussion of this issue, Harding; hooks; Rich; Frankenburg.



reluctance to “join” groups.<sup>9</sup> This distancing themselves from formal groups did not appear to prevent their self-perception of being feminists which they attained through connecting with “an invisible college” (Griffiths 86). Renzetti’s study found that women may “embrace feminist ideals, but do not accept the collective efforts of the women’s movement as the appropriate means to achieve their own goals” (quoted by Griffin 190). Griffin’s view that feminism “is not a unitary category which encapsulates a consistent set of ideas within a readily identifiable boundary” (174) allows women to embrace feminism in a multitude of ways.

At what appeared to be the other end of the spectrum were the participants who strongly denied any links with feminism. As with Oakley’s study of housewives there was a preference for “retaining differences between men and women and preserving the traditional privileges of femininity” (*Sociology of Housework* 191). My research, carried out twenty-six years later than Oakley’s, shared similarities in the stereotyped responses of non-feminist women, such as references to perceived militancy and fear of radicalism:

[women’s movements] always frighten the life out of me. It all seems rather, a kind of a violent attitude towards men, I’ve never really understood that attitude . . . It’s better now because it’s not kind of so militant. (WA17)

Well, I’m not sort of fighting men, I’m not a feminist-type person. (WA33)

In spite of the different location in time between the two studies, the correlation may be accounted for, in part, by the ages of some of this sub-group of women. Of the “non-feminists” in my sample 60% were born between 1929 and 1948, which would have placed them as young housewives at the time of Oakley’s study, giving them a commonality with her sample group. In contrast the other 40% of the non-feminist group were born between 1952 and 1956, making them teenagers during the time of the explosive change brought about through the Women’s Liberation Movement. It would be naïve, however, to assume that all young women during the 1970s were touched by the revolutionary ideas responsible for increased politicisation of gender,<sup>10</sup> just as it would be arrogant to suggest now that such women were in some way “wrong” (Condor, “Sex Role Beliefs” 111).

<sup>9</sup> The action of “joining” conflicts with the Romantic artist image of the “outsider” and further demonstrates the ability of many of the women to adopt features of more than one group.

<sup>10</sup> Being born in 1957, my own experience in the 1970s was similar to these women in that my awareness and acceptance of feminism was partial, impacting only on limited areas of my life.

Griffin maintains that it is dangerous to assume that denial of feminist identification is synonymous with anti-feminist sympathies. As she found in her study comments like “I’m not a women’s libber, but . . .” (182) often prefaced views which were covertly or explicitly supportive of feminist ideas. Amongst my participants there were many women who took this line. Their answers to direct questions about their involvement with the Women’s Movement were often denials of feminist identification and yet other issues raised would result in an interest in some of the feminist positions:

I think you feel very uncomfortable about the extremists in the feminist movement, almost kind of embarrassed because you can’t really say that you’re a feminist and have that understood always in exactly the way that you wish it to be, because it conjures up this image of a mad, unkempt-looking fanatic . . . and I don’t really think it’s necessary to change words and talk about her-story rather than his-story. I think the fact that people will go that far with things brings up the point for discussion and that’s valuable and important, and that should still go on. (WA39)

There are several messages in this passage; this woman wants to avoid being identified with stereotypical images of the psychotic outsider,<sup>11</sup> and she is embarrassed by some of the strategies of the feminist movement to raise society’s awareness of gender inequality, but she recognises and supports the need for a debate.

This kind of ambivalence was evident in the interviews of about 25% of the sample group, including women who had called themselves feminists at college and later dropped the term; women who felt that men suffered from societal pressures too; those reluctant to be identified with women-only (art) groups; and all of them believing that there should be gender equality, that there was still more to be done, and that others who, individually and in groups, achieve progress for all women should be praised. As Griffin points out, “feminism” has been given a range of negative associations causing difficulties for women who might identify themselves as feminists, which would account for some of the avoidance and denial I witnessed amongst some of my participants. Further, the reluctance to be grouped with other women may be caused by the anti-feminist argument which defines collective female resistance as negative and unfeminine. Feminists are portrayed as unattractive, especially to men, which allows the term to be used as an insult or accusation, effectively silencing “insubordinate women” (Griffin 186).

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<sup>11</sup> Such a stereotype of a “mad, unkempt-looking fanatic” is similar to certain stereotypical images of the woman artist (see Chapter 2, p.63).

Condor questioned the validity of clearly distinguishing between feminists and traditional women ("Sex Role Beliefs"), suggesting that expressions of sex role beliefs may "imply very different things to the people who hold them" (111). When the interviews of the feminist and traditional women in my study are analysed more closely, they all demonstrate some conflict between their views of women's situation in society and their overt position on the politics of gender. For example, one woman who perceived herself as "not a feminist type" spoke of the struggles to gain time and space in which to paint, incurring domestic disharmony in the process, but all the while persevering in order to achieve something she valued. On the other hand, a participant who accepted the label feminist, with its implications of group identity, showed signs of assimilating with the high-status group "men" in criticising some women's career success through the use of "feminine" characteristics:

I think for some women it can work to their advantage to be female and I think it's the usual criteria will get you on, and that's not to say that their work isn't good, but it certainly helps if there is sugar around the package, makes it easier to swallow. (WA14)

As Griffin states "the identification of oneself as a feminist is not a straightforward process" ("I'm not a Women's Libber, but . . ." 174).

### 3.5. The Sample Group's Sense of Identity as Artists.

For my sample group it would appear that their sense of identity may be generated by strong ideas of the social constructions of gender in combination with their biological condition and psychological explanations of self. There was evidence of change in some women's perception of their identity, indicating that for some women the sense of self was reasonably fluid. Griffin states that "Social identity is not a tangible entity which can be put on or discarded rather like a hat" (189), but is better approached as a verb, that is as a process of identification. This allows for the changing nature of responses to specific social, political and historical conditions. How, then, does the identification of oneself as "woman" relate to the process of identifying oneself as "artist"?

In order to ascertain what sort of impact these two processes have on one another, most of my group were asked whether they believed they would be a different person if not an artist. There were three main responses to this: those who felt they would be the same; those who thought they would be different; and those who had difficulty imagining

being anything else. The immediate answers of “no”, “yes” and “don’t know” gave the impression that being an artist was experienced very differently by different groups of participants. In some ways this is to be expected; as I have maintained that the experience of being female is different for each woman, so the awareness of what it means to be an artist will come in different guises.

Listening closely, however, to their descriptions of the “artist” experience as part of their self-identity, it became apparent that there were tremendous similarities across the sample group. The group which believed that they would be no different if not an artist were basically saying that their creativity was an intrinsic part of their personality and character, therefore they could not be different. They felt that they would be the same person, just using their creativity in a different way. In other words, it was their creativity which was important, not being an artist:

I don’t imagine I would be that different if I wasn’t still an artist.  
In that sense I think your personality comes from something else  
. . . I was lucky in life to become an artist, but I don’t think anyone  
who knew me when I was working on Wall Street would say my  
personality was any different. (WA8)

Similarly, another woman saw no distinction between different roles in life, including within the working world:

I would probably be a smart business woman and earning lots of  
dosh! I think the creative process, and talking with people who  
are involved with running their own business, I think they have the  
same drive and that same input, so if I wasn’t painting then my  
energies would be into something else in the same sort of way.  
(WA6)

Although these two women saw their creativity, and not the status of “artist” as bound up with their sense of being, they expressed their creativity as a unitary process; that of painting, which is the traditional activity of the “artist”. Elsewhere in their interviews these women covertly expressed the view that painting, through its very different history and different aims, is hierarchically superior to craft work. They demonstrated contradictions between their self-perception of being intrinsically creative, with the emphasis on the process, and their internalisation as artists of the dominant paradigms of unifocus and authority, asserting the dominance of painting and its hierarchical status.

Another section of the sample group were unable to imagine what they would be if not artists, but all felt that their creativity was fundamentally part of their nature:

I sometimes try and imagine what it would be like being, sort of, a maths person or a . . . I can't quite imagine it somehow. I can't imagine that part of me not being there. I can't imagine not being creative, I can't imagine not having pictures in my mind, that powerful imagination being a big part of me really. (WA42)

In some cases it was perceived to have been lying dormant, but innately present:

I really enjoyed [being a secretary]. I travelled to India . . . and while I was there I realised that I could get in touch with what I really wanted to do, and that was painting, and it had always been there, lying dormant. (WA38)

Both of these women refer here to painting and pictures, but in fact worked in a pluralistic way, reinforcing the holistic nature of their creativity. It is not clear in many of these cases whether the participants were talking about their need to produce creative work, which suggests an emotional desire, or about an innate disposition, the stuff of the Romantic image. Another woman, for example, who had spent the first half of her working life as a scientist believed she had sublimated her creative desires during that time, a state that might not have been necessary if she had worked in a creative area of science. She saw a possible meeting point between the arts and sciences in their respective senses of curiosity and wonder of things. This is about transferable skills, that is a capacity for approaching a problem in a particular way, in addition to a felt need to invent.

Of the group who felt they would be different if not an artist, 50% also believed that their creativity was basic to them as people. This accords very strongly with the group which could not imagine an identity without art. The main difference is that this half of the "yes" group felt that only when they were painting or creating were they entirely complete:

I think it's a very integral part of what I am and it defines very much who I am and what I do . . . yes, I feel that . . . it feels that that period before I started [painting] I lacked something really crucial that now is always available to me. So yes I would be [different]. (WA27)

Another woman described the inability to paint as feeling "disabled" even if she could pursue other creative activities (WA13), and another referred to painting as feeling "more sort of at one with myself" (WA29). This sub-group believed that their creativity could only be truly fulfilled as artists. In contrast the other half of the "yes" group thought that being an artist required and/or generated a different approach to life:

I think if you're an artist you're questioning all the time, and you're questioning everything . . . and that really enriches my life so much

that I think when you see someone like my Dad, whose values are very much more “how much is it worth”, my values are very different from that, and I think that is because I’m an artist. (WA7)

WA28 also believed that being an artist gave her a wider perspective on life, and an opportunity to work problems through. WA40 described the difference in terms of “the way I look and the way I see”. All these women suggested that being an artist caused them to have different values from others (the implication being better values); and affected their moods (suggesting the existence of an artistic temperament). These features indicate a belief in a significantly different definition of identity-as-artist than that held by the rest of the participants.

There was no correlation between the various types of “identity-as-artist” of the sample group and their identification as female. Each group described in this section - the “no”, “yes” and “don’t know” groups - contained women who were feminist, non-feminist and ambivalent; traditional and non-traditional. There was no correlation either with the sense of themselves as professional artists. Although this may appear then to be a “non-result” it is also another form of the individual construction of many layers of identity, already seen amongst my sample group. It was clear that my participants’ identification of themselves as “woman”, whether traditional or non-traditional, impacted on their self-perception as “artist”. The process of identification, however, appears to be individualistic in that the impact of one on the other worked differently for each woman.

### 3.6. Gender Differences in Artistic Identity.

When the participants were given another opportunity during the interviews to consider the connections between their gender and their identity as artists there was more evidence of unanimity. Thirty-nine women were asked if they believed their work would be different if they were a male artist. Of these, three said there would be no difference in their work; ten were unsure; but twenty-six believed their work would be very different.

Of the “no difference” group, two women could not see why their work should be any different. Significantly, they both quite regularly sold their work and had a sense of succeeding in a competitive art market. Where this happens it may be more comfortable to see oneself fitting into a particular group, which in this case would be an ingroup perceived as predominantly male, but where gender as an issue is not acknowledged. The third woman in this small group stated that her work came out of two aspects, the female and

the male. Early in the interview she said: “I think what I’m interested in is emotion . . . and to express emotion through art, which is also a very female thing, I still see that as a female thing” (WA38). However, in answer to the direct question about the impact of being a male artist she replied:

I think a lot of my work comes from the male side of me [which is] just fast, just immediacy of everything, and using heavy objects. I’ve done a lot of work with found, big objects, and just hammering them together. (WA38)

This conforms to a concept of androgyny suggesting that every person contains elements of the masculine and the feminine.<sup>12</sup> Woolf described the necessary condition for a writer as that of being a “woman-manly or man-womanly” (112).

Although for WA38 androgyny ruled out the possibility of any gender difference for her in her work, the idea of the presence of a female and male binary in their work left some women unsure how a change of gender would affect their work. Several of the women in the “unsure” group also expressed ambivalence about their sense of being very feminine:

I wouldn’t necessarily say [my work] comes out of me being a female because clinically they reckon I’m a male. (WA41)

I don’t know [if my work would be different] because as females go I’m probably a very masculine-type female. I relate almost better to men than I do to women. Because I am quite a feeling person . . . but I’m also very much a thinking person and my thought processes can be very logical which is very much a masculine trait. (WA26)

In comparison to this, three of the women in this group thought that art work is genderless, or very nearly. One woman, for example, suggested that the work shows the “quality of the person, not the gender” (WA14). Similarly another believed an artist’s work would be different simply through being by a different person, suggesting that to her gender is not primary for the argument. This issue also arose during my discussion with some of the women on the gender of role models (see Chapter 2.4.) and indicates that an internalisation of dominant, malestream, art-world ideologies has taken place.

Some of the women were unsure how their own work was affected by their gender position, but expressed tentative beliefs in the possibility that female and male work may show stylistic differences, along the lines of male: “affirmative”, “aggressive” and “strong”;

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<sup>12</sup> For a more extended discussion of this construct, see Heilbrun, Toward a Recognition of Androgyny.

and female: “peaceful”, “decorative” and “emotional”. Studies involving individual interpretations of social behaviour suggest that the terms fixed on here are stereotypical traits of men and women (Fransella and Frost, On Being a Woman 42). The uncertainty expressed by these women in relation to their own work may arise from a reluctance to attach oneself to a condition which carries negative connotations, as do the female terms above. There can be, therefore, a temptation to align oneself to the high-status group by adopting its positive features. Assimilation of this sort involves denial of difference, especially between oneself and the high-status group, as expressed in the phrase “We’re all the same really” (Skevington and Baker; Perkins).<sup>13</sup>

The majority of the women (67%), however, were very convinced that their work would show significant differences if they were male artists. A large proportion of these women believed the differences would be inevitable because as women they experienced life differently from men:

I’m sure it would be [different], after all I’ve spent my whole life being a woman and never being a man. I suppose it would be very different. I’m sure being a woman is one of the major things in life. (WA8)

I think there is a difference because . . . your experiences of life as a female would be different to one’s experience of life as a male, so it’s bound to be. As I get older I think celebrate the differences. (WA10)

Just as these women implied a connection between their gender and their work, so others specified it as the reason why their work would be so different. Many stated that their work was concerned with and came out of issues of living as a woman, which formed the foundation of their work:

it’s like an expression of how the female feels from within, so it’s expressionistic in a way, it’s like how one feels to be sitting like that or lying like that, rather than a voyeur looking at a female form. (WA17)

I deal with female issues about emotion and I don’t think men would deal with it in the same way at all. (WA12)

Another woman was exploring her, not altogether happy, experience of being a wife and mother and the effects of this on her self-identity. This group of women dealt with their identity as women by aligning themselves to the social group “women”. In doing so they,

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<sup>13</sup> Assimilation attitudes are often used to deny racial difference as well (Parsons; Perkins).



as the subordinate group, create a new positive image for themselves, termed “social creativity” by Skevington and Baker (4). This contrasts greatly with the women, above, who said that art work is genderless, and aspired to merge with the high-status group to prove it.

Practical issues and approaches were cited by some women as the basis for differences between their work and that of male artists. WA23, for example, thought that as a man she would have a studio away from “the domestic scene” (for a discussion of this see Chapter 6, p.170); WA36 believed she would have been a craftsperson and set up in business; and WA27 doubted that she would have been “led into working with children”. Another woman thought that domestic constraints caused considerable differences between herself and male artists:

I think women’s approaches to things are different. I am a mum and I have to get the kids to school on time and I also live in a house that needs a certain amount of maintenance . . . there has to be a certain amount of mechanics to be done before I can actually get to work, and when I see somebody like Wyland, who just hasn’t got any - and I see my husband doing it . . . (WA30).

It was quite clear that when asked to make a direct comparison with male artists many women perceived these practical differences as very real factors.

Just as some members of the “unsure” group claimed there were stylistic differences between female and male work, so too did nearly half of this group. They perceived male work as “bolder”, “more confident”, “bigger”, and “more dynamic”, all accepted in the art world as standing for positive attributes. Conversely, female work was described as “more fussy”, “hesitant”, “colourful”, “passive”, “decorative”, involving “spirals and curvy shapes”, “feminine shapes”, and different subject matter, all terms which subordinate women’s work as inferior. Wetherell argued against the use of stereotypes in Bems’ study because they become the justification for a sexual identity (“Linguistic Repertoires . . .” 83), but as Fransella and Frost point out “women do accept stereotypes about women” (*On Being a Woman* 54).<sup>14</sup> Taking these words out of the context of the interviews, however, creates a danger of distorting the meaning behind the delivery of such phrases. Wetherell’s advice on listening to what women actually say (see quote above) alerts us to the possible contradictions underlying things said and the manner of delivery.

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<sup>14</sup> However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 2 (64) they are more likely to accept stereotypes as being about other women, rather than about themselves.

The judgmental tone in which the “feminine” words were referred to was often contradicted by the claiming of such a vocabulary as a positive feature. One woman, for example, described her work as “being quite feminine really. Kind of work with spirally shapes, curvy shapes . . . in some ways I’m proud I’m a woman.” (WA24) The enthusiasm for their subject matter could be heard in their voices, hard to retain in transcribed form. If then these women did not necessarily use such words in derogatory fashion, why should they use them at all, and run the risk of appearing to denigrate the work which they have invested with effort, skill and enthusiasm? One answer is that there simply is no other language in the art world for referring to works of art. All the terms that may be used in the art world have been allocated a value judgement from which it is impossible to easily extricate ourselves. This presents women artists with a dilemma in that there appears to be no other language in the art world for referring to works of art. Since men have conventionally been in positions of power Spender has argued that language is male. This would explain the difficulties experienced by women artists in that male language forms the hegemonic means of communicating responses to the product of the artist. This explanation, however, precludes change because logically women can only internalise the male world view. Corson argues that the power resides with people and not in language itself: “It is the way that language is traditionally used, as an instrument of power, that excludes women from a foothold on power, not language itself” (230). Words, therefore, must be chosen with an awareness of their meanings and, consequently, their potential, or otherwise for subversion.

Women painters may experience conflict when validating their work. On the one hand they seem to respond creatively to their gender identity, in a positive and often joyous fashion, although the language available gives them the message that such work is inferior and marginal. One response may be to deny any feminist influence in the work, probably with the subconscious hope that the work will not be marginalised further. Many of the women in my sample group would deny being feminist and yet in their interviews frequently demonstrated their awareness of inequality as an injustice requiring political and social change. As Griffin wrote, “they keep feminism hidden beneath the surface of discourse” (“I’m not a Women’s Libber . . .” 190). In a parallel way, traces of their feminist ideologies and sympathies are often present in their work, but suppressed and

denied in discussions of the work; not because they are ashamed of the content, but because they have have been conditioned to keep it to themselves.

### Summary.

Defining women in terms of biology was common throughout the sample group. Most women artists saw the procreative potential of women as proof of gender as well as sex, even where this had not been a reality for them, through choice or circumstance. The generally unquestioning attitude towards the physiological aspects of gender identity suggest an internalisation of the cultural laws defining gender through biology.

There was much more willingness to recognise and challenge social expectations of the construct “woman”, which my sample group saw as instrumental in their lives and work. Using Berger and Luckmann’s definition of socialisation, incorporating ideas of successive stages of induction into the social world, there exists the possibility of a process of change. Change was recognised by many of the women as significant in their development: early socialisation was not necessarily the only model they had from which to construct their identities. The collective strategies used by the sample group to create more positive social identities for the group accords with the three possible phases described by Skevington and Baker; that of assimilation, social creativity, and social competition (4). Assimilation, or merger, was demonstrated by those women who deny differences between women and men artists and the work they produce. They often adopted some of the features of the Romantic artist model and modernist notions of a hierarchy of art forms. Social creativity was effected by those women who believed that their work was very dependent on their gendered lives. They accepted the value of their work lay in its connection with their lives as women. The few women who openly acknowledge the feminist element in their work are competing with other social groups and effectively challenging the basis of the status hierarchy which action can ultimately lead to a change in the relative power and status of the group.

Those women who were educated in school before the 1980s seemed to experience more overtly gender-biased early socialisation. Feminist educational theorists have demonstrated the historical sexism of Western schooling which accepted and encouraged gender difference. Some of the women identified these values in their schooling, and began their working lives in traditional “female” jobs in the support and service roles.

The younger women in the group indicated little acknowledgement of gender inequality in their early socialisation, which is partly a result of genuine changes in primary and secondary education. It has been shown, however, that many hidden inequalities still exist, successfully reinforcing the normative values of a patriarchal system. These may not be recognised by women.

The identity construction of the group, in psychological terms, was based significantly on perceived differences between women and men: differences in attitude, behaviour and expectations. Some of the women believed there was a separation/connection binary in operation amongst men and women, in line with the theories of Gilligan. Although there was an awareness that such definitions come close to gender stereotyping, these women felt the differences were grounded in their experiences.

Domestic relations were identified as one arena in which some of these differences were actualised, with conflict often arising between social roles and the women's sense of how they wanted to live their lives. Although proud of the caring role they identified as female, it was not the only role they wished to claim. There was a refusal to be cast in a unitary identity. This accords with Wetherell's assertion that women construct complex identity structures rather than unitary ones.

The women viewed the relationship between gender identity and artistic identity in a variety of ways. Ten women were unsure about the connection of these identity constructions as manifested in their art work. Some expressed tentative beliefs in the possibility that female and male work may show stylistic differences, without committing their own work to such a reading. Others thought that there would be no difference in their work if they were male, that gender was irrelevant to art work. Twenty-six of the women believed that their work would be very different if they were male because they saw their work as relating strongly to their position as a woman. Such a female standpoint places these women in opposition to the traditional Romantic artist identity as male.

The language that many of the women used to describe art work was gender-specific with male work being described in terms which stand in the art world for positive attributes, and female work in terms which subordinate women's work as inferior. The use of such traditionally perjorative words by these women conflicts with the emotional and physical investment in their work. Because all the terms used as descriptors in the art world carry value judgements there are difficulties for women artists in describing their work in ways that are not biased.

physical investment in their work. Because all the terms used as descriptors in the art world carry value judgements there are difficulties for women artists in describing their work in ways that are not biased.

A value-laden art vocabulary is perpetuated through the structures of higher art education, helping to continue a gendered socialisation process beyond compulsory schooling. This forms a significant agency in the construction of an artist identity which, on the one hand, assimilates male and female identity into a type of androgyny through a denial of difference, and on the other hand, continues to construct female gender as opposite and inferior to that of males. In the next chapter I shall explore the impact of a higher art education on identity construction for my sample group of women artists.

## **Chapter 4.**

### **The Impact of Higher Art Education on the Artistic Identity of my Sample Group.**

Education is a major structure through which women are encouraged to adopt particular gender identities (Measor and Sikes; Lloyd and Duveen; Arnot and Weiner). A continuation of the socialisation process involving attitudes and behaviour can be demonstrated at the level of higher education (Thomas, Gender and Subject in Higher Education). The majority (90%) of the artists I selected from the East Midlands Artist Register have had some form of higher art education. In this chapter I shall discuss the impact of their art education on the construction of my sample group's identities as artists in conjunction with their gender identities. The women's experiences of their art education were varied. For some it was a positive experience. One woman wrote, for example:

I feel positive about my Fine Art education! It changed my life - without the chance of having those three years, goodness knows what I'd be doing and where I'd be! (WA28)

But for others their degree years were disappointing, with resultant conflicts and confusions. I intend to analyse how such diversity of experience impoverishes the value of many women's art studies, and to discuss the implications this has for higher art education.

#### **4.1. Historical Influences on Higher Art Education in Britain.**

A fundamental element of the Romantic model of the artist is that of innate talent,<sup>1</sup> present from birth and often manifested in early childhood (Kris and Kurz 29).

Approaches to teaching art in higher education, at least until the mid-1970s, were based largely on such a belief. Davidson's sample group of women artists, educated up to the early 1970s, described the "teach yourself" approach by "heavy drinking staff", which reinforced the Romantic belief of nature being the best teacher.<sup>2</sup> The question of what students gained by attending art colleges at this time must arise. Research carried out in the mid-1970s on 100 British artists "of note" dispelled the popular myth that achievement of excellence as an artist and public notice could be gained without attending art schools or

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<sup>1</sup> An example of the belief in innate talent can frequently be seen in artists' biographies, for example: "from my earliest days, from four and a half, every teacher I had, knew that I was gifted" (Louise Nevelson in Nemser 60).

<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, Emile.

colleges (Ashwin 40).<sup>3</sup> Ashwin's argument is that the acquisition of knowledge and skills must occur within the structured format of an art school in order to achieve success in the conventional sense. It would seem that the gain of attending art school for art students might be success as a practising artist.<sup>4</sup> During the seventies, in spite of an increased awareness of feminist issues, the majority of artists gaining any sort of financial success or public acclaim were men (Pollock, "Art, Art School . . ."; Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism 4; Olin and Brawer 203).

In contradiction to the notion of structure and discipline, "independent thinking" and "free living" are aspects of the Romantic image of the artist, played out by male American Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1940s and 1950s like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko (Nemser; Mayer). American Abstract Expressionism, as part of the Modernist agenda, was a major factor influencing the pedagogy of art during the 1960s and early 1970s. Williams refers to this influence in terms of a struggle between art education and practice: "in the early 1960s the system was completely overturned and *at last* modern art, its attitudes and its practice took over its own education" (23, my emphasis). Dalton argues that the resultant marriage of Modernism with art education is still prevalent today:

Most of the theories which underpin the practices of art education in schools and colleges today can be traced back to . . . the thirties and forties . . . the moment of high Modernism. Art education has continued growing from that time, but without much disturbance of its basis of knowledge, rooted in Modernist values and ideas. (44)

The artist produced within this paradigm still accords with the Romantic artist myth of the free-spirited, hard-living male. As Pollock suggests, this form of behaviour conflicts with the socially constructed position of "woman" (Vision and Difference 48). The art practices may be formed around this ideal of the artist, but there is no obvious position with which many women can identify. Although women artists working during the Abstract Expressionist period have become more visible in recent years, with increased

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<sup>3</sup> Good examples of this route to commercial and critical success are demonstrated by institutions like Goldsmith's College and events such as the Turner Prize.

<sup>4</sup> Identifying art practice as "employment" is problematic. First destination figures for higher education gather information about ex-students' employment position with reference to paid work, which excludes "art practice" for the majority of artists. "Other arts and humanities" score very badly against other subject areas for full-time employment six months after graduating (Boys 29).

numbers of texts dealing with their work, they have not significantly altered the prevailing view of that movement within mainstream art; they are still seen as “other”.<sup>5</sup>

The most extreme dichotomy of education against practice should have been balanced out in the changes to the higher art education system during the mid-1970s, with the introduction of BA degrees validated by a national body. These were intended to lead to a greater emphasis on the value of learning and academic ability within creative development (Robinson).<sup>6</sup> Alterations to the system did not attract universal approval, however. Conant, for example, blamed what he saw as the faults in art education on the move of art education to colleges and the introduction of “pedagogues rather than artists” (154). This negates the value of teaching and learning within that environment, and refers back to the idea of innate talent. Such approaches to art and its pedagogy help to construct a binary of “academic” against “creative”, the value of each, to the individual, being dependent on the position one’s subject holds within such a hierarchy. Dilemmas regarding choice of subject at degree level arose for several of my sample group because of being academically able at school. One of the women said, for example:

I used to do these scribbly drawings which is why I failed art ‘A’ level . . .  
but I got an A at politics and B at English literature, and I actually decided  
to go and do politics (WA15).

This suggests that before entering her higher art education this artist had a notion of the conflicting values placed on innate practical ability and acquired academic learning. It is also indicative of the problems divergent representational forms have within conventional art education, and of the impact formal validations, in terms of grades, have upon life choices.

#### 4.2. Entering the Course.

The majority of the sample group in this study, forty out of forty-three, at some stage in their artistic development attended a higher education establishment in order to gain qualifications in a particular creative field. Although the largest number of these (67%) were BA degrees in fine art, painting or art and design, courses taken ranged from

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<sup>5</sup> Women abstract-expressionist artists are still considered marginal, even to the extent that they are omitted from consideration of the political and ideological examinations of the period (Guilbalt, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art).

<sup>6</sup> Robinson’s report recommended that “All degrees in art and design should be based on structured curricula, an explicit set of educational objectives” and that the academic standard for entry should be raised (153).



education, through other two-dimensional subjects, to ceramics and three-dimensional design.

Methods of entry into a higher education were tremendously varied, with sixteen of the sample (37%) arriving as mature students.<sup>7</sup> According to figures for 1987/88, approximately 57% of mature students in Great Britain, across all subjects, are women (Redpath and Robus 7) and it is an accepted phenomenon in adult education that “women outnumber men by about three to one” and that men “tend to appear less often in the ‘personal enrichment’ type of class” (Rogers, J. 30). Many of my sample group of mature students entered education gradually through attendance at evening classes in “leisure” subjects: “I went to a local class, just something to do in the evenings really . . . it sort of got me away from the box” (WA1). They showed no particular indication of a self-perception as latent artists.

Those of my sample group who attended college as mature students appear to have had a variety of expectations of their experiences. The reason that many of these women gave for pursuing a course in art in higher education was that of improving the quality of their lives. For some this meant gaining qualifications which led on to an interest in learning about and developing creative practice. One woman said:

the first time I felt I needed education . . . I took English ‘O’ level after a row with my sister-in-law. We argued about a point in English and she said “But I’ve got an ‘O’ level, you haven’t!” I thought that stung, so I got one. (WA13)

This woman later went on to study painting through an interest in textiles (see section 4.3, p.111). Expectations were not always realised, however, with the possibility for some women that once an art education was completed little changed:

And she got me an interview at the Tech. College, typing, which is what you get thrown into as a woman, and they let me in and the art college didn’t. Ever since then I’ve wanted to go to art college . . . [later in the interview] . . . well, I did Foundation and then three years, which was really nice, and then at the end it was back to temping again. It was a bit better because at least I’d done that. (WA2)

The evidence from many of the participants suggests that there was an expectation that learning and development would take place during the period of study; not that it would simply give them time to paint. For one woman her degree course did appear to

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<sup>7</sup> Working from the participants’ perceptions of their age as significant, and the standard definition of UCAS entry, I have defined “mature” as being twenty-one years old or older.

she was in the minority. Leepa, writing in 1973, maintained that learning is a structured activity, not “laissez-faire” (178) and that to be effective art teaching “must deal with the whole person. The student must be helped to define his [*sic*] own identity” (180). Even in the post-1975 degree courses, however, which my sample group attended, there was evidence that many of the women were disappointed in the resistance of their course to issues of *their* identity development:

[the tutors] wanted you to look at political . . . what is a current idea, and certainly the people who got firsts in my year were people who . . . had cottoned onto what was going to be politically correct and gone for it. (WA22)

It would appear that there were specific issues which were acceptable to tutors, but these did not necessarily include those around personal identity.

#### 4.3. Art or Craft?

Even though there has been some shift in attitudes within higher art education, for example, few staff would expect to get away with holding tutorials in the pub (WA9), the Modernist paradigm, which is still largely in place, creates difficulties for women through its production of sexual difference. Aspects of the Modernist artist role<sup>8</sup> such as independence from patronage, the sacrifice of material comforts and social commitments for one’s art, being totally focused on one’s work, and living life in a tough, machismo manner, conflict with the traditional expectations that women should work for others, should sacrifice their desires for the improvement of the lives of others, and should generally live life in a feminine manner (Lieblich and Josselson; Ortner; Fransella and Frost).<sup>9</sup>

In accordance with the “masculine” image of the Modernist artist, creative media and techniques are ascribed to the different genders, i.e. a difference is made between the “real stuff” of painting and sculpture, and “women’s work” of fabric based media. Nine of the participants (21%) had come to painting and related courses through an involvement with textiles, embroidery, fashion and theatre design:

And then I did this textile evening. I suppose I was like most women

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UCAS entry, I have defined “mature” as being twenty-one years old or older.

<sup>8</sup> Such lives are exemplified by artists like Van Gogh, Picasso, Philip Guston and Jean Basquait.

<sup>9</sup> Women Realist artists of the Weimar Republic incorporated the social expectations of women’s roles in their domestic and caring tasks with that of their public involvement in their work. As Meskimmon argues, they were able to take advantage of a particular political and social era (*Domesticity and Dissent*).

really, just going out and doing things, just to sort of . . . because you were a bit bored, and then I realised I was really quite interested in art and started this. (WA13)

As Parker and Pollock argue, these areas of creativity have traditionally been seen as “women’s work” (*Old Mistresses* 59), and consequently undervalued as legitimate endeavours for “real” artists<sup>10</sup> (for a fuller discussion of the art/craft debate see Chapter 2.2.). Often these particular women only began to explore the possibility of fine art courses when they were no longer satisfied with their work in textiles or embroidery:

I wanted to get into a position of knowing why I found paintings rewarding, finding out about them, finding out about ideas, so I think it was a need for an idea input as well as the actual artefacts. (WA19)

Some of the women who entered fine art through the “textiles route” then gave up all involvement in such practices, as if in acceptance of the mainstream view of a hierarchy of art forms. Internalising dominant values may enable women to feel that they “belong” to the successful group.<sup>11</sup> One woman said:

GP: Have you ever had a desire to go back to do any embroidery since?  
WA19: No, absolutely not! The same as the woman next door [in the studio] she started off doing embroidery. No, I hate my sewing machine, I hate doing mending. I don’t even dressmake now, all these activities when there wasn’t any other outlet. They’re no longer interesting or important. (WA19)

There was an indication that art forms that contain a large craft element were considered by some of this sub-group of women as intellectually less demanding, and therefore inferior. There appears to be a conflict between the value placed on the “doing” of art practice, which “craft” fits into and many women “do”, and the intellectual aspect, which women may desire but do not believe that “craft” represents.

This dichotomy was recognised in a report into art provision in higher education in 1982 for the SRHE. This report found that there was an imbalance in this sector with a “disproportionate growth in recent years in the number of students doing fine art courses compared with design or craft courses” (Robinson, K. 145). The assumption is that there has been a move away from the study of vocational courses based on skills because of the “vague, illusive and mostly unrealistic allure that professional practice as an artist seems to

<sup>10</sup> Refusal to accept hierarchical distinctions between art and craft adversely affected the artistic reputations of artists such as Carrington (Grimes) and Sonia Delauney (Baron).

<sup>11</sup> As social identity is founded on an internalisation of distinguishing group features, adopting positive features of the high-status group may lead to a positive self-identity with the dominant group (Skevington and Baker). See also Gurin and Markus.

hold for many young people” (Robinson, K. 150). This suggests that there is a process of identification with the romantic elements of the artist myth, effectively privileging “fine art” practice over the seemingly more mundane “crafts”. Added to this is the criticism that although Coldstream recommended a “broad-base” in his restructuring of art, craft and design courses, fine art as a discipline has assumed greater importance at the expense of craft and design subjects, losing sight of Coldstream’s aims and objectives (Robinson, K. 151). This further reinforces the promotion of hegemonic values of fine art over craft and design.

Struggles with the structures of art education were described by many of the participants. They did not report any disputes over the viability of fabric-based work as a fine art medium (although other women I have come across in the course of teaching have reported such struggles), seeming to accept that it had no place in their studies. Rather, the struggles tended to concern involvement in other fine art media:

I think I was predominantly based in painting because I don’t think printmaking was acceptable as a major route, it was like a support to sculpture and painting, I always did both at the same time. (WA16)

I got told off one day . . . I got hauled in the office with all the tutors there and the head of department, and I thought they were going to say something nice to me . . . they just said they thought I’d been spending too much time in sculpture. I thought it was a bit strange . . . that fine art is fine art; a lot of things are connected. (WA2)

Subject departments seemingly cling on to students who have enrolled in their area, in spite of an individual’s desire to develop her ideas in other media. Many of the women reported their confusion as students because they saw all artistic media as part of a whole:

. . . so the films that I made and all the painting and the printmaking that I was doing all linked in thematically, so it was like working out different things. (WA11)

The formal structures of the institutions were set up in very rigid patterns, or were interpreted in that way by the staff, which amounts to the same thing for the students,<sup>12</sup> and yet the courses that many of the women took at college were called BA (Hons) Fine Art, implying a pluralism that did not in reality exist (“fine art” being a general term which covers painting, sculpture and printmaking). Historically painting has maintained a position of pre-eminence amongst all art forms. In describing the fluctuating importance

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<sup>12</sup> Brighton discusses the influence of tutors on their students, especially in an environment that still works largely on the dissemination of information through the “master/apprentice” system.

of different media in the history of art and craft, Greenhalgh states that “oil painting was the only absolute constant. It held sway over all other genres in that it was always unequivocally a high art” (29).

Many of the participants (68%) saw their creativity in terms of working in a variety of media in order to thoroughly explore and communicate their ideas:

I think that if you have an idea and it works in three dimensions rather than one . . . why, why can't you work like that? Why, if you put a painting and this [papier-mache piece] next to each other, would it make me look like I had no commitment to either thing? Isn't it all part of the same exploration? (WA14)

However, working in this way was considered inferior by art college staff: “I wonder whether because I was doing half of one thing and half of another that they thought I lacked commitment” (WA14). If the impression is given that “real” artists concentrate on “mastering” only one medium (in spite of the historical evidence that many of the “Great Masters” worked in more than one), the effect is very likely to undermine the confidence of the students, making their inclinations seem amateurish. Often in their conversations the women in my study would use words such as “balance” (WA16) and “combine” (WA17) when referring to their work in painting and dance, or painting and printmaking, for instance. Even amongst the 32% of participants who had apparently focused only on painting, many had gradually come to their specialism through explorations in other media, including the investigation of ideas in contextual studies (WA15).

#### 4.4. Form and Meaning.

The Modernist debate about the “true” nature of art centred on the idea of self-regulation that science was seen to adopt:

visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience . . . Scientific method alone asks that a situation be resolved in exactly the same kind of terms as that in which it is presented. . . . Analogously, modernist painting asks that a literary theme be translated into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art. (Greenberg 8)

Painting, in Greenberg's rationale, can only be about the forms of painting, it cannot be about a narrative, or have the kinds of meaning that literature carries; it is purely paint on a

two-dimensional surface. Dalton suggests that much of art education is still defined by this Modernist rhetoric (45). There was evidence of this amongst my sample group:

people were getting very annoyed about the fact that people would come and give you tutorials and they might be very good in terms of like formal ideas but they didn't want to talk about anything else. (WA15)

I think it was me, what I was working on, subject matter, because it was once again, quite personal, quite intimate. They talk about . . . like the composition, practical things that you could discuss, but for reasons why you are actually tackling that subject matter . . . (WA16)

The staff were either unable through their own training and focus, or unwilling through their prejudices, to discuss aspects of these students' work other than the purely formal or technical. They avoided becoming involved with the subject matter, especially it appears where that was of a personal or political nature. Collins believes that it is "art's progressive detachment from everyday experiences and feelings (such as those related to gender)" (86) that has led to an elitist status, where the issues are more about "art" than about "life".

LaChapelle challenges the orthodoxy which assumes that the professional modernist artist is the most appropriate role model for (female and male) art students, in the same way that "modernist art objects have been accepted for study and appreciation" (160). He indicates a significant difference, in that "The former requires the student to adopt a particular role to some degree, while the latter allows for a far more distant engagement" (160).

Art and life have not always been perceived as discrete elements. Bordo suggests that "a sense of oneness with the universe is characteristic of a medieval world view" (cited in Code, *What Can She Know?* 135) which was apparent in pre-Reformation painting, with its sense of connectedness with life. According to Bordo, the discovery of perspective, in line with Cartesian thinking,<sup>13</sup> disrupted this oneness with nature by locating the viewer outside the picture (cited in Code 136). In other words, boundaries were introduced between art and life. Modern social boundaries are formed and maintained with the aid of art (White 103) which leads to a particular way of seeing, for example, in rhetoric surrounding notions of popular versus high art (Berger). Groups of (women) artists and individuals have subverted this disjunction in their work, for example,

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<sup>13</sup> Code explains this in terms of Descartes' desire to establish control through objectivity of reality (134).

in the murals of the Social Realists of the late nineteenth century (Nochlin), or the ecofeminists of the twentieth century (Code).

A deliberate separation of art and life by college tutors creates conflict for women who want to explore issues of their lives, issues of race, gender, sexuality. Frederica Brooks, for example, describes the attitudes at her art college where staff only discussed the *form* of the work and “[c]ontent in her work was not talked about - though it was relevant” (“Ancestral Links . . .” 187). Chila Kumari Burman also details how the content of her work, dealing with her experiences as a black woman, was attacked: “There were attacks on your work. What you were supposed to be saying” (“Don’t Rush Me . . .” 54). Pollock demonstrates the anomalies of art education’s position in her discussion of the routine argument of art schools for their retention of a privileged status within education, as the defenders of spiritual values lost by society in its pursuit of economic goals (“Art, Art School . . .” 11). Yet in (studio) practice content is frequently ignored.

Whilst some participants found the emphasis on the formal and technical aspects of production a disappointing, albeit necessary part of their training, others thought there was a value in students being taught a greater range of technical skills. One woman said, for example, “You need to learn the techniques and I wouldn’t say that side is there anymore” (WA21). Perhaps significantly this artist was one of those who had attended a textiles course, within which students will often expect to learn about techniques:

like this thing, I need to talk to my tutor about it, because I don’t know if it would work because I don’t know enough about embroidery . . . putting things down . . . I’m not very good technically, so I have to have a lot of help. (WA1)

Technical issues were sometimes discussed by the participants in relation to a general laissez-faire approach of some institutions, demonstrating a conflict between a desire to be taught tangible skills and the professed enjoyment of three years of uninterrupted, unstructured painting time. WA4, for instance, described her fine art course as one which allowed students to do whatever they wanted, which she enjoyed, and yet later in the interview said:

we didn’t have much technique taught to us at art college. I do think that was a mistake. I mean it was a kind of “get on with it, we don’t want to inhibit you”. I think you’ve got to have a bit of technique, haven’t you? . . . I mean, if you’re learning the piano you can’t learn to play until you’ve got the technique . . . it’s the same thing really. (WA4)

This demonstrates a recognition that certain skills were useful, if not essential, to a freedom of production. Similarly, WA10 experienced three years of time in which to paint, but in retrospect had very mixed views about it:

we were told it at the time . . . it was three years of time, but I also found that my lecturers were appointed in the late sixties, they couldn't teach me perspective or anatomy, it was very much "do your own thing". (WA10)

The issue of skills-learning is connected with the debate over art versus craft and design, with the "low" arts being considered teachable and the "high" arts being innate (Edge, "Your Name is Mud"). Innate creativity and its corollary, originality, are preconditions of the "genius" of the artist. The teaching of the "fine arts" of painting and sculpture may help to perpetuate the myth of originality, in its promotion of such a myth as a necessary specification for the artist. This is set against the perceived condition of craft work as "traditional", with skills being passed on from one generation to the next (Meuli 202).

Brighton refers to there being no given body of knowledge in fine art as in most other subjects studied at a higher level,<sup>14</sup> so the student "has to engage on a personal level the fundamental and unresolved issues of what it means to be an artist, and what it means to create works of art" (305). Paula Rego, for example, described her days at the Slade School of Art, London, in terms of the dichotomous nature of art education:

"I spent most of my time doing these pictures out of my head, which was encouraged. Not a restricting art school at all. Bloody good it was." And yet, in the same interview she blamed the Slade for encouraging her to do "grown-up art. That's where art school was bad for me." (McEwen 52)

A few of my participants clearly believed that the experience they had in their art education was designed to give them the freedom from perceived constraints of performing a series of prescribed actions. WA3, for example, changed colleges in order to pursue the type of course she wanted, rejecting the "academic" for the "emotional" because she saw her creativity as "intuitive". There is an assumption here that the two conditions are mutually incompatible, and that one can be avoided in preference for the other. Such a stance implies the internalisation of the Romantic ideal of innate creativity feeding on emotions and impulses.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pollock goes further, stating that "art students are put at a scandalous disadvantage (and ironically glory in it) *vis-à-vis* other students in higher education. The school sustains a powerful sense of the being of an artist in total mystification of what working as one entails" ("Art, Art School . . ." 11).

<sup>15</sup> The evolution of meanings attached to "Romantic" are detailed by Praz. The cumulative associations



Rosie Snell, educated during the early 1990s, has described how her tutors were willing to let her “sink or swim” (Henshall 93): “There was no structure really - anywhere. They stuck you in a studio and said, do it. There’s freedom and freedom . . .” (93). This apparent lack of structure may be seen by some women as working to their advantage, giving them the freedom of opportunity to pursue their own agenda in terms of their work. Irrigaray maintains that women can fight masculine structures through “attempting to speak the feminine in ways that subvert the masculine logic of language” (Lorraine 75). Lack of structure, therefore, could be taken as a positive position for women; a breaking through the “projects and projections of masculine consciousness” (Lorraine, quoting Irrigaray, 79). This does not mean, however, that lack of overt structures means no structures. Hidden structures are made apparent through tutorials, “crits” and assessments, during which the student can frequently find herself, again, “ignored, misunderstood and marginalised” (Skelton 18). In her study, Dossor found “little sense of the studio tutorial as empowering to the *student*, but rather a place where tutorial power may be retained and flexed.” (165) Although not questioned directly about tutorial systems, many of my participants talked of tutorial experiences in relation to moments of significant change:

it was really hard to find a language, and in the assessment, instead of talking about my struggle to find that language, I started to explain the paintings, you know, I was talking about really personal things, about hopes, fears as a child and how your vision of the world is very different, and they totally laughed at me and said who’s going to be interested in that, who’s going to be interested in you as a five-year old child . . .? And it was a terrible, terrible assessment, and I was very, very upset. (WA11)<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the assessment must be played out in terms set down by hegemonic rules; women who introduce unexpected responses are often marked down (Gilligan, “First Among Equals”). The experience being portrayed by an artist may be so personal that the work borders on therapy.<sup>17</sup> In educational terms the student’s artistic development could

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with the term incorporate ideas of the spirit and the senses responding to objects and images in “a magical and evocative” manner (14).

<sup>16</sup> Paula Rego has written about the importance in her artistic development of being in touch with her childhood: “I discovered Dubuffet. And it released me . . . So I started doing my childlike scribbles big as well. It got me back in touch with being a kid again on the floor, in fact I began to work on a table, and play - and play.” (McEwen 56)

<sup>17</sup> An example of this would be the “phototherapy works” by Jo Spence and Rosy Martin, tracing Spence’s experiences as a cancer patient undergoing medical treatment (Meskimmon, The Monstrous and the Grotesque 6).

be progressed through tutorial assistance in translating an experience into a visual language, whereby the viewer *may* be interested in the artist's experience as "a five-year old child".

The intention of an art education<sup>18</sup> is that the student should produce a body of work that is generated by the student and thereby "original", which is often interpreted by women students as meaning work that emanates from their personal female experience. Aggressive or patronising "crits" and assessments may all too often leave the woman student feeling personally attacked:

I didn't really get on very well all the way through with my marks and stuff like that . . . if I'd been put off by what, by how they'd marked my work . . . I wouldn't have carried on . . . it always upset me but then I would carry on painting. (WA12)

Pollock succinctly describes the process of much art education thus:

The basic pedagogical plan is that the privileged independent spirits selected for the course at interview are given the opportunity to sink or swim. Space is provided, materials, a few technical resources. The student is expected to develop a programme of work, "my work", that precious phrase, a project about which, from time to time, a conversation is held in unequal, ill-defined and educationally lamentable conditions. ("Art, Art School . . ." 10)

The reality is that students are often left confused about their progress in developing such a body of work: "they were chatting all wishy-washy, one minute saying 'Oh, yes that's great' and the next minute trashing what you'd done, and you didn't know where you were." (WA5) Davies suggests that this problem exists for the majority of students irrespective of gender. The ritual of humiliation appears to be based on the machismo concept of "take it like a man!" This seriously conflicts with feminist educational literature which advocates sharing power with students to diminish potentially negative effects of traditional hierarchies (Ropers-Huilman 336). Women frequently start from a subordinate position (Spender) and may, therefore, be in a more vulnerable position than men in the face of such rites of passage.

Although frequently upset by tutorials and assessments, many of the participants only cited such instances as part of a process of development, where they could point to a

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<sup>18</sup> University prospectuses provide statements of the aims of their fine art degree courses such as "One of the most crucial requirements of the course is for students to demonstrate a high level of individually orientated motivation and to evolve their own interests within a critical framework" (The Nottingham Trent University Prospectus, 1998); and "One of the most important elements about being an artist is individuality . . . students are encouraged to develop their own work, together with a serious understanding

Although frequently upset by tutorials and assessments, many of the participants only cited such instances as part of a process of development, where they could point to a personally acceptable or successful outcome (WA12; WA11; WA4). There appeared to be a general reluctance to be cast in the role of victim, in spite of being humiliated, usually by male tutors. This accords with the position of many feminist arguments that to simply portray women as hapless victims is to further stereotype and undermine gains made by women in society (Wisker). The women in my sample preferred an image of being in control.

Women students' survival of difficult tutorial experiences points to their strength of character and determination to succeed, but it does not necessarily justify the continuation of such experiences (in the form of it being "necessary to suffer for one's art"). Mitchell states that

In the crits, language is the key to reflexivity in which the articulation and sharing of perceptions, ideas, resonances and connections in speech inform and enrich the processes of making which precede and follow the occasion. But not all uses of language in fine art are effective and not all are recognised by the institution. ("Institution, Individuals and Talk . . ." 146)

Although she goes on to say that the discussion in crits did not "facilitate learning" (146), the point is not sufficiently made that "language is masculine" (Lorraine 74)<sup>19</sup> and that without a change in language women cannot speak as women, only as men. The very processes, therefore, that are intended to "facilitate learning" cannot work for women students unless the women adopt a masculine mode.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.5. Student Work and its Context.

An analysis of the type of work produced by the participants whilst at art college shows that about 50% more were working figuratively than were working in an abstract form, although the use of these terms can be slightly problematic in that some work may be deemed figurative but treated in an abstract way. The feminist debate concerning figurative and abstract art centres on male dominance of "surface" issues, as defined within

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<sup>19</sup> Cixous argues that language represents the symbolic order which is designed to protect men (see her fictional work "Angst") (Sellers). Similarly, Kristeva argues that there are complex feminine forms of language, existing outside the symbolic order, which they threaten. They both believe, in different ways, "in the potentially revolutionary force of the marginal and repressed aspects of language" (Sarup 123).

<sup>20</sup> I am referring here to Saussure's concept of *langue* and the changes necessary to the meaning of language rather than its manifestation in speech or writing.

Abstract-Expressionism, and considered by many women artists during the 1970s and early 1980s as not powerful enough as a language for an “oppressed group” (Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism 5). For many women artists during the rise of second wave feminism, there was a strong desire to produce work which reflected their increasing awareness of gender politics. Artists like Mary Kelly, who made work which was heavily reliant on a connection of words and visual material, directly related their experiences within the women’s movement to their art work, dealing with the social issues of home, family, femininity and maternity (Maloon). Wall recognised the difficulties for women art students in the late 1980s, of

this turning your back on abstraction in the sixties and seventies, I think because it was becoming too aesthetic, and that for women especially is not, well it’s not what I want . . . I can understand, especially a lot of women, especially back then, getting really pissed off with abstraction. (Wall)

She experienced a conflict between wanting to work abstractly and producing work based on her female experience; there was an awareness that by doing so she was working within a gendered debate.

Modernist art has been described by Mary Kelly as the “expression of the ‘sons’ against the ‘fathers’” (Maloon), from which dissension women were excluded. Such a revolt took the form of an increased formalism and progressive separation from the representation of the subject, resulting in abstraction. Early feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro argued that the discourse of self-referencing autonomy within Modernism “diverted attention from the social aspects of art” (Metcalf 44). The felt need by feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s of an increased connection between their gendered experiences and their art work raised conflicts with the focus on “surface” issues (Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism 5). “Surface” concerns with their celebration of “the gestures and creativity of the maker” (Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses 145) were considered insufficiently powerful for an “oppressed group”. Realist art was thought to be “a more direct reflection of the woman artist’s specifically feminine concerns than abstract or idealised art, because of its language” (Nochlin 86). For many women during the 1980s, however, this position began to seem too essentialist and restricting for their interest in exploring the relationship between non-representational painting practices and a feminist politics of the gendered body (Betterton, Intimate

Distance 79). A contemporary feminist critique of abstraction has opened up possibilities of its appropriation by women artists (WA11).

Five of the participants talked about their work in terms of mathematical logic, grids, detail and geometrical structures:

[I] got involved with the architectural, mathematics side of plants and the buildings. (WA6)

I was working with the notion of grids, anyway, and mapping . . . the grid is the most abstract notion you can imagine. (WA13)

They appeared to experience little difficulty in having their work validated by staff, possibly because these are ideas contained within mainstream art history, and therefore part of the masculine language of representation. Only one of these women connected her work in this field with a personal intent, and significantly she was also the only one who had difficulties in having her work accepted by her tutors. This suggests that the introduction of the personal into a traditionally “objective” form may subvert or threaten a masculine position.

There appears to be little research into the type of work produced by women art students, and certainly this study shows that there was a diversity of work, albeit a weighting towards figurative work. Just as there is no one feminism (Betterson; Sulter) so there is no single type of work by women artists. Very few of the women claimed to have been affected by a “house-style”, and yet they may not have perceived the more subtle manipulations taking place. A redefinition of the women’s student work into subjective (including political, spiritual and gender based ideas) and objective (including painting about painting) themes,<sup>21</sup> shows that many considered their work to be based on some sort of personal experience, and yet it could manifest itself in either figurative or abstract terms. This suggests that feminist interventions have allowed some women to appropriate non-representational forms of painting for their explorations of the personal.

If the women students felt free to express their creativity either figuratively or abstractly, contextualising their work was a major difficulty for many; 66% had gained no support for their studio work from an art historical source. Alison Rowley criticises many institutions for not providing the necessary analysis which would enable women students to understand how their chosen medium “might best challenge its own cultural and

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<sup>21</sup> This is a problematic form of division which itself has come under scrutiny from feminist critics (Rowley, Key, Osborne, C, Lee).

sexually over-determined conventions” (106). The women in my sample may have found their art history or contextual studies component enjoyable or interesting, but not directly relevant to their practice:

it was very much a set timetable of what we were to go through with the art history lectures and that didn't necessarily connect with what you were doing back at the studio directly. (WA24)

I learnt more about contemporary art after I left college. (WA16)

Some students actively pressed for greater input on women artists from their tutors, feeling the lack of such material in relation to their development as artists:

we set up the women artists' discussion group because several of us were coming and saying “well look, we're going to art history lectures and we're not finding anything about us, where we're coming from”. (WA32)

Williams suggests that in order to join their subject “at the highest point of its ‘front-line’ activity” (25) art students need to have a full knowledge of the past history of that subject and to have reference to that subject's practitioners (24). If the past history of the subject is only presented in a partial form, leaving out significant contributions made by women artists, many students may be unable, in Williams' terms, to achieve full success in their subject: “in the art history lectures we were never informed about lady artists at all as if they never even existed” (WA17).

Women artists were used by 20% of the participants to contextualise their own work, although one of these women found that little support on a more personal basis. As she looked at the examples of women artists available to her she thought them all unsatisfactory as role models for her life, since they were either wealthy (Vanessa Bell) or single (Agnes Martin and Brigit Riley), neither of which fitted with her position of being married, with children and a part-time job whilst studying (WA35).

Altogether only four women were introduced by their studio tutors to artists whose work related to the students' concerns. Two of these were guided towards women artists which validated what they were trying to do at the time:

Dorothea Rockburn . . . they showed me her work and I did find it interesting, and yes, I did semi-emulate it, but . . . I tried to do it with different materials. (WA9)

So when I discovered someone like Agnes Martin, . . . and to be fair the tutors brought to my attention people like Agnes Martin and said, perhaps you might like to look at . . . (WA22)

Frida Kahlo proved a valuable source for one of the women (WA12), although she had learnt of Kahlo whilst at college “only from discovering her myself, not through tutors, just an accident I discovered her.” (WA12)

The two women who specifically talked of being influenced at college by male artists had chosen particularly Romantic role models. For one (WA6), it was an almost mystical series of coincidences around which she appeared to weave some sort of fantasy, living in North Kent, Samuel Palmer country, working from the landscape, and with a tutor called Samuel Palmer. As a typical model of the Romantic artist myth, she found such an artist inappropriate for any length of time, as her tone made clear in the interview.

A completely different account was given by WA28 who had reached a significant stage in her development at the end of her second year, in which she seriously questioned the morality of a purely formalist painting:

I hit a very difficult phase in the third year about, is this enough? Is this what painting is about? Can I justify worrying about putting a red down, whether this is the right thing to do, when it seemed so very separate from what was happening in the world? And I was also doing my thesis at the time. I did that on Philip Guston and he really, those same sort of dilemmas were cropping up in his work . . . and that really fuelled my angst. (WA28)

The directions he took in his life and work helped her to work through her rationale about the purpose of painting, and yet according to LaChapelle, Guston is a questionable role model for art students because he is representative of a modernist art-making which “might be grounded in circumstances which preclude the meaningful replication of this type of art-making in the average classroom” (161). Discussing Musa Mayer’s biography of her father Philip Guston, LaChapelle holds up as inappropriate Guston’s behaviour and attitudes, as a father and as a member of modern society.<sup>22</sup> If, as LaChapelle suggests, it is difficult for all students to effectively use artists like Guston as role models, how much harder is it when the student is separated from the gender experience of that artist?

My research supported Brighton’s findings that art history could play an important part in the “exploration of ‘puzzle solutions’ in relation to the student’s own work, rather than being presented in a formal theoretical or methodological context” (323). But in contrast to Brighton’s research I found that art history, either in the studio situation or in the formal presentation, was regarded as insignificant in many women art students’

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<sup>22</sup> Such a judgement is more prevalent in critiques on women artists (Nemser).

development of their identities as artists. Brighton's study was gender-blind in that the majority of the interviews cited were attributed to female students, but there were no female artists mentioned by any of the sample group, and no questioning by Brighton of any gender implications of such a lack for the study.

#### 4.6. The Impact of Staff on Student Development.

Studying art at college involves a variety of learning experiences. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi describe this as "the hidden learning"(60) that happens for art students and concerns the reality of artists' behaviour, lifestyles and attitudes. Students practise being artists during this time to see if they "fit". Similarly Davidson states that secondary socialisation is common, establishing the norms of dress, behaviour and manner of speech (203). Much of this research suggests that information is provided by the tutors, by how they dress, talk and behave. Brighton found that student interviews revealed a tendency to confirm the importance of tutors in the development of the students' work and as individuals (305). This would suggest that the information art students receive is important for the appropriate selection of necessary components to effect the construction of their identity as artists.

There was evidence from the interviews with my sample group that many women art students select what they perceive to be important criteria of the artist role model from the staff available, even if that means a total rejection. Their lecturers' importance as teachers was questioned during the interviews and many thought that the tutors on their courses were ineffective rather than inspirational:

the majority of my lecturers were in their middle to late twenties,  
so they had been a product of the sixties . . . and I didn't think they  
were in a position of, not authority, but in a position as teachers . . .  
I didn't think they offered an enormous amount of teaching, actually.  
(WA10)

Where reasons were given for the students' negative view of tutors, they often demonstrated the general inability of forming working relationships:

GP: What was your relationship like with your tutors?

WA14: Crap!

GP: In what way?

WA14: Well, I didn't have a relationship with them. (WA14)

The personalities of the tutors could be an important factor in the success, or otherwise, of building up relationships. One participant talked of how a tutor's inter-personal skills were



a major cause of her disrespect for him: "I found one of the tutors got . . . quite domineering and would shout at people, and I don't know, I just thought that was out of order really, talking to adults, using his authority like that" (WA12). The women expected to be treated with the respect and intelligence usually accorded to adults (WA5) but felt uncomfortable when tutors became too friendly (WA31), sensing an inability for impartiality when certain boundaries were crossed.

Although my sample group rarely mentioned being treated differently from the male students, there is evidence from other studies (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi) that art college tutors treat female and male students differently, expecting and appraising different character traits.<sup>23</sup> This in turn contributes to gender polarisation. Only two of my sample reported any overt discrimination from tutors and one of those was educated during the 1960s when such open displays of sexism were rife (Skelton; Davidson; Parker and Pollock):

On the day we finished . . . we were told bluntly that the men would go out and they'd be given the jobs at art colleges and the women, for the most part, would be given teaching, if they were given any, but mostly their creative energies would be into pro-creativity. (WA6)

The other was referring to a situation in the late 1980s, when equal opportunities policies were supposed to have eradicated such practices:

Because of the guy who runs the printmaking department at --- and you have to be blonde and twenty-five and have very long legs I think to do printmaking. He was just very obstructive and he's still there. (WA37)

The majority of those women who had experienced difficulties with tutors recognised the subtleties of discriminatory behaviour.<sup>24</sup> They were made to feel in the wrong and might apologise for appearing to complain (WA14). Where female students cannot fit into normative male values they can be made vulnerable (Dossor 165), with a resultant questioning of their "belonging" and of their right to be there (Sperling).

Where tutors were perceived as significant in the women's development at art college, part-time tutors were cited more often than those working full-time, either

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<sup>23</sup> Burman gives a clear description of the existence and effects of discrimination by tutors and students: "There were some hassles at college . . . Some were really racist, ignorant, sexist and stupid. There was a lot of sexism. Totally out of order things like 'Cor she's a good mover' when you were trying to ink up your lithography plates . . . All male staff. There was a kind of fear." (54)

<sup>24</sup> Sex discrimination on the part of tutors in higher education is a general educational problem which often goes unrecorded. For a full discussion see Dziech and Weiner.

because they were “more prepared to listen” (WA7) or because their work connected more with that being produced by the students:

I got on better with a lot of the part-time staff, the ones that came down from London . . . primarily because the full-time members of staff . . . worked very different in paint, they were very figurative, still quite Impressionistic, and I was this Minimalist . . . and a lot of the part-time staff . . . were more involved in the contemporary things.  
(WA9)

Pollock discusses the difficulty of staff in art colleges developing their cultural values and their identity as artists in a different era from their students, leaving them out of sympathy with, and lacking understanding of, their students’ concerns and artistic interests (“Art, Art School . . .” 8). Although she relates this cultural generation gap to the difficulties of staff accepting the deconstructive practices of much feminist work, not in fact produced by many of my sample group, it still seems relevant to the gender gap which was experienced by my sample group. Battock suggests that students are aware that their tutors, even “first-rate artists [are] inadequate to impart the latest mode” in art practice (95), because of the fast changing attitudes and fashions in the art world. Part-time tutors and visiting lecturers can, therefore, be an answer to students’ need for staff to be in touch (Ashwin; Williams).

Although students are not always aware of the constraints that many full-time staff are increasingly working under, in terms of reduced staffing and increased administrative roles whilst building external careers as artists (Thompson 46), there appeared to be a feeling that full-time tutors were unwilling to commit themselves to their students, both in terms of the quality of their contact and because of perceived career building:

it was the part-time tutors really who I got on best with . . . they seemed to be more prepared to listen to what you were actually aiming for and then try and help you in that direction, and they just listened a lot more.  
(WA7)

This was also mentioned by a woman student in Brighton’s study, who described tutors as being “quite deaf, they don’t necessarily hear what you are trying to say” (306).

Similarly, where regular tutors had been dismissed by the students in favour of visiting lecturers, the same criteria as for part-time lecturers seemed to apply. Although much of the support that the students gained from visiting lecturers was simply the attention they received, their work was being validated by an external mediator, especially useful for women students whose work was taken more seriously (Dossor 164).

Research into the phenomenon of art college lecturers as role models for their students tends to merge all teaching staff into a single category (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi; Davidson; Brighton) and yet approximately one third of my sample group volunteered the significance of visiting lecturers in their development as generally supportive: “We had a visiting lecturer that I mentioned . . . who I spoke to a handful of times, but I liked her because she was really supportive” (WA11). As art students the women found the interaction with visiting lecturers a stimulating point of exchange, because they spent time listening and talking to a few students, and in the process validating the students’ efforts. One participant even felt that she had only learnt anything of significance from visiting lecturers (WA36).

Types of contract and hours of employment amongst teaching staff are significant issues within the gender debate. In 1983 Skelton showed that “women formed 50 to 60% of the student population” in art colleges but women never formed anywhere near that percentage of staff. A lack of women staff members was cited as an issue by the majority of my participants, some saying that they had had no women tutors at all. As in Skelton’s study (19) the majority of women tutors were visiting lecturers or part-timers, except in areas such as textiles or illustration which were staffed either exclusively or significantly by women.<sup>25</sup> Because of the specificity of the geographical spread of the sample group, many of the participants (46%) had attended one of three East Midlands art institutions, but the same experience seemed to apply to the majority of the participants, irrespective of where they had attended, with the exception of WA32 who had deliberately chosen a fine art department with a very strong female presence. If tutors do provide important information for the process of identity construction amongst art students, the lack of women on the staff body would suggest that women students can only receive a partial idea of what it means to be a woman artist, that is they have “fewer role models than male ones” (Skelton 19).

Although some of the participants experienced women tutors as a positive force in their development: “the woman who taught printmaking there was brilliant, I mean she was really helpful” (WA37), there was evidence that not all women students connected with women tutors. The reasons for this were varied: two participants just “didn’t rate”

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<sup>25</sup> This situation is a manifestation of the structures which designate fabric-based work as “female”, ensuring a predominance of women tutors in such subject areas.

the women tutors (WA13; WA1), appearing to identify more fully with the male tutors, and yet two other participants criticised their women tutors for being too ambitious and too masculine:

there were women there and they were feminist, but it was quite distressing really, one I particularly remember, she was so much wanting to be like a man . . . she was like a man, only worse.  
(WA3)

Davies, Lubelska and Quinn argue that women who gain power can be affected by “gendered notions of success” (4) which can disrupt their sense of identity as women. There is also the possibility that students are disappointed in their expectations of appropriate behaviour in some successful women tutors. Feminism argues for an increased awareness of differences amongst women (Butler; Nicholson; Sulter). This should work in both ways, that is women students’ expectations of their women tutors and vice versa, enabling a greater respect for each other’s theoretical positions. However, one source of conflict, for example, arose where a student felt pressured by women tutors to engage with feminist artistic ideas:

On the whole I think I was at odds with the general tenor of the teaching of the female tutors. There were one or two younger quite ambitious female tutors who were very anxious to promote what is current in women’s art issues which is their job . . . But it wasn’t in any way relevant to my issues. (WA22)

Although WA22 did not identify with current feminist art issues, it was not simply that she had accepted the masculinist concept of appropriate concerns, her art work being a site of disagreement with all the staff. This artist believed in a feminine aesthetic,<sup>26</sup> which accorded with neither the contemporary feminist<sup>27</sup> nor the masculinist position amongst the staff.

Identification with tutors was made more problematic where life experiences differed. One participant who had attended art college as a single mother expressed an awareness of this difference: “they’d all got studios in London and that, and I’d got a small child and I couldn’t see myself in their [life]” (WA4). The realities of life are such that it is difficult to be driven in a single-minded way, focusing entirely on one’s work, when there

<sup>26</sup> Texts which support the concept of a feminine aesthetic include Collins; Chicago; French. Artists whose work deals with this issue include Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Monica Sjoo, Georgia O’ Keefe, Lee Bontecou.

<sup>27</sup> Much current feminist theory disputes the idea of a specifically feminine aesthetic as an essentialist position responsible for relegating women’s art once again to the margins.

are other demands on one's time (Foley). This created a dichotomy for the student in that she wanted to be like her tutors, she had not attended "art college with the intention of becoming an art teacher", but she received no information from her tutors' lives to aid her sense of possible identity as an artist and a mother. The tutors did not offer appropriate role models for her (Walsh).

When participants were asked directly about the relevance of their tutors as role models, 38% stated that none of their tutors had fulfilled such a capacity, usually the same women who felt unable to respect their tutors as teachers, and in some instances as people. Where participants did acknowledge a tutor (or tutors) as significant in their development, men were cited more than twice as often as women. As a statistic this is unsurprising because of the lesser exposure art students have to women tutors; however, the male tutors were seen as role models predominantly because of their perceived success as artists:

Yes, the print tutor definitely was [a role model] . . . he'd got his own studio. (WA1)

They were young, practising artists who were really concerned about the problems of making images of their own and going through the . . . living as an artist and getting excited about being an artist themselves and having exhibitions themselves etc. (WA24)

In contrast, of five women tutors cited only one was given such a definition: "We had this really good project with Pam K., who seems to be doing very well because I've got books of hers" (WA34). Kim Thomas argues that "Female academics are not invested with the same authority as male academics" (150), creating difficulties for them to be perceived as successful role models for their students. Ropers-Huilman maintains that cultural identity positions, such as gender and race, bring about challenges to the authority of women tutors by their students. Women academics she interviewed talked of the lack of attention given to women tutors, the aggressive conversation styles of some male students, and the teacher being "processed as mother", in the student's mind (338).

Validation of artistic identities for students came through the perception the students have of staff as professional, especially in their role as "real artists". This was more likely to be credited to non-full-time staff:

there was never any connection with the outside world really, apart from visiting lecturers coming in, who you thought were successful anyway, just by the very nature of the fact that they were a visiting lecturer. (WA15)

The opportunity to work alongside a practising artist is tied to the notion of the “master/apprentice system” (Conant 154; Williams) as the best way of learning, and reinforces the view held by some participants that “real artists” do not need to teach: “There’s a bit of influence of so-called artists that are teaching you, but they actually aren’t. They wouldn’t be teaching you if they were” (WA4).

A cyclical argument thus begins to be generated: art college staff are employed on the basis of their success as artists (Pollock; Ashwin; Rosenberg). Students, however, are not always able to see their tutors in terms of successful practice (because their energies are dissipated through bureaucratic and other commitments), in spite of them being the most readily available role models (Brighton). Many students enter art college aspiring to be practising artists in the future but very few are able to make their living from it (Pollock; Robinson, K). They therefore have to accept alternative employment in order to carry on painting, often becoming teachers/lecturers (and consequently reducing their artistic practice). As LaChapelle argues, the concept of the full-time practising artist does not appear to be the most appropriate role model for (women) art students.

#### 4.7. Personality Traits of Women Students.

The naturalising of women’s difference from men, biologically and psychologically, has in the past provided reasons for their apparent lack of achievement in art, turning a socially constructed division into “natural fact” (Pollock, Vision). There is evidence (Thomas, Gender and Subject) that many women students have accepted this view of themselves, lacking the confidence to talk in seminars and demonstrating difficulties with their self-image. Dossor found that women students believed they responded differently compared to male students in studio tutorials, focusing on their weaknesses, failures and their searching for solutions to problems, whilst the men were confident, assertive and presented the value and positive aspects of their work (164). This did not necessarily equate with the quality of the work they were producing. Many of my sample group expressed their lack of confidence during tutorials and “crits” (see above, p.118), but also in a more general way about how they saw themselves fitting in:

I never actually belonged there. (WA5)

I felt that there was nobody to help me, you know, there was nobody that I particularly trusted. (WA14)

Socially acceptable female traits, such as humility, lack of confidence and non-assertiveness (Fransella and Frost; Skevington and Baker) preclude many women from attaining the status of artist because, as Dossor suggests, “the less confident student is labelled unprofessional or second rate, and these assumptions stick” (165). As part of their research in the early 1970s into personality traits of female and male art students, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi found that both female and male students tended to be “socially withdrawn, introspective, independent, imaginative, unpredictable, and alienated from community expectations” (38). Similarly, Whitesel’s study of the personalities of women art students in 1978 showed them to be autonomous, original, and tending to have a desire to do well to satisfy their own objectives rather than for reward. They were not bound by conventionality and showed strong individuality, with no need for numerous personal relationships (62). This accords with the Romantic image of the artist, standing on the edge of society, unable and unwilling to form social relations. Neither of these studies appears to have questioned whether the personality traits shown are innate characteristics of the students or assumed traits in order to fulfil the role of “artist”. Furthermore, Whitesel fails to question the gender implications of her findings, assuming the traits she found were proof of the essential personality of the artist, possessed equally by women as by men.

There were only five participants in my study who showed such tendencies, isolating themselves out of choice, often working at home, not wanting to become too involved with staff and students. Of these five, however, two women worked in this way through chronic shyness and lack of confidence (WA16; WA24). For the most part, the women talked of the importance of their peers as a support mechanism in what was often a confusing and isolating experience:

And she had encountered the same from her tutor and the two of us kind of got together and almost brought ourselves through it. (WA32)

The general attitude of the college was too narrow and I think because we were as a group on the course, we tended to just get on. (WA21)

There was disappointment expressed at the lack of connection with the staff, but consolation in friendships with other students. Gilligan has described women’s identity development as defined within a “context of relationships” (*In a Different Voice* 160), unlike the masculine development of separation and individuality, around which in fact art education is structured; the idea that students will work on their own, become increasingly

independent, and separate from the structures at the end of three years. To adhere to this pattern is proof of success (Pollock, "Art, Art School . . ." 11), but if some women students are uncomfortable with this model, they will have to work hard at resisting the image of failure: Skelton found that the most successful women art students were the "strong aggressive" types (19). Although there was talk of support from their peer group generally, only one of the students mentioned more formal networks of female support, which endorsed similar findings in Davidson's study and my MA study (Perkins):

[there was a] figure who was there on a regular basis, who I felt had a small group of students . . . who were very much her students, and I didn't feel I was ever part of that group. (WA28)

To suggest, though, that the women in this study were totally passive would be to reinforce certain gender stereotypes. Through the interviews with the women it became clear that many of them had, in fact, attempted to take action to affect the sort of education they received. Isolating oneself, choosing to work at home, for example, could be read as an acceptance of the stereotypical artist image, or it can be seen as an attempt to work in an atmosphere more conducive to the student's work than that on offer at college:

I used to have a studio in a flat and I used to work mainly at home and they didn't seem to mind as long as I came in and brought the work in to tutorials. (WA16)<sup>28</sup>

Lubaina Himid writes of black women students often preferring to work at home because of the negative, humiliating effects of racism in college studios, but she states that such students are "punished" by staff. This provides evidence of staff intolerance towards women who try to take control of their position.

Occasionally the women would talk about an attempt to alter their experience without success, the result being direct or indirect coercion by staff into specific working areas:

I think I probably always was a painter, but why I didn't do painting was my personal tutor was the Head of Department who was the painting tutor and I felt he didn't like me. So I just thought that sculpture would be more interesting. (WA14)

I actually wanted to paint but I wasn't allowed to paint . . . the Head of Department said "You can't paint". (WA5)

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<sup>28</sup> Working at home in preference to working in the public glare of college studios is a familiar issue in interviews and biographies of women artists: see Sulter, Douglas and Wegner.



While this group seems to demonstrate passive acceptance of the “ruling power”, they proceeded quietly to paint on their own, without the support of the college, demonstrating a determination to pursue the subject of their choice.

Many more of the women talked about action they had taken which significantly changed the way their courses worked for them, either fighting to do a specific subject:

I had to fight to actually be a painter because Andy said to me . . .  
“I’m very surprised you want to be a painter!” (WA12)

I was self-funding [so] I said if you really don’t think I’m a painter or you don’t want me on a painting course for whatever reason that’s fine, I can accept that, I’ll go somewhere else but I don’t want to stay in printmaking. (WA22)

or seeking out a tutor who they believed it was possible to establish a profitable working relationship with:

and I thought “Right, well, I don’t think you’re going to be much good as my tutor, then I’ll look for another one”, and I did. (WA3)

I went home and thought “Yes, what he said was true, if I’m going to get anywhere on this course I’m going to have to change tutors”, so I changed to him . . . he was really good, and I felt I’d made the right choice. (WA4)

These women assumed control in apparently small matters, but their power not only affected the type of course they worked on and who with, they clearly felt good about themselves, seeing the results as a measure of success (Wisker). Taking control, either covertly or openly, was empowering for many of these women and may be a significant way that women art students can create change for themselves and others.

#### 4.8. On Leaving.

There was a strong feeling amongst many of the participants that whatever their experience of the art course they attended, it had not fitted them for life outside the institution.<sup>29</sup> It is an accepted phenomenon that art students leaving the structures of an art course often find themselves floundering in an inability to work, to find a direction, to know what they want, and there was evidence of this in some of the interviews: “I’d sort of lost interest by the time I left, so again it’s . . . I’m still wondering now what I learnt from it” (WA36). For some, three years of struggling with the structures of an art

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<sup>29</sup> Pollock states that art students’ training “leaves them totally unequipped to grasp their place in the competitive world of business, professionalism or, no longer so inevitable, education.” (“Art, Art School . . .” 11).

education did not give them the expected sense of independence on which their future was supposed to rest:

I've got a friend who I was at college with . . . and she's had hang-ups ever since college as well . . . we've got this lack of confidence, they didn't give us a terrible lot of confidence. (WA4)

Courses were criticised for not helping to prepare students to survive in the world outside, with speakers and information about vocational issues: "And then it was curious because there were no links at all with any of the studio groups that existed then" (WA15). This was a student who saw her future, however precarious, as a practising artist, and in spite of the ethos that prevailed which assumed students would have such ambitions there was no practical support to carry it through. Participants who had attended vocationally inclined courses, such as textiles, could also find themselves at a loss:

I think it would have been more, sort of . . . if we'd had people coming in who had made a living in different areas of textiles . . . But we were just very much in the dark. (WA21)

Both of these situations seem to arise out of a similar assumption, namely that knowledge in itself is sufficient in the market-place. Robinson however criticised all art, craft and design courses for becoming too inward-looking and not sufficiently aware of the problems that arts students face on gaining employment (*The Arts and Higher Education* 151). One participant summed up the prevailing attitude:

I mean C---- gave you no insight about how to survive afterwards, you know, it was very much slightly on the arrogant side, you know, you are all artists, you'll be fine when you get out there. Nothing . . . practical about how bloody hard it is. (WA24)

Possibly art institutions believe they do enough for their students with the final degree show acting as a rite of passage. During these occasions art students begin to connect with the society in which they and their productions are situated (Wolff), becoming latent business people with an eye to presentation, hospitality and sales. They dress smartly, offer wine and give out business cards. Rosenberg suggests that the ties with the Romantic model should be loosened, and refers to the Constructivists and the Bauhaus who saw the artist as "a sophisticated, healthy, self-confident professional - a 'public man' who, like the lawyer or engineer, confirms 'his own informed ideas'" (99). This might be a more appropriate model for many of the women in this study in terms of what they need to aspire to, but difficult to realise.

### Summary.

The Romantic model of the artist, as filtered through the Modernist paradigm, is still the most obvious role model on offer to art students in British art institutions, in spite of the increasing inappropriateness of such a model. Women art students particularly have difficulties with this model; it does not allow for a pluralistic approach, or a concern for personal politics. Conflict was frequently created by the women's desire to work in a variety of media, used by art college staff to disparage and marginalize the women. Similarly, where the women wished to use experiences of their own lives in their work this was ignored and rejected as inappropriate material for art practice, in line with the Modernist theories of formalism and surface issues.

Women students whose work is based on ideas and issues seen by institutions as marginal may require more support in contextualising that work within contemporary practice. Two-thirds of my sample group, however, gained no such assistance from studio or art history staff. The art history component of their courses was viewed by many women as insignificant in the development of their work and consequently their sense of artistic identity. Although teaching staff in higher education are important in terms of providing information for the secondary socialisation which takes place during a student's time at art colleges, many of my sample group saw their tutors as ineffective. This was most pronounced when discussing attitudes and behaviour of full-time staff, whilst part-time and visiting tutors were considered more helpful to individual students' needs. In addition to a continuing lack of women tutors on higher art education courses, there was a failure of women students to identify with those who were present. Both of these factors contribute to a shortage of female artist role models for women students creating fragmented views of the artist identity.

Support by their peers was important for many of my participants whilst at art college. Their resistance to an isolating form of independence and the separation which is considered a necessary part of the maturation process accorded with Gilligan's theory of gender difference which suggests that women work within a "context of relationships" (160). Such difference can, for some, lead to an image of failure which is hard to resist in the face of contrary social and psychological norms. Far from being hapless victims, however, many of the women were pro-active in effecting change of institution, course or way of working in relation to their own educational experience. Assuming control in this

way was empowering for the women, restoring some of their self-image after demeaning experiences with the structures of their institutions. The ethos of art education is to encourage non-conformity in the work produced and as a personality trait but it ignores challenges and “prefers the safety of its establishment ivory tower” (Skelton 18).

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Social Relations and the Family.**

In the investigation of the social relations my sample group engaged in, I was concerned to explore how they related their experiences of being women artists to their wider social framework, both within and outside of the art world, and the intersection of this with their place of (art) work. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, an art education is a significant part of the artist's socialisation process, conjoining with other factors such as the individual's position in the family and society at large. Social identity theory as developed by Tajfel and Turner explains "aspects of identity that derive from group memberships" (Skevington and Baker 1), rather than individual characteristics and idiosyncrasies which make up personal identity. Such an approach takes the emphasis away from the exclusive study of the individual and incorporates a group context (Baker 84). In Chapter 2, I discussed the participants' internalisation of images of the artist; that is their specific response to a social construct. In this chapter, however, I shall explore how the women see themselves as operating in social groups and the effect this has on their self-image.

One of the groups which contribute to identity formation is that of the family. Although often seen as a "natural" unit Barrett and McIntosh rightly point out that "the family" is really a socially constructed unit, that there is nothing "natural" about the structures and ideology of such a grouping. For this reason anthropologists and some sociologists prefer to talk of kinship systems. This redirects the focus away from the biological and incorporates group members with no blood-ties (Finch; Moore; Gittins; Barrett and McIntosh). The structures of the family unit in contemporary Western society are still largely based on the Victorian model (Moore 118). In its simplest form this model constructs the family as a socialising unit with the father in authority (Finch, Family Obligations and Social Change 2), and as a refuge from the external world (Gittins, "What is the Family? Is it Universal?"), placing it in the private or domestic realm (Moore 22) rather than in the public one. In the second section of this chapter I shall discuss this public/private construct in relation to the implications of a gendered reading of the workplace. Because of the conflation of the private realm with the family and the domestic, the patriarchal family has consistently been used to define women and children in

specific ways. In the third section I shall analyse the impact of their families on my sample groups' attempts to construct their image as artists.

### 5.1. Social Relations.

Social identity theory suggests that social groups have varying power and status in relation to each other, and that social comparison is important, both individually and as part of a group, in order to evaluate opinions and abilities in relation to other social groups (Skevington and Baker 1). Social groups are made distinct through social categorisations, which are the specific features of the groups; when these features are internalised, social identity is formed. As the possibility of mobility is built into this theory it allows for change over time, avoiding the pitfalls of some theories which have been accused of ahistoricity (Condor 17).

The responses of my sample group were classified into a dyad of "social" groups<sup>1</sup> and "art world" groups<sup>2</sup>, in order to understand any possible connections between these in-groups<sup>3</sup> and the women's perception of themselves as professional artists. When asked about their support networks, some participants gave examples of only their general social group(s), some described people and groups within the art world, and some gave examples in both categories.

As an example of one type of in-group, a few women identified themselves very strongly with their church. One woman especially tried to incorporate her church group with her art work by exhibiting her paintings, inspired by her religious ideas, in the church. By exhibiting in the meeting place of her in-group, she may have been interested in a response to her ideas rather than to the paintings as evidence of art practice,<sup>4</sup> or she may have been seeking recognition of her role as "artist". Another woman also connected her art work with her social group, church, by running craft workshops for the church's drop-in centre. She was having trouble doing her own work because she found it "a very

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<sup>1</sup> "Social" groups were defined as those friendships formed around social or familial positions.

<sup>2</sup> "Art world" groups were defined as being connected through a shared interest in art.

<sup>3</sup> "In-groups" are the identifying groups based on shared or common features which are used to distinguish between different groups (Skevington and Baker 2).

<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to modern male artists who have produced commissioned religious art, such as Matisse in Vence Chapel, Piper and Sutherland in Coventry Cathedral, and Sutherland in Northampton Parish Church. In all these cases the art work has added to public knowledge about and status of the individual building.

selfish, self-indulgent thing to do”, but felt that her workshops gave her a sense of purpose:

There’s a lot of people living on their own, isolated, in the city centre, with nowhere to go . . . so that’s what we’ve been doing and I’m totally committed to that. Whatever I do in my art . . . I’ve been doing art things with them . . . I’ve got a women’s group and we’ve been doing patchwork and needlework, making papier mache jewellery . . . that’s why I was saying that I feel things are coming together now.  
(WA4)

This participant had been a school teacher before her retirement, and I think that she still identified herself in that social group because she apparently felt most “complete” when she was sharing her abilities and disseminating her skills knowledge rather than her art products which she saw as egocentric.

Attempts to incorporate the features of one social category with another was not always successful, demonstrated by the participant who used the activities of her social group as the subject matter for her paintings and then exhibited the work at a group event. As with WA3, WA2 expected the subject matter to generate an interest in her product but was disappointed by the apparent refusal of the in-group to become involved with the features of an out-group:<sup>5</sup>

I thought folk people would like to see my work, so at one of the festivals . . . two years ago . . . I hung some paintings on the wall, and I got no feedback, except for three or four people, who know me, said it was nice to see my work. None of the people I know . . . I don’t think they even saw it. (WA2)

Social identity theory acknowledges the desire to change the level of the status of the in-group, but appears not to account for the attempts by some of my sample group to combine their different social in-groups. This is more in line with difference theory (Chodorow; Gilligan) which explains the need to make connections in life as a feature of the feminine psyche. On the basis of her study of mature women students, Edwards argues that this gender difference is brought about by

women needing a recognition of, and interaction between, their identity from the private sphere in the public sphere - an integration and blurring of boundaries between the material public world and their private consciousnesses. (31)

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<sup>5</sup> She had not taken into account the lay person’s reluctance to discuss works of art, especially with the artist, even when favourably impressed by the work.

In a similar way some of the participants identified strongly with the in-group women, citing female friends as a vital element in their construction of their identity as women and artists (for further discussion of points raised by this, see Chapter 3.5. p.96).

If membership of a representative body, such as a professional association or trade union, confers power and status on individuals (Walby, Patriarchy at Work: Hugman, Power in Caring Professions; Garmarnikow et al) it might be expected that joining a formal artist group would be widespread practice amongst professional artists in order to achieve professional status. Out of forty-three women artists, however, only six were members of artists' organisations. (It is unclear how this relates to the national picture because information is not available on the percentage of practising artists who are members of artists' groups.) Four of these women were members of the same county-based artist group established by local professional artists for raising the profile of visual arts in the area through group action and support. One woman was a member of various arts-based groups and one was a member of a national, establishment art society. Of these six women, four clearly perceived themselves as professional artists, gaining validation of their commitment in part through membership of a high-status group. Hugman suggests that

Professional associations and trade unions provide collective contexts in which the nature of caring professions and their relationship to organisational structures are continually debated. (Power in Caring Professions 219)

This is an appropriate role for artists' groups to adopt in order to effect social change, a collective strategy to create a more positive social identity for the group (Skevington and Baker 3). As the majority of artists, however, are not directly employed in the traditional sense (Walby, Patriarchy at Work), my experience suggests that many do not perceive the value of joining a collective body. There was much talk amongst my sample of artists being solitary individuals. For example:

artists are loners and they're best off remaining loners (WA8)

I know other artists but I think we're all a bit wary of each other  
 . . . you're only interested in your own ideas . . . very selfish, artists.  
 (WA2)

The concept of artists as isolated individuals, existing outside of social groups, rather than part of a strong united force, is evidence of the internalisation of the dominant Romantic image of the artist (Battersby; Davidson). Looking at it another way, those women of my sample who perceived themselves as *professional* were more likely to give examples of



artist friends or organizations, than those who saw themselves as having no status or as being artists in opposition to *professional* artists.

A less formal collective support system for some women was their involvement in a studio group, through renting studio space, or membership of workshops, used for access to specialised equipment such as printing presses. These groups operated as support groups in a loose way, providing casual contact between different combinations of individuals at varying times. As long periods of time might pass without any particular contact with others in the studio or workshop, simply belonging to a work-based in-group provided more in the way of psychological rather than social support; having a sense of belonging. The women artists in my sample who worked in studios outside of the home were less likely to give examples of associating with social in-groups and more likely to cite art world in-groups, suggesting that they identified themselves in relation to their work in preference to their non art-based social world.

Women artists who wish to support a self-image of professionalism may do so by assimilating themselves into a high-status group through adopting the positive features of that group (Tajfel; Skevington and Baker). In this case the positive characteristics of the high-status group, dominated by men, is involvement with identifiable art groups and the possession of a studio space. These women have not joined a subordinate group, such as “women artists”, or significantly challenged the status hierarchy. It is not easy to explain why women artists should want to move into a hegemonic structure which operates patriarchally, without acknowledging “the pressures which operate to discourage overt feminist allegiance” (Griffin, ‘I’m Not a Women’s Libber But . . .’ 191) and the creation of a new positive image for the group “women artists”. The patronizing and stereotypical social constructs of the patriarchal art world are supported by negative media images (Griffin) (see Chapter 3, p.95), one outcome of which may be the desire to join the group perceived as carrying positive status.

## 5.2. The Workplace.

The domestic sphere has been the means, since the sixteenth century, of reinforcing hierarchical structures of power and authority in gender terms (Finch, *Family Obligations*; Gittins, ‘What is the Family?’). In Protestant Britain, increasing secularisation meant that the household became the woman’s responsibility, and also her salvation through “good

public and demonstrated their spirituality in the private realm of the family. This model formed the concepts of “public” and “private” which have been amended and altered since, but never entirely superseded in the West. Industrialisation reinforced the “public/private” gender split as work was removed from the home, which itself became the refuge from the world for the male worker and the means of exclusion of the female dependent.<sup>6</sup> In these terms the domestic sphere is, therefore, an “ideological category, not simply a physical space” (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 15).

As an ideological construct the place in which a woman works carries complex meanings. In the era of changing work structures it is not uncommon for people employed by businesses to operate out of a room in their homes (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz). Unless it is generally known that a man is unemployed it is assumed that when at home during the normal working week he is fulfilling his contractual obligations. For a woman the position is less clear, because she becomes a potential “housewife” as she disappears inside her home (Scott and Tilly 45). Vincentelli’s study of women artists working in Wales, for example, related how one woman whose exhibition had been reviewed in the local paper had been referred to as a “housewife”. One of my participants also felt that society’s interpretation of a “homeworking” woman was stereotyped around traditional gender roles. She said:

people assume you’re here because you’re a housewife, when they come to the door, or when they drop in and see you . . . it really is difficult . . . if I had a studio, or if I had a job somewhere else they wouldn’t be able to do this. (WA2)

Oakley asserts that the role of housewife is still entirely feminine in spite of changes in occupational roles: “No law bans men from this occupation, but the weight of economic, social and psychological pressures is against their entry into it” (Sociology of Housework 29).

Women artists who work at home, therefore, may be identified by society as housewives who indulge in a creative hobby. This in turn may interfere with the woman artist’s self-image as a *bona fide* artist. Amongst my sample, the women working at home had the most difficulty in seeing themselves as professional artists; only 26% as against 75% of the women working in studios away from the home (I shall return to this below). The majority of the “home-workers”, however, were able to construct a self-image of

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<sup>6</sup> This model of the family was, however, only relevant to the middle classes as working class women needed to work in the public sphere. (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz; Gittins)

being an artist, and those who were not in paid employment saw themselves as unemployed artists, not housewives. They often seemed to strive to avoid any adoption of the conventional role of a woman at home by ignoring traditional standards of “a good housewife”. The ambiguous social position of women working at home could be seen in the similarity of characteristics raised by my sample and those discussed in Oakley’s study on housewives. For example, the most frequently mentioned problem with working at home, in both studies, was the sense of loneliness, having no-one to interact with. Oakley suggests that in an industrial society “the opportunity to engage in social relationships with other workers is one of the most prized aspects of any job” (*Sociology of Housework* 182). One of my participants who was an unemployed artist working predominantly at home said:

that’s why I found the Print Workshop has been good because you go there, you meet other people who are working in different ways to you and you can swap ideas or just have a coffee, or just know that you’re not the only person working where you are. (WA14)

Other points of connection between Oakley’s housewives and my women artists were the sense of autonomy in working at home and being in control of the output of production. This allowed them to set their own individual work patterns, which could be structured to suit their circumstances, for example, allowing a connection between their working world and their domestic lives (see Chapter 6, p.173). In a study on 834 US government employees Patchen found that having control over their work methods was central to high job motivation (cited in Oakley 42). In her studies of first-time motherhood Zajicek also found that choice was a significant factor in positive evaluations of self (cited in Baker, “Social Identity” 89). This may help to offset the generally low status of the housewife role and the lack of self-esteem felt by some of my “home workers”.

Part of the autonomous condition of working at home is the responsibility of ensuring that the work gets done. In the case of my sample group this meant deciding the frequency, regularity and quantity of their creative work. As Oakley puts it, women working at home need to specify standards and routines as elements in defining their job, and then they tend to use these as indicators of success or failure. For the housewives in Oakley’s study, however, their autonomy was more imagined than real, because the husbands also often had standards which the women were expected to achieve, whereas my “home workers” had greater autonomy (except when leading up to exhibitions) in that

their art production was not narrowly determined by others. This created a conflict for some women in that they felt such work was self-indulgent and therefore of little value.

Feminist theories of the work place have explained sex-role difference in terms of class structure with women being disadvantaged because of their position in reproduction (Firestone); as a binary of housewives as producers and husbands as the expropriators of labour within a patriarchal system (Delphy). Of the six structures which, according to Walby, constitute the system of patriarchy, the two most relevant to this study are paid work and housework. She argues further that paid work takes place in the public domain, controlled predominantly by men and carrying a high status, whilst housework constitutes the private world of women and is of inferior status in terms of value within the system. Similarly, Imray and Middleton think that patriarchy is part of the social system which defines women as existing in the private sphere, whilst men can move easily between the two. Returning to the point raised earlier that men at home will be assumed to be doing “home office” work whilst women at home may be thought of as housewives, this can be explained by Imray and Middleton’s thesis that:

Activities in themselves have no absolute and unchanging value, be they economic, political, cultural. Rather, value accrues to activities by virtue of who performs them and more importantly who controls their social meaning and importance . . . it is not work *per se* which is valued and which is part of the public sphere, but rather it is work done by men. (16)

What all these theories have in common is a distinction between housework and employment, which does not allow for the conflation of work in the home, evident in my study. The women in my sample hope to, and sometimes do, sell their art products made within the home environment, placing their effort within the category “paid work”, irrespective of whether or not they make a living out of it. (This is similar to outworkers who may often fail to earn a living wage from long, hard hours.<sup>7</sup>) In order to account for a more complex situation it is necessary to conceptualise the place of work and its attendant status as a variable as proposed by Walby, and Imray and Middleton (Table 1).

Table 1.

Hierarchical Status of Types of Work in Relation to the Place of Work.

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<sup>7</sup> See Phizacklea and Wolkowitz for a discussion of this point.

Table 1.

**Hierarchical Status of Types of Work in Relation to the Place of Work.**

Private		Public
-----I-----	I-----	I-----
	Low Status Paid Work Outside Home	High Status Paid Work Outside Home
-----I-----	I-----	I-----
Low Status Art Work At Home	Medium Status Art Work Outside Home	
-----I-----	I-----	I-----
Low Status Housework		

(Source: Walby, Patriarchy at Work; Imray and Middleton.)

This model indicates a shift between the extreme positions of the private world of housework, with its low-status, gender specific orientation, and the public domain of paid work, which has a variable status dependent on the type of work performed.

### 5.3. The Family.

The influences of the family operate largely in the private domain, whilst impacting on the subject's position in the public domain, for example, a woman's choice of education or career. The three main areas of family relationships that seem to have affected my sample group's identity construction are the women's parents, the women's position as mothers, and the women's partners. Each of these relationships is explored in the rest of this chapter.

#### 5.3.1. Parental Influence.

Parental involvement in their children's choice of subject in higher education is significant (Griff). What begins as pride in a child's artistic ability can often turn to rejection of art as a suitable activity for an adult. WA15, for example, said: "When I was younger I used to draw quite a lot and they always used to say, 'You're going to be an artist'", but at eighteen her father felt quite differently about it. Artist Jenny Saville has related how her family encouraged her creativity, but did not expect her to make a career out of it (Douglas and Wegner 88). Of my sample group only five participants believed

that their parents demonstrated unconditional support for their decision to study art at college. This means that 88% of the women artists in this study had to work against varying degrees of parental resistance in order to pursue an interest in art. For some this meant having to achieve their aims as mature students, an option made possible partly through changing attitudes towards later entry into higher education (Edwards). Like Sylvia Plath, these women had usually been channelled by their parents into traditional gender-related employment:

[my mother] got me an interview at the tech. college, typing, which is what you get thrown into as a woman, and they let me in and the art college didn't, so that was it. Ever since then I've wanted to go to art college. (WA2)

Another woman had originally trained and practised as an occupational therapist, part of the nursing profession and heavily identified by gender.<sup>8</sup> She believed that she took this route because she was “into the kind of caring thing” and not coerced to conform. When this is located against the family background it can be seen that many pressures came to bear on her choice. Her parents had been engaged before her father was disabled during World War II; they married and her mother became a

full-time assistant to him. He was a clergyman and she was full-time, right-hand woman for him . . . she was like THE role model for womanhood, so then she gave up her whole life, married him, and served him, for the rest of his days. (WA35)

She believed that she had not been “forced into it”; social conditioning as she experienced it, however, can be subtle, but effective. Fransella and Frost suggest that people absorb common assumptions which appear not to be imposed: “they ascribe to themselves the qualities of the group to which they see they belong; they want to do what is expected of them; and they value the socially recognized goals” (14).

Where parents were very supportive of their daughter's choice of art, it appears that vocational links were present in that choice. WA42, for example, stated that her parents were supportive, but not of a fine art education: she started work as a textile designer at seventeen, training through a day-release programme, only coming to fine art at a later stage. There is a gender-bias within textile design, especially at art college, which, as well as the vocational aspect, makes it more immediately acceptable for cautious parents. WA31 also felt that her parents had encouraged her, but she trained in graphic

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<sup>8</sup> In 1988, 89% of nurses and 93% of care assistants were female (Equal Opportunities Commission).

Approval by parents for the further study of fine art was tempered, usually by a concern for possible future employment prospects. This was especially so where the participant had come from a working class background (as identified by the participant). As WA10 related, her parents who were on a low income were not be able to support her, and had hoped for help in the domestic finances. Employment fears were cited more frequently than concern about unsociable peer groups and behaviour (Griff), although two women did say that their parents were worried about drugs and riotous living, which conforms to the popular image of the Bohemian artist. The role of artist was not seen by many parents as a viable career ambition and there was much expectation that daughters would get a “proper job” after graduating. The “proper job” was usually some form of teaching, full or part-time:

I was making this decision to stop teaching full-time and I can remember speaking to my parents and my mother was very supportive of me but my dad . . . my dad’s very northern and working class and he just said, “Well really, what are you doing? You’re just getting on your feet!” (WA32)

As with WA35, WA27 appeared to have absorbed her parents’ values, in this case that art was only suitable for a hobby; “you couldn’t take that seriously as an avenue to go down”. She now perceives her mural painting as her real work, for which she gets paid, and her own painting as a hobby.

Ten of my participants reported that their parents had disagreed on the suitability of their daughters studying art at college, although this had not prevented any of the daughters from doing so.<sup>9</sup> Amongst these parents it was more common for the mothers to be very supportive of their daughters’ aims, with two-thirds approving their decisions. Whereas not one father of these “split” parents was wholeheartedly in favour of a career in art, the arguments, again, being that of employment difficulties. The fathers of three of these women had ambitions for them in specific careers, for example, science, politics and engineering, all traditionally male subjects. Parents of either sex may attempt to control the career development of their children into specific areas, especially when the parent has not fully resolved aspects of their own development (Pincus and Dare 62). Rejecting

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<sup>9</sup> An extreme example of parental opposition to art studies was the case of a woman in the late 1950s who moved from “a very sheltered life into this world of artists”. On suffering severe depression as a result of a broken personal relationship, her mother had her diagnosed as schizophrenic and subsequently institutionalised. A psychiatrist recently involved in the case stated that “Often young ladies who didn’t conform to parents’ wishes were institutionalised” at that time. (Longrigg)

the career development of their children into specific areas, especially when the parent has not fully resolved aspects of their own development (Pincus and Dare 62). Rejecting paternal ambitions, and in one case his monetarist values as well, caused the women some discomfort in that they could not conform to and fulfil their fathers' ambitions. In the case of WA7 it occasioned a complete rift with her father for a time.

Parents, then, would appear to have varying degrees of influence over their daughter's choice of educational direction and career. For some women this influence clearly affected their choice of course. Others, however, showed some sagacity in selecting courses which provided the wished for experiences whilst appearing to satisfy parental objections. WA37, for example, studied window-dressing at St. Martin's Art School which gave her "the life without having to be an art student", exactly what her father was against. Unconditional support from parents was rare amongst my sample group, but few of the women were actually prevented by their parents from studying art. Where there was dissension, it was predominantly from fathers and tended to concern career opportunities, rather than lifestyle issues as reported by Griff. Generally speaking there appeared to be more attempts on the part of fathers to control their daughter's choice of course, establishment and career, in line with traditional family ideology which gives male relatives a sense of greater authority. There may be a correlation between a parent having worked and their wanting to influence a daughter's career choice, i.e. whilst all fathers had presumably worked, the mothers possibly had not and were, therefore, less concerned about career issues. As can be seen above, however, many of the women achieved their ambition, even though they had to wait for independence from their parents.

Four of the women were the daughters of artists: two had painter-fathers, one had a painter-mother, and one had a painter-father and a sculptor-mother. The effect of this on their own development as artists varied. The advantages experienced by two of the four women included the supportive attitude of their parents towards the study of art in a higher institution. Generally, however, these women felt doubtful about the advantage of having an artist-parent. One woman's father, for example, was an artist in the Bohemian mould, leaving the family when she was young. Although she effectively rejected him as a model, establishing a strong, stable family unit as an adult, she talked of herself as a "typical hippie-type artist". The role model of her father accorded with the popular image of the artist during the 1950s, creating a pattern difficult for her to entirely contradict.



For another participant the influence of her father-painter was more consciously dealt with, as she deliberately attended a different university from the one he had gone to, worked in different media, and refused to let him see any of her degree work (until the final show). Having done an MA at the time of the interview, she was just beginning to feel confident that her work contained no direct influence from her father, although she acknowledged the possibility of sub-conscious influences from growing up amongst his work. One woman felt comfortable with the idea of having followed her mother's career in terms of the work she produced, being unconcerned about issues of influence. She felt, however, that she had mirrored her mother too closely, to the point where she also had given up painting, concentrating purely on teaching.

The pressures of having artist-parents were too great for one woman, who for many years rejected all aspects of an artist's life. She resented what she perceived as parental neglect<sup>10</sup> establishing and focusing on her family until the children were adolescent. It also took until this stage in her life for her to develop a sense of herself as a potential artist, with her own creative ability. Although she still expresses rancour when talking about her upbringing, as an artist she has adopted many of the features of her parents' lives, in terms of where she lives and travels to, who she deals with, and the subject matter of her work. This suggests that although not willing to acknowledge it, there have been some benefits for her as a successful practising artist. As a route into the arts, family connection 'has been a constant factor with women artists since their emergence into the profession in the seventeenth century' (Grimes, Collins and Baddeley 16). This no doubt becomes less relevant in contemporary society with the increased ability of women to 'learn their trade' at art college, instead of in their father's workshop, possibly accounting for the low number of women in this study who are the daughters of artist-parents.

### 5.3.2. Artists as Mothers.

Of my sample group, twenty-three were mothers, just over 50%, which is lower than the national average for women having children. This figure, however, is consistent with Davidson's research which found that 50% of her sample group, including seven men,

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<sup>10</sup> Although her mother has made many public statements that suggest an idyllic, if slightly unusual, family experience.

had no family.<sup>11</sup> In order to understand why this might be so, it is necessary to explore the experience of women who have combined motherhood and a career in art.

Ten mothers in my sample group had their families before training or becoming artists, accounting for the majority of the mature students in my study. Many of these women had fulfilled their social role of being a wife and mother prior to developing their own interests. This is not necessarily as selfless as it might appear; many of the women described motherhood as a positive and absorbing experience:

it was enormously enjoyable and I loved them and perhaps it was a good thing that I hadn't got any work . . . because I really loved them when they were babies and I loved them when they were children . . . and I found the whole thing very, very enjoyable. (WA33)

I had a great time when my kids were little. I mean they used to drive me nuts like everyone else, but on the whole as soon as the school holidays were coming I used to be the one shouting the loudest . . . brilliant . . . and we'd go out into the woods and do all sorts of things. (WA13)

Although the emotion and the enjoyment were, no doubt, very real, both these women had had very unhappy childhoods of their own and may have been playing out an idealized version of family life, or thinking they had provided for their children the experience of which they felt deprived (Chodorow 90). Descriptions such as these could be seen as stereotypic constructions brought about through social conditioning, but Baker warns us that if we focus on "women's personal constructions and experience" there are inherent contradictions in dismissing these as "misrepresentations of the 'truth'" (102).

There was a general view amongst these ten women that having a family affected the quality of their art educational experience. This often focused around their inability to stay in the college studios as late as other students, emphasising their difference, in working to the demands of family life, rather than to the demands of the work:

we had a set time for the evening meal, six o' clock, and the studios used to stay open to nine, and I often wanted to stay and go to things but I couldn't, I had to come back here. I felt extremely frustrated about that, I didn't like it at all. (WA3)

In those days I used to go really early in the morning . . . and then I'd leave dead on five to dash home and get the dinner. (WA20)

Rosalind Edwards also found that a significant number of women in her study on mature students resented the constrictions of their families on their study time. She goes on to

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<sup>11</sup> Vincentelli however found a slightly higher figure of 59% of women artists had children.

discuss the uniqueness of education as neither exactly like paid work nor leisure. The conflict of balancing study time and a family, both considered part of the private domain, is in its demands akin to paid work in that there are real demands on students to conform to expected behaviour patterns (70). Many women in this position try to conform to two different social role expectations, that of artist, committed, self-absorbed, hard-working, and mother, nurturing, giving and absorbed in others. If acted out to their full extent these two roles are mutually exclusive, and therefore, a compromise has to be sought.

This conflict was not confined to mothers who became art students, but was also experienced by artists who became mothers. Many women said that having children affected their creative output. For example, WA25 felt that her baby son had caused difficulties for her “because one doesn’t have the time, and then sometimes when one does have the time, one’s too knackered . . . so I suppose it’s the time and the energy.” She was still managing to work, albeit at a reduced level; she was planning a new work routine of “a little every day”, and she bought time by employing a childminder occasionally. This accords with the strategies adopted by some of the women in Vincentelli’s study, and one that I was familiar with, that of painting in the evenings and when the children sleep in the day. Alice Neel has also stated that she used to work at night when her baby was sleeping (Nemser 125). This phenomenon is not generally discussed either during training or in the majority of art texts and, therefore, conceals possible models of working and the reassurance of commonality.<sup>12</sup>

Other women, however, did not fare so well, stopping work completely for some years whilst their children were small:

when I had children I completely stopped [work] for about two or three years. (WA21)

my friends who are painters they make a window each day, but I’ve completely failed to do that, except with a camera. (WA23)

Parry suggests that women with young children may see their caring work as “socially legitimate”, which allows them to evaluate their role positively in comparison to working women (quoted in Skevington and Baker 88). WA23, for example, said:

then I was painting and now I’m being a mum and that is two separate things, I think . . . I think if I try to paint and have

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<sup>12</sup> Grace Hartigan’s method of dealing with the conflicts created by motherhood was to adopt the masculine paradigm and send her son to live with his father, thereby breaking one of society’s taboos and the long-term relationship with her son (Nemser 154).

Even though she may identify positively with the mother role, she perceives the two roles of artist and mother as distinctly different and difficult to combine, requiring a separation for a time and a (possibly temporary) curtailment of any artistic activity.

Oakley (Women Confined) saw the transition to motherhood as one which incurred a loss of personal identity through giving up work and taking on a domestic role. She equated motherhood with emotional dependence, social isolation, and financial dependence, leading to low status, in comparison to the high status of the work role brought about through self-enhancement, financial independence, emotional and intellectual development, and the opportunities for self-expression and independence of spirit. As I discussed above, for the majority of my sample the artist role did not provide financial independence, making the status of the mother role equivalent to the artist role in terms of achievement of financial autonomy. Further, people may choose to work full- or part-time in paid employment and “be artists” in the remainder of their available time, in the same way that women can work and be mothers. Combining all three roles, however, that is paid worker, artist and mother of young children, may be extremely difficult, and was not achieved by any of my sample group.<sup>13</sup> Some worked in paid employment and had young children; whilst some others combined their art work with having young children. Those of my participants, therefore, who combined motherhood (having young children) with an artistic role, necessarily remained financially dependent, contributing to a possible lowering of the economic status of their household.

The traditional view of the artistic establishment, particularly visible amongst male art educators, is that the artistic role is synonymous with creation, in conflict to the mother role of procreation: the argument persists that because women have the biological condition necessary for giving birth this dilutes their energies for creating art. Parker and Pollock quote the chairman of an art department who said to a female student, “You’ll never be an artist, you’ll just have babies” (Old Mistresses 6).<sup>14</sup> It is assumed that artistic and procreative activity are mutually exclusive, which indeed they are for some women for a specific period of time, but does not allow for a change in women’s identification over a longer time, and treats women as an homogenous group, effectively closing down a variety of readings (Baker; Moore). The majority of my sample group who had children saw their

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<sup>13</sup> Many of the women in Vincentelli’s study argued that frequently women already have dual careers, that is household and childcare plus their art work, so they cannot take on a third job.

<sup>14</sup> See also Battersby for further examples of this attitude (131).

longer time, and treats women as an homogenous group, effectively closing down a variety of readings (Baker; Moore). The majority of my sample group who had children saw their mother role as taking priority at certain stages in their lives, that is when their children were young:

I never do as much art work as I want to do, because I think in the end my priority is my children. There were three or four years in which I did virtually nothing, when they were little, and as they get older I gradually build up how much time I've got available to do my art work. (WA27)

This describes the type of pattern that many of the women alluded to. One exception to this model was WA30, who had just had her fourth child prior to our interview. She and her husband shared the childcare role, arranging their work times around each other, this being possible because they were both self-employed. She was also atypical of the sample group being one of the few who made their living by their art work, in this case, mural painting. None of the mothers in my sample group, however, complained about their partner's lack of contribution towards the care of their children (although there were complaints about the sharing of other roles). They appeared to assume the responsibility was theirs. For example, when asked how having children had affected her creativity, one woman said:

It's bound to have done, because I left college with a degree and a baby, and my children are very, very important to me, so I'm sort of . . . I am Mother in the traditional sense as well. (WA10)

The only participant who admitted to ambivalent feelings towards the state of motherhood saw herself as at fault:

so having two children and finding any time for art work when there was no-one else to mind the children, no-one to do anything, it was quite bad . . . but I don't think I was a natural mother with small children. (WA43)

She appeared to have internalized many of the stereotypical images of motherhood, especially those which construct the practice of mothering as "natural". In addition to this she experienced the practical problems of the demands of young children, which together produced a conflict. Such a conflict was described by Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) as the twin dragons of art and life which continually pull in opposite directions for women artists (Nicholson, A. 132). Although such descriptions solve no practical problems, the

The commitment of the majority of the mother-artists to the nurturing role, however, did not necessarily submerge the women's creative urges for long. They had all developed strategies for maintaining or getting back to work, for example:

When the children were very little I used to find that if I tried to paint when they were around I ended up doing both things badly, so when they were little that was separated, and then as they got older it was - if we do this together can I then have a bit of time? (WA10)

Many of the women also spoke of being "a better person" through doing some of their own creative work, so that in spite of their apparent acceptance of the traditional role of mother, they saw it as enhanced by and enhancing other activities. They needed, at the same time to identify with the artist role.

Combining the roles of mother and artist was approached differently by different participants. One strategy entailed integrating work and family. This could take the form of structuring work to take place alongside the family:

I ran a dance school when they were younger and the studio was like next door and we just tried to do something creative all the way they have been growing up . . . so my daughter's carried on doing that, I've taught her all I know . . . and she's making a good job of that. (WA17)

Organising her life in this way conformed to her ideology that work and mothering are connected, as she goes on to say:

it's given them that space as well to develop creatively which is important. It's all part of the process of being a woman, isn't it really, because the kids are like the same as the paintings in a way, I don't find any difference, it's all part of the same process, creating stuff. (WA17)

This challenges the traditional view that creating and procreating are incompatible; according to this artist they are the same process.

Another participant linked her children with her work by using them as occasional models. She saw it as a bonding process:

my son modelled for me for the Sebastian drawings, and he was naked, and for me that was something very warming because I was making connections, although not at that time because I was being very objective, because I needed the figure. (WA6)

Male colleagues and students, however, had great difficulty in accepting her right to work with her teenage son in this way, in spite of an historical precedence of male artists using their daughters to pose for them. Staff and students at art colleges are used to working

Male colleagues and students, however, had great difficulty in accepting her right to work with her teenage son in this way, in spite of an historical precedence of male artists using their daughters to pose for them. Staff and students at art colleges are used to working with male life models, suggesting that the problem they experienced was not particularly male nudity, but the familial connection of mother and son. The incest taboo in Western society is very strong, and finds its psychoanalytic explanation within Freud's work on the Oedipal complex. This makes adult men suspicious of the sort of relationship which must, therefore, exist between this woman artist and her son. There are few ready examples,<sup>15</sup> from which she can gain support, of women artists using their adult sons as nude models in the same ways as Lucien Freud, for example, works with his daughters (Lampert).<sup>16</sup>

The majority of the mother-artists established two separate roles for themselves, attempting to keep their work distinct from their family life. One woman, for example, paints only when her daughter is at school: "my working day is nine to half past three, because that's when I get my daughter from school . . . [in the school holidays] I come to a full-stop . . . it shuts down. That's 'mum' time." (WA5) This submitting of her work regime to her perceived needs of her daughter, interferes with her ability to see herself as a professional artist. She said, for example: "Maybe if I needed to produce a lot more pieces of work and became a real artist, then . . . when she's older . . ." (WA5). She equated being a "real" artist with full-time commitment, that is, the identification with only one role, in line with the Romantic image of the artist. She has been unable to adopt an alternative image of the "real" artist as one who has additional responsibilities.

WA5 worked at home, but other women established a distance between their work and family by renting a studio away from the home, with its associations of housewife and all things domestic. Whatever strategy was used, there had to be an allocating of time to different activities for mother-artists, especially whilst children are living at home. The strong sense of responsibility expressed by these women, transcended everything: there was a sense that relationships are more important than anything. Yet their commitment to producing art work was also very obvious in the sense that they had to plan, organize, sacrifice, and fight to gain the time and space, physically and mentally, in order to create.

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<sup>15</sup> One recent example has been that of Sally Mann whose work entails photographing her three young children nude (Apter).

<sup>16</sup> Such extreme reactions by the male staff and students may also be fuelled by the knowledge that artists like Eric Gill, who used his daughters as models in his work, are known to have broken the incest taboo by having sexual relations with their daughters (MacCarthy).

They may have absorbed society's expectations of what it means to be a "good mother", and worked hard to conform to such a model. For example, there was a feeling amongst several of the women that they had sacrificed a part of themselves as artists to be mothers; but they were not passive victims. This dual role is not acknowledged by art traditions as a valid model. There are numerous examples of male artists, however, who elevate their total absorption in their art work above family relationships. This is exemplified by Philip Guston's response to his daughter who had arrived to stay, with her young baby amid some problems in her marriage; he ran away from any emotional contact with her, back to his studio, feeling that her visit was an interruption of his work (Mayer 116). For him, art came first, whereas for my sample group there was a general desire to find some sort of balance between these two competing forces causing the women to adopt at least two roles, requiring their energy to go, not just into being a mother or being an artist, but into harmonizing these two social identities.

### 5.3.3. Partners.

The desire for a balance of the mother/artist roles in their lives raised questions as to the women's attitudes towards their relationship with their partners. Twenty-four women in my study were either married or cohabiting in a long-term relationship akin to marriage. Three further women were in a long-term relationship where their partner did not live with them on a permanent basis. All the women were invited to discuss issues about how their family, whatever that consisted of,<sup>17</sup> had affected their creativity, in order to establish their experience of being an artist in conjunction with the role of partner/wife. Although there is some overlap with the mother-artist group, only fourteen of those appear in this group as well: that is, at the time of the interviews only fourteen of the mother-artists were married or cohabiting, the implications of which will be discussed later.

The participation of my sample group in the art world may be determined by the effects of patriarchal relations; that is, the demands placed on them to "service" the family. If we take the "traditional" sex-role to mean the exclusive adoption of the roles of wife and mother (Oakley Sociology of Housework; Friedan Feminine Mystique; Fransella and Frost On Being a Woman) then few of my participants could be placed in that category. They

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<sup>17</sup> Gittins argues that "Families are but groups of individuals; individuals who age, work, die, may have children, marry or move. By definition families are constantly changing" (8). The family unit is formed within the constraints of history, geography, and socio-politics.



had all retained a perception of themselves as artists, if not professional, requiring a level of engagement with a structure outside of the domestic role. Many of the sub-group “wife-artists”, however, appeared to adopt certain aspects of the traditional sex-role pattern of behaviour, which impinged on their ability to work as artists, using the popular role models available. One crucial factor was the division of domestic labour. This was most apparent, but not exclusively so, where the family consisted of young children, as discussed above. Women without children were often still solely or mostly responsible for preparing food and cleaning the family home. One woman, for example, perceived the business of feeding her and her husband as her duty that she was conditioned to perform:

he keeps saying you don't have to make dinners and such like that,  
but in the end you have to do it, otherwise we wouldn't get anything  
to eat . . . he's not bad . . . it's just that I was brought up in the traditional  
way, you've got to look after your man. (WA1)

This had to take precedence over her art work, even though she had to “get it out of the way” because it was a “hassle”. Similarly, another participant assumed the responsibility of the housework, and justified it by claiming it as a universal experience for women, whilst at the same time trying to distance herself from the process by blaming it on social conditioning:

I'm not a very domesticated person and I never was, but I must have  
been brought up to think that way . . . you do notice other people's  
attitudes that you're supposed to do certain things. Women think  
more about details, don't they, being tidy . . . men don't, you can  
leave something and it won't annoy them, but you've just got to put  
it away (WA2)

She implies that it is all women's nature, as opposed to men's, to be concerned about the cleanliness of their living environment, which she has previously denied for herself.<sup>18</sup>

What is much more likely is the conditioning experienced by the majority of women to assume such responsibilities for domestic care, in order to liberate men to concentrate on their work.

Nearly an equal number of women to those in traditional relationships appeared to have established some kind of non-traditional structure in their relationship with their partner. This again often revolved around the division of labour in the home. I have already discussed the situation of WA30 who shared childcare with her husband: other

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<sup>18</sup> See Barrett and McIntosh for a deconstruction of the concept “that to keep house is a natural adjunct of femininity” (61).

women had negotiated with their partner non-traditional arrangements around other aspects of domestic labour, for example, WA13 said:

He knows there's not much I can't do. He knows that, and we have worked through that, but there have been problems because it means he's actually had to redefine himself . . . he'll come in and put the washing in the machine, etc. so what's happened to us certainly is that labour division is on a need-to-do basis, not on who does it. (WA13)

She refers to her husband needing to change from an existing pattern of behaviour to fit in with her perception of appropriate roles which would allow her to work effectively. Of the nine women that made up this group who saw their familial position in a non-traditional way, the majority were under forty years of age and had no children. The attitude of WA13, one of the two who were older and who felt the need to "re-train" her husband, contrasts with that of WA32 who was cohabiting with a man who had internalized alternative forms of men's domestic role:

I mean I'll cook something for us to eat, but I don't cook very often or anything, because he loves cooking and he's very, very domesticated. He's good, because he was brought up in a family where there were only boys . . . I suppose it's just he was brought up in a great liberal environment. (WA32)

The younger women in this group appeared to assume an equality with their partners on matters domestic. They nearly all worked part-time at teaching and filled the rest of their time in their studios producing their own work, and they did not have children (with the exception of WA30 discussed previously). This is significant when compared to the traditional sex-role group where the majority of women were over forty and/or had children (82%). The possible reasons for this split are explored further in Chapter 3 on the construction of the female identity. Of interest here is the effect of these structures on the women's ability to perceive themselves, and perform as artists.

In addition to the fact that the majority of the non-traditional sex-role participants were working consistently in their studios, as a group there was a much stronger sense of them having a self-image as an artist. All of this group except one, a woman who was producing no art work at this point, perceived themselves to be professional artists. This is in contrast to the traditional sex-role group who were much less sure of their role as artists, with only two clearly perceiving themselves as professional: three were generally unsure and six did not believe themselves to be professional artists. It is possible that the

non-traditional group had a clearer sense of identity in part because they were working regularly, which validated their right to call themselves professional. They were all, however, also working part- or full-time in paid employment, preventing any of them working full-time in their studios. This is compared to the traditional group, amongst whom eight of the eleven women had no paid employment outside the home, two worked full-time and one worked part-time. A comparison of the two groups suggests two possible interpretations, in line with Ortner's theory of difference or Walby's theory of patriarchy.

Ortner argues that women were consigned to the private sphere because of their reproductive capacities, making them subordinate to men who inhabit the public world. This causes women to develop a different psyche associated with interpersonal concerns. If this concept of a feminine type is applied to my two groups it could be argued that the traditional women have chosen/been allocated a role with a particular approach to life; an identity built round dependency, a willingness to service others to the detriment of their own desires, and a lack of clear self-image in relation to their artist status. In contrast the women who had adopted a non-traditional role had constructed an alternative framework to their lives which dealt directly with the issue of equality in their domestic relations, effectively reducing their responsibilities to play out the role norms of women. In other words, the position of my participants in relation to the family reflected their position in the world of work.

Walby's theory of patriarchy argues the opposite case that the situation of women in the labour market defines their position in the family. The group of non-traditional women were all inhabiting the public world of work and the private sphere of the domestic in the way that men have traditionally done. When referring to work in this instance I mean the paid employment that these women did, which in turn gave them status to approach their art work as professionals, on an equal footing with men.

Of the single women in the study, that is those who had never been married but may have previously been in a long term relationship, fewer than 50% saw themselves as professional. Four of the five women who had a clear self-image in this way earned their living through their creative work which validated their belief in themselves. For example, when asked if they thought of themselves as professional artists they all mentioned the economics of their work:

Yes I do . . . that's the means by which I make any money and I'm always trying to do it and thinking about it and that's what occupies me. (WA27)

(At what point did you start to think of yourself as a professional artist?) I suppose after I did a year on Enterprise Allowance and I think the year after that when I managed without signing on. (WA37)

Other single women, however, provided conflicting data. Amongst the six who could not perceive themselves as professional artists three worked in paid employment part-time, two full-time and one did not work outside the home. These women, therefore, were predominantly occupying two worlds, in the same way as the "non-traditional partners", but in this case it appeared to contribute nothing to their self-image as artists, apparently contradicting Walby's theory of patriarchy. Yet many of them were single because of the conflict introduced into their relationships from their creative work. Many of them seemed to have been unable to sustain permanent relationships which were compatible with the artist role, possibly because they were looking for non-traditional attitudes in their partners. One might therefore argue with Walby that their position in their (creative) work has defined/contributed to their (lack of) family relationships.

The conflicts raised between women's work and family relations may have contributed to the break-up of the marriages of five women in my sample, four of whom had children. Four of the five women spoke of this conflict as directly related to their artist role, for example:

we had a lot of friction because I painted . . . and you would have thought my painting was a lover in the way that he responded to it. He saw my work as a competitor, something he was competing with, against, and wasn't very supportive, and to do it I literally had to fight, really fight the whole way. It's partly what split my marriage up. (WA26)

The earlier phase of their marriage had been more conventional in the sense that WA26 had happily devoted herself to nurturing her children, but with the increased absorption and commitment to her painting the structure of the relationship had clearly become less traditional which her husband found threatening. Another woman struggled to perform the traditional sex-role but found it incompatible with her artist identity:

[My work] is a very personal thing because I think it's largely to do with the fact that I was in a marriage that I struggled with and was not coping with very well at all and when that went over I suddenly

managed to be myself and my work just went whoosh and it became really personal. (WA24)

For two other women the identifiable stage of irretrievable difficulty in their marriages was when they entered full-time education as mature students, a common outcome of that move (Griffin, *Changing Our Lives*; Edwards). Their circumstances were different in that one of the women was moving from a traditional sex-role of support for her “workaholic” husband and care of their children to the public world of education requiring commitment, time and energy. The other woman had been a practising artist for many years on an apparently equal footing with her artist-husband, but her return to full-time education proved to be the catalyst which identified the conflict in their relationship:

As I became more successful, and as I had more time with my work . . . he changed when I went to Kew, because he saw that I was out of his orbit and was becoming more and more independent, and then it fell apart when I went to Middlesex. He did not want me to go on that course . . . he tried every which way to stop me going. (WA6)

Although these women expressed regret that their marriages ended, there was a general sense of having been poor at performing the “wife-role”, but being enthusiastic mothers. The fifth woman did not discuss her marriage in the interview, though I understood that she was divorced. These were women who would have been in the traditional married sex-role category, discussed above, but for their unwillingness to suppress their artist identity. All five perceived themselves as professional artists, but it is difficult to see whether this was the cause of their marriage problems or the effect of being liberated from a constricting relationship.

Four other women in the sample group had a strong identification with the artist-role, but appeared to be combining this with their marriages, although one of these had previously been divorced, cause unspecified. These women were all over forty-five years of age and had in their various ways performed a traditional role as wife and mother; supporting their husband’s career, to the extent of moving home as required, and taking the responsibility for their children’s care, probably in accordance with their own upbringing (Chodorow). As they got older, and presumably their children became less dependent, they all appeared to have reconstructed their lives along non-traditional lines, with three of them retraining as mature students, at the same time maintaining a relationship with their husbands. They were, however, unable to identify themselves as professional artists in spite of their full-time involvement with their creative work, aligning

them to the category of traditional role wives/partners, further corroborated by the fact that none of these four women had regular paid employment away from the home or their art work. They had been able to renegotiate their position in the family in spite of their lack of position in the public arena, but they had not been able to carry this over into a total identification of themselves as artists, in the way of the divorced women.

Living outside of marriage may not be so liberating where women are left with the responsibility of young children. As Edwards suggests:

Independence as a lone female parent could still be seen as inequality, in that along with independent control goes all the responsibility, unshared. (155)

Amongst my sample group, however, this appeared to be so for only one participant who had chosen to establish a separate home from her long-term partner because she felt unable to support him emotionally and nurture their young child:

I've got my own space but most of the men I have lived with have taken an awful lot of my energy, but strangely enough Mark has given me the confidence to keep at bay . . . the lines are very clear with a child but with an adult it isn't. You know my lines haven't been clear and I've had to fight for the space that I've taken in painting. (WA23)

Although she was not producing any art work she believed it was no different as a lone parent than when she was cohabiting, but at least she had the emotional space necessary for her well-being. Of the eight lone parents the majority perceived themselves as professional artists, which suggests that there has been a clear benefit for them in terms of their own identity as artists, if not for other aspects of their lives. This implies that for women living single lives, there may be benefits undiscovered by other studies. However, it also reinforces the notion that a woman may have to choose between a partner and her art work.

### Summary.

In this chapter I explored the social relations of my sample group, including the way that the workplace, the public/private divide, and the family, impact on the women's construction of their artist identities. The use of social identity theory as a framework for this investigation allows a shift away from a concern with personal idiosyncrasies, on which the Romantic artist image is predicated, towards a reference which privileges the relationships of the individual within a variety of groups (Tajfel; Skevington and Baker).

The women variously identified with either “social” groups, “art world” groups or both. Those who only mentioned “social” groups tended to work at home and had few opportunities to mix with groups of artists, whereas those who identified themselves predominantly with “art world” groups tended to be more likely to perceive themselves as professional artists. Joining formal artist groups may be seen as a way of obtaining power and status (Walby; Hugman; Gamarnikow et al) and appeared to validate their professional status for some women. A reluctance to join artist groups by the majority of the sample group was further reinforced by much talk of the artist as a solitary individual. The prevalence of support amongst the women for this stereotypical image suggests a widespread internalisation of the Romantic artist image and its attendant anti-professional stance. Some women gained a measure of support from having work space within studio groups and workshops.

Changing work patterns have caused an increased use of domestic spaces as work spaces. As the domestic space is ideologically implicated (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz) the use of such space for work produces complex gendered meanings, depending on who is working there. Male “homeworkers” are not normally assumed to be “houseworkers” in contrast to the general assumptions surrounding women “homeworkers” (Oakley; Vincentelli). The stereotyping of women’s work in the home interferes with women artists’ abilities to see themselves as professional artists. If they are able to perceive themselves as artists nonetheless, they often do so by subverting the traditional role of the “good housewife” in order to reinforce this self-image.

Theories of the public/private division place paid work in the public domain, which, it is argued, is controlled largely by men and is accorded high status: housework is allocated to the private world of women with its attendant low status (Walby; Imray and Middleton). This division impedes the conflation of “employment” with home, as was demonstrated in this study with over half the women working in this way. (Art production in this respect can be seen as on a par with low-paid work.) It is necessary, therefore, to recategorise places of work and their attendant status within a multi-layered figuration (Table 1) in order to account for my sample group’s experience.

Women’s positions within the family impact on their life choices and artistic practice. Parental influence is such that many women are forced to postpone an art training until they are independent of the childhood family, often pursuing traditional

appropriateness of their daughter's career choice, usually with the greatest dissension coming from the fathers. Occasionally the fathers actively tried to persuade their daughters into specific careers, as if they wished their daughters to fulfil their own ambitions. Artist-parents seem to produce different problems for their daughters. Most women in this category had some difficulty in adopting their "own" artist identity. They found various strategies for dealing with this, borrowing and rejecting aspects of their artist-parent's behaviour as appeared relevant to them.

Of the family roles, being a parent had the most significant impact on the women's art practice. My research supports other small-scale studies (Davidson; Vincentelli) in demonstrating the practical and emotional difficulties of being a mother and an artist. If they did not give up work altogether (for a time) whilst their children were young, the women adopted the strategy of "working-when-you-can" around the demands of the children. Although the majority of artist-mothers expressed pleasure and satisfaction in mothering, they all acknowledged various levels of conflict between their art practice and being a mother. These conflicts were never entirely resolved and changed over a period of time (largely in accordance with their children growing up). The women tended to see their relationships with their children as the most important feature of their lives, but at the same time they demonstrated their tremendous commitment to their art practice, often working in very difficult circumstances to be able to produce their art. This dual role was a necessary product of their attempts to balance different aspects of their lives and is unacknowledged by the art world, and therefore by the women themselves, as offering a viable image of the artist.

Adopting some of the traditional sex-role patterns of behaviour appeared to impact on many of the women and their ability to work as artists, with the majority taking the responsibility for domestic work. In contrast a number of women appeared to have established non-traditional structures in their relationships with their partners, involving different divisions of labour. The majority of this sub-group were under forty years of age and had no children, in comparison with the traditional sex-role group where the majority were over forty and/or had children. A clear distinction started to emerge between the two groups. The non-traditional group had a much stronger sense of themselves as artists, working consistently in their studios and perceiving themselves to be professional artists. The traditional sex-role group often worked at home and were less sure about their role as artists. The differing patterns of employment between the two groups may help to account



were over forty and/or had children. A clear distinction started to emerge between the two groups. The non-traditional group had a much stronger sense of themselves as artists, working consistently in their studios and perceiving themselves to be professional artists. The traditional sex-role group often worked at home and were less sure about their role as artists. The differing patterns of employment between the two groups may help to account for this phenomenon. The traditional group mostly had no employment away from the home, indicating an identity constructed around concepts of dependency and service. The average age, i.e. forty-plus, of the traditional sex-role group may account for this tendency in familial behaviour, because of the early socialisation experienced by this age group. The education of girls in the 1960s and early 1970s tended to prepare them for domesticity (Abbott and Wallace 55).<sup>19</sup> In contrast the non-traditional sex-role group were all working part- or full-time in paid employment. These women would have benefitted from some of the more obvious progress in the provision of equal opportunities in British education after 1975.<sup>20</sup> This enabled them to create alternative frameworks for their lives, which allowed for a variety of different approaches to the role norms of women.

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<sup>19</sup> The Newsom Report Half Our Futures (1963) argued for girls being “educated in terms of their main function”, that of wives and mothers (quoted in Abbott and Wallace 54).

<sup>20</sup> Educational equality was made a legal requirement for all schools through the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **Working Practice, Product and Artistic Identity.**

Achieving an understanding of the interconnections between working practices and contemporary artists' identity development necessitates an exploration of the environment and conditions in which they work. This chapter, therefore, covers four main issues:

- the working space;
- the work routines;
- the work product;
- the dissemination of art work.

The issues discussed in this chapter do not exist as discrete elements in a person's working life, but are connected in a variety of ways, for instance, travelling to a distant studio takes time out of the working day; working at home may make an artist vulnerable to interruptions; the type of space available may impose a particular scale on the work.

Working environment, time and approach to one's work taken together form the site of private production (Walby, Theorizing Patriarchy). The artistic product is the object which mediates between private, solitary practice and public consumption in the form of exhibitions and sales (Duffin; Hyde), where the voice of the artist can be heard (Pollock, "Motherhood and Creativity").

#### **6.1. The Working Space.**

Virginia Woolf stated that in order to write "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (7). The privacy of a working space was, she believed, important if women were to be able to produce creative work. Such a construction of the working environment reflects a particular way of thinking about artistic production, one of emulating a specific male tradition. In general, however, the working environment is rarely considered:

In books on art I found little factual information about artists' studios, methods of work and tools. The books concentrate on either biography or aesthetics. Seldom has anyone described those details that are part of the creation of the work of art itself. (Lieberman 9)

The sociological study of art supports the importance of “an exploration of those personal aspects of one’s life which so radically affect the making of art” (Tucker xiv), of which the workspace is one factor.<sup>1</sup>

Historically artists’ work places have been diversely constructed (Lukehart 12). The Renaissance workplace was the “workshop”: a place which was used as an administration centre for the handling of commissions and the setting of guidelines where the work was produced, stored and viewed, and the tools and equipment were kept (Thomas, *The Painter’s Practice* 1). The workshop could be completely separate from the home of the artists, but using the domestic premises as a workplace exempted them from paying tax, so many of the smaller businesses were conducted from the ground floor of the artist’s home. It is unclear from Thomas’ study what proportion of women artists were working in these workshops, but Chadwick points out that in the early Renaissance women virtually disappear from the guild records. This suggests that the Renaissance workshop was predominantly a male environment.

European male painters, and increasingly female painters, of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tended to work in studios and workshops within the family property. Self-portraiture by male artists such as Vermeer (1632-75) and Rembrandt (1606-69), and female artists like Vigee-Lebrun (1755-1842) and Gentileschi (1597-1651) have provided historical evidence of the artist working in her/his studio. During the period of the Enlightenment in the mid-eighteenth century, emphasis was placed on the idea of a logical order of the universe: science replaced Christian explanations of the existence of “Man” and self-determination led to a sense of the uniqueness of the individual (Honour). A changing awareness of creative processes, with an increasing emphasis on originality, resulted in a corresponding desire by the public to see the artist in her/his working environment (Zakon 11). It is still customary in contemporary biographies to include a photograph of the artist in the studio, which is often the only reference made in the book to this aspect of production. For example, the definitive work on Matisse (1869-1954) by Alfred Barr shows several photographs of the artist in his studio at various stages through his life. Similarly, monographs on contemporary women artists, such as the studies of

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<sup>1</sup> Lukehart points out that since the early 1970s art historians have been divided on the issue of the connection between artists and their environments, with contextualists insisting on the “intertwined nature of the artist’s familial, social, cultural, and intellectual experiences” and the post-structuralists and semioticians seeing the artist as merely a “second-to-last link in the metonymic chain that results in the creation of a work of art” (12).

Paula Rego (McEwen) or Gillian Ayres (Gillian Ayres) adopt the same strategy of giving the reader a glimpse of the artist's working life, rather in the manner of a family album, which allows the viewer to momentarily feel included in that life.

In studying the lives of French artists in the nineteenth century Letheve shows that the studio is a rich source of information about artists' daily lives, demonstrating a variety of working places (44). The artists often lived and worked in the studio or in adjoining rooms. Many acquired their studios in government palaces through official channels, a confirmation of status, and the rest found their own in houses, "sheds, ex-gymnasias [and] former fencing schools" (48). Those artists who congregated in Montmartre, Paris, now an area which carries connotations of the "Bohemian" model of the artist, tended to be the non-conformists requiring greater freedom than was possible within the prescriptive confines of the Establishment (56).<sup>2</sup> The trend, which had begun in the late eighteenth century, continued with the bourgeois public's interest in artists' studios, which gave them a "whiff of adventure, of unbridled freedom, even debauchery" (56).

The twentieth-century artists' lofts in New York retained a measure of this aura, in spite of a changing social climate of increased permissiveness. The need for a large studio space was considered by artists and critics as inevitable for a professional painter:

We were accustomed to thinking of a studio as a loft or . . . two thousand square feet of commercial white space. (Chicago 98)

The large scale of the work produced during the Abstract Expressionist days made practical demands on the choice of studio. This coupled with the availability of un-used warehouses at reasonable rents probably made the demand for "loft" studios a necessity (Zukin 2). During the 1940s and 1950s this type of working space came to symbolise the struggle of the artist in a hard, macho environment, within which women were accepted conditionally. Grace Hartigan describes her early experience of living and working in a studio on the Lower East side of New York during the late 1940s:

Once the men saw how serious my work was they respected it. They were also touched by the fact that I was so poor. They weren't used to young women going into that life. I lived like the men. (Nemser 152)

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<sup>2</sup> The rise of the *flaneur* in nineteenth-century Paris was indicative of the image of the ideal (male) artist whose creative work involved moving out of the workspace and roaming freely in the public space of the city to absorb information voyeuristically in order to comment visually on society. Possibilities of a female *flaneuse* were restricted in a context where the public sphere was designated as "male" (Pollock, *Vision and Difference* 71).

Big, commercial studios were the rightful domain of male artists; women artists had to adopt the masculine characteristics of art production to increase their chances of success. From the information available it is difficult to produce a clear picture of how many women artists rented and worked in large spaces during this period. The suggestion from reading interviews with artists like Grace Hartigan and Lee Krasner (Nemser) is that women artists rarely had sole possession of a loft studio, but more usually shared these spaces with their male partners.

The influences of the American Abstract Expressionist era on the contemporary art world have informed both the image of the artist (as discussed in Chapter 2), and, less obviously, sites of artistic production. The connection between large scale work and workspace on the scale of the New York “lofts” is still being made in the 1990s. Two of my participants, for example, cited the large scale of their work as one factor in their choice of work place, that of old warehouses converted into studio groups (WA15 and WA11). These are buildings no longer required by industry which provide space running into thousands of square footage, usually at a reasonable rent and situated in the poorer areas of a city, with very basic services. The main difference between such situations and the New York loft studios is the non-residential nature of the former. In addition, it appears much more common for women artists to occupy such space now than for women artists during the Abstract Expressionist years.

Thirteen participants in my sample group worked in a studio away from home; ten within studio groups, like the one mentioned above, and three in their own, independent studios. The reasons given for preferring a studio group were either practical, such as scale of work and lack of space in the home (cited by six women), or to do with attitude, for example, the distraction, isolation and lack of status in working at home (Allen and Wolkowitz). Physically distancing oneself from the home was considered useful in focusing on the work:

I found I couldn't be in a space where I lived, because I found it too distracting and I started doing other things. I started doing things like cleaning up and making cups of tea all the time. (WA15)

The isolation of working at home was also a problem for some women, a common feature of home-working generally (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz), and a complaint made by many women designated as “housewives” (Oakley, *Sociology of Housework*). In the case of the women artists the situation was probably exacerbated when compared to the apparent

camaraderie of the studios at art college, which in turn possibly contributed to the desire for a studio in a group; a way of recreating the sociability of the college experience.

WA19, however, demonstrated the anomaly of this idea when comparing her experience of working at home with having a studio space in a group. Her experience of working at home was unsatisfactory because her neighbours were “out at work during the day” and she was “becoming very withdrawn”. She was equally isolated in both situations, but found the studio more acceptable. As she said, “I probably am isolated here, it can be weeks when I’m the only person here, which doesn’t worry me at all”. Although she referred to the situation as isolated there was always the potential of other artists being present. In addition to the possibility of company, the equal isolation experienced in the studio and at home suggests the issue may have been one of space. WA19 had been a mature student, transferring from a career in science, to become a practising artist. Working at home may have symbolised a non-artist status for her, implying lack of connection, acceptance or success in the art world: “I was doing something totally alien in my suburban house surrounded by all the other suburban houses” (WA19). Some of the other women identified their studio spaces as important to their sense of themselves as artists:

I dreaded being forty and thinking “Where’s my life gone?”  
and so in anticipation I looked around for a studio, and I  
thought “This is no good - I’m not getting stuff done at home.”  
I mean, I kept painting but things were unfinished. (WA43)

Troll describes the age-related phenomenon of placing importance on specific birthdays as the “cusp effect” (194). Reaching forty was a marker of ageing for WA43. For some women this signifies the point at which they reclaim their identity as creative people (Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life*; Labouvie-Vief). Having a studio was a way for WA43 to re-establish her creativity on a more positive basis, whilst validating her ambition and experience of being an artist.

Of the three participants who had independent studios away from home, two identified an idea of professionalism as a factor in their decision. Part of this was tied in with the idea of a clearly defined working day, in the sense of channelling concentration (as some women described it above), but also in terms of measuring working time through set parameters:

my pattern of working is nine-to-five, it’s more sociable to do  
that, if you have a family and start working nights, it puts extra

stress on you, so if you work as most people do then it gets you disciplined, and it makes your sociable and family arrangements more sensible. (WA8)

Two of these women preferred the privacy of working in their own space, the opposite of the ten women who had gone into studio groups. However, isolation drove one of these three women into an independent studio which was run as part of a craft centre, and therefore regularly open to the public. She operated in a very public arena, often akin to performance:

when I first moved here . . . I felt really self-conscious having people watching me while I was painting . . . and after a while I just got used to it really and now I don't notice that people come in sometimes. (WA34)

The majority of my sample group (69%), however, worked at home.<sup>3</sup> From an historical perspective having a workspace either in the home, or in the grounds of the home, has been the most common situation for modern artists. In *The Artist in His Studio*, for example, Liberman demonstrates that the majority of modern French artists, those who have been significant in mainstream art history such as Cezanne, Monet, and Picasso, had some sort of dedicated space in their home environs for the sole purpose of their work. This space varied from a room in the artist's house to an architect-designed building in the grounds.

Of the twenty-nine women in my sample who worked at home, in contrast to these French "masters", fifteen had no special place in which to pursue their art, working in kitchens, dining rooms, living rooms, spare bedrooms, and conservatories. Judy Chicago had a similar experience when visiting fifty studios of women artists in USA and related how shocked she was to find women working in "bedrooms, dining rooms, and porches" (98).

The choice of workplace by the artist is associated with both the sociological causes and the practical effects of that choice. The reasons given by my sample for working at home, whether in a dedicated space or not, were similar. The most common factor, economic necessity, was cited by more of the women without a special workplace, suggesting that it was the main reason for some to be working at home. Four admitted to

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<sup>3</sup> This accords with Vincentelli's study in which 70% of her sample group of women artists worked at home, either in a separate studio or "in the kitchen". The reasons given by her sample group for working at home were very similar to those given by my sample.

a preference for a studio; one even described her ideal in terms reminiscent of Impressionists' circumstances (Lieberman):

My ideal would be a rambling farmhouse with a barn attached, or something with a huge studio, away from it, away from the house, but actually within the house area. (WA5)

This is consistent with this artist's subject matter, flowers and gardens, and her "life experience" role model, Monet.

Other reasons given for working at home were privacy, time constraints, convenience for unsociable working hours, and the availability of space. The latter was more relevant for those who had a separate work room. One positive aspect of working at home was the way that could interact with other aspects of the artist's life:

I don't see my work as separate to the rest of my life. I see very much my garden, my house, my vegetable patch and my studio all very much intertwined and being a printmaker often you have to let something dry . . . So I might go and pull a few leaves . . . while I'm thinking about the next process. (WA24)

Some of the women had begun working at home when their children were little, making possible quick forays into the work, but often still against many problems:

I did take advantage of him being out in a pram, outside. I would just push him in the garden and go inside and hope I wouldn't hear if he cried . . . so I did get on then. (WA43)

Again this mirrors Chicago's observations of the women artists she visited. Many women set up their working space in the middle of their domestic situations and "developed an artmaking process that was compatible with their life styles" (Chicago 98). Similarly, women artists like Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) and Mary Fedden (b.1915) worked in their domestic environments, which impacted on their product in terms of subject matter (Nicholson, A; Gooding). Winifred describes how important working space was to her husband Ben Nicholson, but waited until she was seventy for her first separate studio:

My new studio is going to be wonderful. I've just realised that in all my life I have never had a work room where I could see my things properly and criticise them. Very foolish not to have had one, but there, I thought I could work on my knee in any half light or any confused atmosphere. (Nicholson, *Unknown Colour* 177).

Chicago recognised this form of self-effacement where women compromise their requirements or needs, witnessed often amongst women artists whose partners are also artists. Such women work in "the back rooms of their men's studios, having internalised



the idea that their work was less important” (98). One of my participants shared a studio at home with her husband, which she found less than satisfactory:

we converted it into a studio and I had half, more or less . . . he got a bigger half than me, you know as they do . . . I invariably try and work when my husband's away because I find it very difficult to work if he's working in the same space . . . he will either talk to me or ask questions or will want to view his work. (WA35)

She was also finding him very dominant in relation to her art studies, so the studio could have come to represent a place of marital struggle for her.

One famous example of such gendered inequity is that of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, both painters during the Abstract Expressionist era of the 1940s and 1950s. Hartigan describes their working arrangement thus: “Jackson had this huge barn and Lee had just a tiny little bedroom in the farmhouse . . . it wasn't as though she was allowed a real studio” (Nemser 152). This is explained in terms of Pollock's dominating, insecure competitiveness. However, it also serves to demonstrate the lack of self-esteem held by many women artists for themselves and their work.

Only one participant admitted that the establishing of a studio was connected to her need to validate her artistic experience, seeing it as symbolic of her position in the art world. However, my analysis of the interviews suggests that many more felt their lack of status, without a dedicated working space. To acknowledge that “the studio” might have significance beyond the practical, when it is unattainable, is to admit to limitations, not just of one's own ability but also a narrowness of view by others. Chicago, for example, experienced problems in taking seriously the work of those women painting in a very domestic situation: “I found it difficult, at first, to ‘see’ the work, because it was not in the kind of space that I had learned designated importance and seriousness” (Chicago 98). Here an adaptation to the male art community resulted in expectations based on masculine criteria for success.

Although my participants initially claimed that working at home was acceptable for them, probing questions often resulted in a different impression. Even those women who liked the privacy and the convenience of working on their own at home clearly felt the lack of stimulating company, citing this as the biggest drawback to the arrangement. Issues around the social relationships of the artists are discussed further in Chapter 5, although it is appropriate to note here that the dichotomy of isolation and company was not seen as easily resolvable for any of the women, apart from joining art groups of various sorts. As

shown in Chapter 5, the majority of the sample group had not joined any form of formal artists' groups or professional associations. Joining "amateur" groups of painters can cause difficulty for those wishing to avoid association with the "Sunday painter", which can further undermine the practising artist's professional status, as mentioned by WA4.

Working in domestic rooms, especially if not given over for exclusive work use, can affect the work produced, in terms of constraints in the use of certain media. Painting in oils in a room with carpets and curtains is, from my own experience, very inhibiting. This effectively limits the artist to drawing or working in water-based paints such as water-colours or acrylics, as many of these women working at home did. The time involved in setting up and clearing away work and tools was discouraging to some, causing demotivation where confidence was already low. WA31, for example, had tried to make a work space in the family spare bedroom, only to find she had a steady stream of visitors and was constantly having to dismantle her work.

Scale of work also becomes an issue when the size of work room is limited. This is often more noticeable after working in large art college studios. As WA4 said: "I think that's the biggest thing you miss . . . the fact that you've got space to do huge pictures, and when you're on your own you have to come down to doing little pictures." Some women had given up working in particular media, such as sculpture (WA2) and printmaking (WA1) because of the practical difficulties posed by the need for equipment, and the inevitable mess and dirt caused by such processes in a domestic environment (Davidson).

One participant summed up the value of a working space, as put forward by Woolf, in a description of what it meant for her:

I was working on the kitchen table and my husband said, "Look there's a cow barn there, let's make it into a studio for you." And I said, "No, no, no, I don't need a studio, I'm fine, quite happy," and if anyone tried to get this off me now, I'd kill them. I didn't realise how much you need your own space and it's absolutely vital. (WA17)

## 6.2. Work Routines.

Financing of a studio space can impact on the work routine because earning enough money to support oneself and the work is difficult without other means of employment. As Douglas and Wegner point out: "Maintaining your practice as an artist,

while earning an income from other employment, is a difficult balancing act" (85).

Amongst my sample group the women who were least likely to have a studio away from their home were those who were unemployed, whether being supported by husbands or social security payments (see Table 2). The most likely women to have a studio were those who worked part-time, although the difference in numbers between the unemployed, part-time and full-time workers who had a studio was slight. In addition those working full-time included women using their studios for their employment, for example, mural painting or illustration, and those who were "unemployed" include women who are "artists" full-time.

Table 2.

The Relationship Between the Women Artists' Work Status and their Place of Work.

Work Status	Work Space		
	Studio	Dedicated Space at Home	No Specific Space
Unemployed	2	9	8
Part-Time Work	7	4	3
Fully Employed	3	2	5

Amongst my sample group there seemed to be little connection between type of paid employment and consistency in working on one's own creative work. Teaching, for example, formed the largest single type of paid employment, accounting for 30% of the total (or 46% of those in employment),<sup>4</sup> but each participant's experience was different (see Table 3). For two of the women, teaching full-time impeded their work production through lack of time and energy, and yet a third teacher painted regularly. Similarly, of the ten women who worked part-time in education, six used their non-teaching time to paint, but four worked only erratically, even though this has traditionally been a common route for artists to earn a living whilst allowing time in which to work (Davidson).

<sup>4</sup> Vincentelli's sample group consisted of only 15% of lecturers/teachers, with the largest proportion of women earning their living through specific types of commercial art. The difference in these two results may be accounted for by sample criteria. Vincentelli chose to study women *artists* whereas I selected specifically women *painters*.

Table 3.  
The Relationship Between the Women Artists' Category of Paid Employment and the Regularity of Their Art-Based Work.

Type of Paid Employment	Regularity of Work		
	Consistent	Erratic	Not Working
<b>Unemployed/Retired</b>	10	3	2
<b>Teacher/Lecturer</b>	7	6	1
<b>Student</b>	3	1	1
<b>Commercial Artist</b>	3	2	0
<b>Other</b>	1	3	0

If the data is analysed in terms of those working full-time or part-time, in whatever job, still no pattern emerges: amongst part-time workers six worked erratically and six consistently, and amongst full-time workers five worked erratically and five consistently. According to this, the number of hours spent in paid employment, for these women, has no immediate connection with the time spent on creative work.

The largest group amongst my participants, however, were those without any form of paid employment (35%). The majority of this group of fifteen women were married and living with their partners, who presumably supported the women financially. Eleven (73%) of the women worked consistently and regularly on their art practice, most having deliberately given up external employment in order to concentrate on their own work. The motivation engendered through such a level of commitment was detectable in the reasons given by these women, irrespective of whether married or not, for working in this way:

I feel slightly guilty and slightly not fulfilled when I'm not working.  
(WA18)

I took it very seriously and the fact that I can do what I really believe in makes me take it even more seriously. (WA24)

Of twenty-eight participants who had a studio, eighteen (64%) worked regularly and consistently, in contrast to 40% of the women who had no studio. This suggests that the obligation to creative work is greater amongst those women who have a studio, whether it be a rented studio or a designated room in their homes. For many of these women the working space is a significant factor in the work routine, for example: "I think

for me I need the discipline of knowing that I pay rent for somewhere so it makes me use the space” (WA15).

Motivation to work in a regular manner often appeared to be an intrinsic part of the artist’s personality, which, although quite genuinely felt, is consistent with the Romantic concept of being driven by an unknown force or a powerful need to create (Kris and Kurz):

I’m compelled, it’s just part of me . . . can’t help it (WA6)

It’s just what you do. Why do you breathe? I’ve got to, I’ve got things to do. (WA2)

I don’t know how to describe that . . . it’s something I’ve got to do . . . It’s something that just has to come out of me. (WA42)

In other words, in response to questions about the regularity of their work routine, these women were often unable to clearly articulate their reason, believing it was something beyond their control. Like Sonia Delauney (Nemser 45), a few spoke of the pleasure such work gave them: “Because it’s the biggest pleasure of my life and I like to live with my work” (WA26). Some acknowledged their strong work ethic as an attitude generally in their lives:

I’m a horrible person to live with because I’ve always had . . . you get into a sort of work mode . . . women especially get this work ethic and can’t stop it. I think work becomes . . . it’s like a demon (WA30)

The majority described a kind of compulsion, which accords with the Romantic image of the artist, for whom art “ceased to be a trade or a profession: it had become a vocation” (Honour 246).

Conversely, reasons given for working irregularly, or not at all were not based on personality but usually concrete, for example, work, family, and other interests. Eight women blamed pressures of paid employment for not being able to work as much as they would like; five had difficulties working around family commitments; and three had outside interests which absorbed their time and energy. For many women this irregular way of working felt uncomfortable. They would speak of a preference for, or obligation to, work regularly or constantly, having internalised the concept that art practice must be all-absorbing:

I feel that if I’m going to get anywhere I ought to spend time in there every day, maybe six days a week, but I can’t discipline myself at the moment to do that. (WA4)

WA9 referred to the time when she was “good” and worked in the studio “nine-to-nine”. The natural extension of this is that working any less than that is “bad”. Some women described what they ought to do whilst trying to rationalise the reality:

I am inclined to beat myself up and struggle and raise this spectre of constant work, you only get what you put in and there are professional artists who say I always go into my studio and sit down and I start something and eventually as long as I'm doing something then something will emerge. And I say well that's fine if they are people who have to produce something that day . . . it's not my business to beat myself up about it today. (WA22)

Many of the women validated their sense of professionalism through the notion of a disciplined work routine. The concept of working regularly in a consistent fashion continues from the Middle Ages, when the artisans worked their trades, through the Renaissance when the role of the artist changed to that of the specialist practitioner fulfilling commissions and satisfying patrons (Honour). The notion of being “inspired” to work, however, originates with the decline in patronage and the rise in speculative painting of the Romantic period (Ayres 23), and is therefore a relatively recent phenomenon. This contrasts with the parallel rise in professionalism during the nineteenth century, distinguishing the artist from the professional (Larson). Tied into this is the general belief, as mentioned above, that artists are driven to create by an inner need (Mayer). In fact, three of the women explained their erratic, or non-existent, work pattern as an artistic crisis; they were questioning what they should paint and why they were painting at all. Where this apparently straightforward binary division of work routines and attitudes breaks down is that many of the women combine two working models, that of a disciplined approach to work, in terms of self-control and routine, with that of a compulsion to create, in terms of a sense of destiny or having “no choice”. Although business-like discipline and unorthodox compulsion may be seen as binary opposites, in the same way that order/confusion, culture/nature operate, many of the women combined both working models, cutting across the simple adoption of a specific artist role model.

### 6.3. The Work Product.

The product of creative activity has several facets, including the choice of media, subject matter engaged with, the style of painting, the type of paint used and the scale of the work. Each of these features carries specific critical implications for the interpretation and classification of a work of art. The various characteristics of paintings allow the

“educated” viewer to place work into movements of art, such as Impressionism, or “schools of painting” such as St. Ives in Cornwall (Hyde 107). Moreover, large-scale work in oil paints will generally be considered as having more artistic weight than a smaller painting in water-colours.

As discussed previously (see Chapter 2, p.55), two-thirds of my sample group seemed to work in a pluralistic way. The majority of participants, however, still included “paint” as an important medium with which to work, but fourteen women regularly chose to include printing and/or construction techniques in their artistic production. Working in this way avoids some of the controversies inherent in the “art/craft” debate, because painting, print and sculpture are considered “fine art” in both educational and exhibiting situations (Hyde; Levitine). It was evident, however, that for many of these women their art college experience did not encourage working pluralistically, even within the “fine art” framework. As I discussed in Chapter 4 (113), the structures of the art colleges attended by these women discouraged and even prevented many of them from using a range of media with which to work through their ideas, in many cases allowing the institution (including the staff) to retain control of the women's work.

There has been an historical pattern to the subject matter used by artists. Traditionally, subjects included religious and historical painting, symbolism, portraiture, landscapes, interiors and still-life, although the importance of one over another has varied at different stages in the history of art (Gombrich; Nochlin; Chadwick; Honour; Pollock, Vision and Difference). The majority of my sample group worked on landscape and the figure. Their work as practising artists was an extension of ideas first encountered during their art college education. This was rarely articulated but was evident from the interviews.

Art colleges often run courses or modules on subjects like “landscape” in order to introduce students to working approaches and practices on these subjects. They tend to be contextually linked to art historical references so that the students learn to situate their own work within a tradition, and have models from which to work. Of the twelve women, however, who were working on landscape subjects, only half cited artists as “work” role models who had themselves produced landscape paintings. This suggests that for six women their choice of artist role models did not relate to their choice of subject, but possibly connected with either other subjects they were working on, or features such as style of painting.

Like landscape painting, painting from the figure is a significant activity at art college. Since the late 1970s life drawing has slowly come back into vogue as a discipline, after the total commitment made by art institutions to abstraction in the 1960s which involved a repudiation of figurative work (Betterton, An Intimate Distance; Thistlewood, American Abstract Expressionism). The former covers most of the relevant years during which my sample group were studying in higher education. Thirteen of my sample group worked from figures, in the form of portraiture or narrative, or used figures for exploring visual movement or abstract ideas such as personal relationships. Of these, eleven had cited artists whose work related very directly to their own, in terms of subject matter; artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Degas, Frida Kahlo, Paula Rego and Gwen John, but only half selected any female artists. This suggests that the availability of work by women artists is still limited in comparison to the vast range of work by male artists. It may also be that the women in my sample group who had selected women artists' work as relevant to their own art, were seeking gendered support for their ideas; that these were choices where the participant was conscious of the gender of the artist.

Style of painting, especially since the twentieth-century development of "abstract" painting, has been a significant factor in the analysis of an artist's work. It is a factor which has been used for exclusion by artist groups, in order to maintain identities and retain access to resources such as exhibitions. The *Seven and Five* society, for example, was used by a faction of its group membership to support their commitment to abstract painting, eventually ousting members who worked in a representational manner (Cross 44).

The term "abstract" carries a variety of meanings. Osborne defines two uses of the term:

- (i) the reduction of natural appearances to simplified forms; and
- (ii) the construction of art objects from non-representational basic forms. (Oxford Companion to Art 2)

He further differentiates two ways in which the former is used, firstly to reduce the natural appearance of objects to their essential form by eliminating features (retaining some connection to the source), and secondly, to construct an image which has an aesthetic value of its own, in the way that music does (having no visual reflection of objects) (Osborne 3). References to abstract painting in this chapter have been taken to mean work which is either constructed from non-representational basic forms, or that which has all



direct references to natural form eliminated. Work which is “abstracted” or “reduced” but still retains identifiable references to objects is referred to as representational.

As commonly used the terms “abstract” and “representational” are potentially imprecise descriptions of styles of painting. Representational art is usually taken to mean work which to some extent adheres to the “traditional European conception of art as the imitation of nature” (Osborne 2). Pollock states that in addition to this, representation makes visible “social practices and forces which are not, like trees, there to be seen but which we theoretically know condition our existence” (*Vision and Difference* 6). Women in my sample, like WA15, WA12, WA14 and WA35, who used the figure to explore ideas about relationships or “the female condition” were employing representation within this second definition. They were not concerned with mimesis, but with representing more abstract notions, whilst retaining some recognisable forms.

Those of my sample who were working on landscape or the figure were significantly more likely to be working in a representational rather than in a purely abstract style. Of the twenty-five women who used these subjects, twenty-one worked representationally. A similar situation still applies if subjects such as “flowers/gardens” and “still life” are considered. These are all tangible subjects and the aim of painting them is often to render in paint the individual visual response experienced by the artist. Themes like “landscape”, “flowers” and “gardens” became key forms of expression in the Romantic period (Honour). During the nineteenth century, these subjects became acceptable for women artists to portray, in addition to the clothed figure, especially if the narrative was of a high moral tone. In this way women artists were able to partially resolve the conflict which they experienced in their relationship to middle-class ideals of femininity (Chadwick 166).

Subject matter which was more difficult to categorise, such as “life events”, “the female condition” and “the spiritual”, were dealt with by my sample with half the women working representationally and half in an abstract style. The reasons for this could be twofold: firstly, that the subject matter has less of a tradition. As was shown in Chapter 4 (116), tutors in art departments are often reluctant to accept such subject matter as viable and certainly would not tend to encourage it. This means that artists who are interested in working on these kinds of subjects often have to work independently with little in the way of role models. Secondly, the subject matter itself falls into Pollock's definition of

representation as the visible form of “social practices and forces” which in themselves are abstract qualities.

Issues around abstract art have contributed significantly to feminist debates within the art world. In the early twentieth century, the move to an abstract language in art and craft was seen by artists like Kandinsky (1866-1944) as carrying the threat of “decoration” in their lack of content (Chadwick 237). His concern arose from the connection of geometric abstraction to fashion and textiles, which was situated at the centre of the modernist ideal (Chadwick 236). By 1910 Kandinsky had painted what is taken to be “the first purely Abstract work, depending entirely on the emotional significance of colours and form without figurative suggestion” (Osborne, Oxford Companion to Art 621). The rise of abstract art, in the form of Abstract Expressionism, was used by male artists to support their Romantic ideal of the painter as hero and manipulator of destiny (McEvelley 189). Changes in social consciousness, brought about through events like the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and nuclear proliferation made the lack of political and social comment in Abstract Expressionist work seem suspect (McEvelley; Gablik, How Modernism Has Failed). The lack of content in abstraction which had been of such concern to Kandinsky became its strength before contributing to its loss of supremacy. One of my participants spoke of her struggle during her degree course with precisely this issue:

I had got very taken with a sort of abstract painting language . . . and the result was an abstract painting where my joy of paint and mark-making was coming out as a priority, and I hit a very difficult phase about is this enough? Is this what painting is about? . . . Whether this was the right thing to do, when it seemed so separate from what was happening in the world. (WA28)

She resolved this partly through the use of a male Abstract Expressionist painter who had experienced similar dilemmas over form versus content, and who had been marginalised by the art world at that time when content clearly became dominant for him (Mayer).

Abstract painting in the expressionistic style was practised by many women painters, but was clearly rejected by “a generation of women artists in the 1970s” (Betterton, Intimate Difference 79). Amongst my sample group of women artists approximately twice as many women worked in a representational compared to an abstract style. This accords with Betterton’s view that since the rise of the feminist movement abstraction has continued to be “largely dismissed within feminist art practice and

criticism” (79). Three of the participants articulated concerns they had during their art education about the issues around abstraction for women artists. WA32 described how her role model at college was “a very strong abstract painter” who had been abandoned by her female peers during the 1970s because of her commitment to abstraction. Because of the support of her tutor, WA32 had explored the aesthetics of decoration from embroidery, quilts and textiles, in accordance with the critiques of feminist art history (Parker; Chadwick; Broude and Garrard; Harris and Barnett), a route closed to many of my other participants (see Chapter 4, p.111). WA11 interpreted the aesthetics of abstraction as negatively gendered, that is men could choose to be sensitive and “make beautiful pictures”, an option, she believed, not available to women who wanted their work taken seriously. She did, however, produce abstract paintings which were worked in the strong, bold aggressive marks usually attributed to male artists. Both of these women worked in an abstract style but with opposite agendas. WA32’s approach accorded with the idea of a feminine aesthetic as described by Collins, a concept which celebrates gender difference, whereas WA11’s strategy sought to appropriate the “masculine”.

Choice of painting media would appear to be, on the face of it, a matter of personal preference. Many artists talk in terms of liking or disliking particular types of paint. Experience at art college, which I have already demonstrated has a significant effect on an artist's working practice, suggests that many students are coerced into working in certain “acceptable” media, the dominant one being oil paint. This reflects the general prevalence of oil paints since the perfecting of techniques in the fifteenth century (Ayres 74). Students are persuaded to work in oils, and learn that water colour painting is unsatisfactory. One participant, WA5, used water colours as part of her illustration course during her BEd degree but found it undermined her ability to conform to the normative practice of oil painting during her later fine art degree.

Another participant, WA10, used water colours all the way through her three-year BA degree, trying oils as requested but without any “success”. She saw issues around media as part of the mythology in process at this stage, and appeared to use her difference as a form of rebellion. When asked how the staff had reacted to her continued use of water colour she replied:

I don’t think they were really aware of what I was trying to do . . .  
everybody seemed to be an oil painter, and everybody seemed to  
have a very good line in chat, which used to irritate me intensely. . .  
I mean, it’s the “Emperor’s New Clothes” thing . . . so whether I was

deliberately doing it or not, I'm not sure. (WA10)

Oil paintings traditionally have a higher status in the art world, fetching higher prices on the art market than do water colours. In addition to the longevity of oil paints it is possible that the translucence of water colour connects it as an inferior activity to the subordinate stainers of cloth in the sixteenth century (Ayres 74). Further, water colours carry overtones of amateurism, probably dating back to the prevalence of lady water colourists in the Victorian era, thereby possessing gender implications (Pollock; Chadwick). My sample group appeared to have internalised the normative values of the hierarchical status of painting media, in that twice as many women were painting in oils as in water colours. Of those who were working in water colours, the majority had changed media since attending art college, possibly for practical considerations associated with space and scale of work; the odour of oil media in a domestic environment; and the ease of cleaning up in a family-used space. Some women may also have felt able to explore water colour as a medium when freed from the normative practices demanded at college.

The status of various media was recognised by many of the participants. WA22, for example, understood "the unspoken assumption at college . . . that water colour isn't an artist's medium", so she worked with watered-down acrylic paint which has a similar consistency to water colour. This was acceptable to the staff, supporting the idea that acrylic paint, whilst not having a long tradition, is a "serious" medium, and one worthy of use by "artists". Some of my women artists resisted converting to acrylic paint, possibly because of preconceptions that "real" artists paint in oils. One of my sample said, for example, "I just had this obsession that I had to work with oil paint." (WA32) This woman needed to be persuaded to try acrylics, even though her work was very flat with design overtones. She may have felt, however, that the use of design media would reduce the value placed on work that was already challenging boundaries of subject-matter. WA39, on the other hand, deliberately used painting media as a site of resistance. She struggled for independence from her painter father (see Chapter 5, p.150), and because he was a strong advocate of oil paints she used acrylics throughout her first degree.

It is difficult to accept, however, that choice of media is purely a political action, especially when hearing the women talk about their use of their chosen paint. There is great pleasure described in the handling of paint as a physical substance, as well as a carrier of colour, for example:

I use oil paint, mixed with oil and turps, and I like it quite juicy.  
(WA11)

[Oils] have a body to them, they have a richness which is important to me as a painter . . . you can actually move the substance around, and because the touch, the surface of the painting is so important, to me then oil lends itself to that. (WA28)

Physical enjoyment was referred to only by oil painters: pleasure in the use of the medium may therefore also help to account, in part, for the higher numbers working in oils.

#### 6.4. The Dissemination of the Art Work.

Although exhibiting is ostensibly about showing the artistic product to the public, it also forms part of the artistic practice (Duffin, Organising Your Own Exhibition 4). Artists have to work at obtaining exhibitions, through networking and applying to exhibition organisers. Both of these routes require the artist to visit galleries, make contacts, develop an awareness of the political implications of venues and types of exhibitions, in other words to mix in appropriate environments. Art education can perform this function for some artists, making contacts with successful artist/tutors, and practising exhibiting one's work (Pollock, "Art, Art School . . ."). A sense of inevitability is generated about exhibiting; a connection between being a professional artist and showing the product. One woman artist I spoke to believed it was an artist's duty to exhibit her work:

I think every artist should want to exhibit. It's like a celebration . . . no, you're working towards something . . . it's a goal, and it's a celebration . . . it's like writing a book, you publish it. It's like the piano or a piece of music, you play it and you do it to an audience. (WA6)

Nearly 80% of my interviewees believed that exhibiting their work was important for them. This included a diverse range of experiences, in terms of quantity and quality of exhibiting, from those who had rarely shown to those who regularly showed their work. The responses of the women to the question of why exhibiting was important for them fell into six main categories: communication, remuneration, validation, feedback, celebration and aspiration. Of these, "communication" seemed to be the most important factor, with nearly half of the women mentioning it, for example:

Well, ultimately, although I did do it for myself, I do also do it because I want to communicate something, so I do want people to see my paintings. (WA19)

The women rarely articulated what precisely they wished to communicate, but dealt with the general concept of taking something to others, or as one woman put it, “connecting”:

It is very important to me because I think it is the connection of taking your work out of the studio and actually if you connect with somebody in the public who actually understands what you are getting to, you actually get them some, whether it's joy or some connection with something that's important to them. (WA24)

In pedagogical terms, effective communication requires feedback to ensure that the message has been received (Hancock 53). For WA24 the notion of feedback was not simply an indicator of information processed, but the proof of connection between artist/work/public, which accords with Gilligan's theories of women's need to connect. This artist did not only want to transmit a message; rather she wished to establish a relationship.

Feedback was another significant factor in the importance of exhibiting for my sample group, mentioned by 21% of the women. This is a term which also incorporated the idea of self-criticism and reflection, that is, a situation where the exhibiting artist learns something more about her work, either from herself or others, for example:

I think once you actually hang it up in a nice space with good lighting, you see it very differently than when it was sitting in the corner of the studio, and you actually start to look at it more objectively perhaps, what I've done here and where I'm going to go from there, so that's really important for my own development, but also I need to know what other people think . . . to see what other people bring to it. (WA7)

Most artists' experience of exhibiting, however, does not allow for much in the way of interaction with the public, apart from the apparently dreaded private view. One woman, for example, stated that her reason for exhibiting was to communicate her ideas, and yet when questioned further admitted to a lack of responses to her work:

I think it gets ignored, because if you're exhibiting in a group exhibition . . . you don't get anything back at all . . . you wouldn't know . . . you're just one of many. When I've had solo exhibitions I've had no response as well. It's a shame really. (WA2)<sup>5</sup>

Some women referred to visitors' books in which people are requested to write comments, but which in reality are unsatisfactory as a form of response. Magazine reviews give one person the opportunity to respond to an exhibition of work, effectively appearing to speak

for the masses. These are significant enough in the art world to be included in the CVs of artists, but were not mentioned by any of my sample group during the interviews. The exit questionnaire of my study, however, showed that fourteen of the women had had reviews of their work in either local or national publications. This suggests that either reviews are not perceived as important forms of communication by these women, or that they have no wish to indulge in self-glory. It is not clear, therefore, how my sample obtained feedback from others when showing their work in public.

Three women avoided this issue by no longer exhibiting publicly, being apparently content to show their work to interested friends, for example:

my studio's a bit like my private domain . . . and I tend to only ask people who I know are genuinely interested, who I know . . . might not like what I do, but you can have a rapport with.  
(WA9)

it's become less important to me than actually doing the work. I do actually like showing it to friends, especially other friends that are artists themselves or who create work, that's important.  
(WA16)

One possible type of response is for the viewer to purchase a piece of work.

Although usually denying that it was the main reason for exhibiting, selling work was mentioned as significant by a third of my participants. Since very few of the women made their living through selling work this was often regarded as a pleasurable bonus, as well as a validation of their activity as an artist. One woman, for example, stated that she had always seen her work as “not so much working to be a part of the commercial market, but pleased . . . pleased at how nice it is to have someone like your work and buy it because they like it” (WA26). Another woman, (WA37), was the only woman in the sample group making her living through selling easel paintings (as opposed to the three women living off mural painting), so inevitably for her the most important motivating factor in exhibiting was the possibility of remuneration. She identified herself as an artist who needed to make work which, whilst satisfying her own artistic criteria, was sufficiently commercial:

I actually like selling, I think it's really wonderful that people want this, I think it's really exciting! And I quite like the challenge of having to go out and sell them. I couldn't be a painter if you just did large paintings that never sold. I think I like . . . merchanting. I like that thing of it being a commodity . . . that you exchange. (WA37)

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<sup>5</sup> Art gallery visitors often feel uncomfortable about commenting on work in exhibitions, possibly through a lack of confidence in their ability to evaluate the work and find the appropriate vocabulary. Many

She also saw exhibiting as a necessary focus, a goal towards which she worked. This feeling was shared by six other women, who recognised the importance for them of having the commitment of an exhibition to aid their motivation, for example:

Well, it's important in that it gives me a goal to aim for, a deadline.  
(WA3)

I think it's essential really, because you need something to work for  
... towards. (WA4)

There was also a recognition by one woman that more importance was attached to other areas of her life which carry deadlines than her art practice which lacked a particular focus. This created guilt when she spent time on her art work, in spite of her placing a value on it.

Although some regarded exhibiting as an objective, seven women introduced a pleasure factor when discussing such activities. For three of them it was the pleasure in experiencing their work on the walls, sharing it with others, or having work accepted in open exhibitions:

We just had a studio exhibition and having it I realised how important and how wonderful it was ... and how much pleasure it really gives you. (WA38)

I got the biggest buzz ever at getting into an Open, and actually working out the statistics for the catalogue, and the chances of me getting any in, which were astronomically small. (WA35)

It did not necessarily follow that they were exhibiting any more regularly than those who found the process stressful they just seemed to enjoy it more. For two women exhibiting was partly entertainment, in the way that it was a public event, with pleasure in the sociability. This conflicts with the popular image of exhibitions in galleries as serious, quiet, and intellectual, the type of atmosphere that both these women wished to avoid. One woman, for example, described the situation in which her paintings are viewed by the public in a local restaurant which has exhibited her work since they opened:

There's four really big ones ... well they are the decor really and people ... I suppose the paintings get better the more the people drink ... which is unlike a gallery situation ... there is not that intimidation in a gallery. (WA17)

Validation was mentioned by 23% of the sample group as a factor in the importance of exhibiting. Some of those who saw it in this way aimed to get prestigious exhibitions in major galleries in major cities, others had had poor experiences of showing



their work in formal gallery situations, and yet others sold their work through commercial outlets. Although the idea of validation was only raised by a quarter of the women, what they were all seeking was some kind of justification for the activity of creating work. Concepts such as communicating, connecting, selling, giving pleasure, entertaining, getting feedback, are all part of the process of confirming one's perception of oneself as an artist. Even the women who claimed to have given up exhibiting still showed their work to friends. This is an extreme form of what Hancock describes as common practice, selecting others who share a similar frame of reference in order to support our opinions and beliefs (66).

The need to verify artistic practice through exhibiting work may also account for the disillusionment which was apparent with many of the women who had experienced difficulty in finding venues and getting feedback from the public. Although this is likely to apply to male as well as female artists, it is well-documented that women, especially at national level, have been significantly excluded from exhibitions and galleries (Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism) but also that the situation is changing (Rosen, Making Their Mark). The fact still remains, however, that many of the women spoke of exhibiting as "stressful", "scary", "disappointing", "difficult to get". Often the women who spoke in this way had crossed the boundary between art and craft, or the hierarchies of fine art, in their work. Imray and Middleton suggest that male structures can work to maintain women's subordination (Gamamikow et al, eds., The Public 26). This may be in operation in some cases here. There is also the issue of women having less of a history of working in public spaces which may reduce their confidence in dealing with the public that they need for their validation.

Taking control of exhibiting work is one way of generating confidence; deciding where and with whom to exhibit; having involvement in the hanging of the work and the financial support to ensure a professional presentation. WA15, for example, said:

it's very difficult getting into some sort of position where you can call the shots, and maybe it's not so much linked to money, but it's linked to people you'd like to exhibit with, and spaces that you'd like to work in . . . (WA15).

She had found curating a group show "a fantastic opportunity", which appeared to be about having the power to make decisions which affected the presentation of her work, and validation of the importance of the project through funding. WA43 also found the move towards curating and criticism a significant stage in her career. She said: "[The MA

in Art Criticism] has been a recent change to my life, a very important one" (WA43). The MA led to WA43 curating exhibitions on the artist she had written about for her dissertation. This change of direction came at a time when, because of her age, teaching was becoming closed to her; training in criticism allowed her to continue working indefinitely - in itself, another type of empowerment. These two women articulated a sense of the politics around exhibiting, not apparent in the interviews with the other women, although many of the others felt the lack of authority in their own positions.

WA15 was the only one to make the responsibility of exhibiting a gender issue:

When I left college I was very anti [exhibiting] . . . and I can remember saying I don't think exhibiting is important, and I've changed quite a lot and I do think it is now, essentially because . . . I'm aware of the fact that I think it's very important for women to exhibit. (WA15)

### Summary.

The artist's workspace exists within a socio-historic context. The three different working environments experienced by my sample group reflect a variety of working patterns, present from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century. Thirteen of the women had studios away from their homes. The reasons given were either practical such as the large scale of work and lack of space at home to accommodate it; or personal such as the distraction, isolation and lack of status in working at home. Ten of these women had their studios as part of large studio groups, based in disused warehouses and industrial spaces. Such buildings are usually available at reasonable rents and situated in poorer, ex-industrial areas of a city, with very limited services available. This way of working reflects the New York artists' lofts of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (Zukin 2) where such space came to symbolise the struggle of the artist in a hard, macho environment, within which women were accepted conditionally (Nemser 152). The male artists who lived and worked in loft spaces contributed to the modernising of the late nineteenth-century Bohemian artist image, with their obsessional ways of working, their poverty and their highly developed egos (Levitine 75), an inappropriate role model for many women artists of the time (Nemser).

The majority of my sample group (69%), however, worked at home. The reasons they gave were varied, including economic necessity, privacy, time constraints, flexibility in working hours, availability of space, and the possible interaction with other aspects of their

lives. Of the twenty-nine women who worked at home, fourteen had a studio or dedicated room for the purpose of their work. There is a historical precedence for working in this way; for example, the Renaissance workshop was often in the home of the artist (Thomas 1); the European painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to work in the family home (Chadwick 107; Ayres 24), and the French artists in the nineteenth century had workspaces within the environs of their homes (Letheve 44). Within art history, as a contextual support for studio practice at art college, it is only the paintings of these periods that tend to be referred to, rendering the working practices invisible as relevant role models for students.

The third form of working practice was experienced by fifteen of the women who worked at home, where they had no special place to pursue their art. They worked in kitchens, dining rooms, living rooms, spare bedrooms, and conservatories. This equated with the situation Judy Chicago found when visiting fifty “studios” of women artists in the USA during 1971 (98). Whilst there *are* practical reasons for working at home in this way, Chicago recognised that it *can* stem from a form of self-effacement where women compromise their requirements or needs.

There was little connection amongst the sample group between type of paid employment and consistency of their production of creative work. Although 30% of the sample were teachers/lecturers, they all related different experiences of the effect this type of work had on their painting. Similarly, there was no pattern of artistic work routine if full-time employees were compared to part-time workers, with some of each working consistently and equal numbers working erratically.

Two minor patterns were evident: firstly, that the majority of “unemployed” participants worked consistently and regularly on their art practice; and secondly, that those with a studio, either at home or away, were more likely to work consistently than those with no “room of their own”. There is some contradiction in operation here: those women who were “unemployed” were the least likely to have a studio away from home.

Regularity of work was often explained by a need or a compulsion to work, which accords with the Romantic artist image. Those who worked inconsistently did so for specific reasons such as work, family, and other interests, rather than reasons based on personality traits.<sup>66</sup> Some women, however, combined two working models, that of

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<sup>66</sup> It is difficult to assess personality traits within this context.

discipline, associated with the business-like approach of the Renaissance (Ayres), and that of compulsion, usually connected with the Romantic model (Mayer).

The majority of the women in my sample group worked on landscape or figure subject matter, which appeared for many to be an extension and development of ideas first explored during their art college education. Those using the figure in their work were more likely to relate to similar subject matter by other artists, suggesting a greater desire to draw from and/or critique the work of others, but appeared to have a limited pool of women artists from which to work.

Twice as many of the women worked in a representational rather than an abstract style. In order to clarify terms which can carry a variety of meanings, I took abstract to mean “the construction of art objects from non-representational basic forms” (Osborne, Oxford Companion to Art 2). Work which is “abstracted” or “reduced” but still retains identifiable references to objects was referred to as representational. Work on the themes of landscape, figure and still-life were more likely to be treated representationally. Subject matter which was more difficult to categorise because of the abstract nature of the content was worked by half the women in representational style and half in abstract. The lack of tradition surrounding subjects such as “life events” may allow for a more individual and diverse exploration of visual interpretation (Pollock, Vision and Difference).

Although practised by some women painters, abstract painting in the expressionistic style was clearly rejected by many women artists in the 1970s (Betterton, Intimate Distance 79). The weighting amongst this group for representational work accords with Betterton's view that feminist consciousness has continued to largely reject abstraction as a valid art form for feminist art practice. Even where several women work in an abstract way there may be no consensus about intention, with some women advocating the idea of a feminine aesthetic, a concept which celebrates gender difference, and others seeking to appropriate the “masculine” through the production of large, gestural paintings worked in the strong, bold, aggressive marks usually attributed to male artists.

Within the art college paradigm students learn to place value on the connection between the professional artist and showing the product (Pollock, “Art, Art School . . .”). Of my women artists, 80% saw exhibiting their work as an intrinsic part of their practice. Communication was the most important reason given for this, although it was rarely clear

what the women wanted to communicate. The general feeling, however, was one of “connecting” with the public.

Feedback, with its attendant sense of self-criticism and reflection, was considered by many of the women as an important aspect of exhibiting. Although opportunities for interaction with the public may be very limited, visitors’ comments books and magazine reviews were considered only moderately successful vehicles for the exchange of views. Selling work was often seen as a good indicator of the success of work, in spite of the denial by many that selling their work was a significant reason for exhibiting. Only three women made their living through mural painting and only one through selling easel paintings. For the others selling work was a bonus within the work scheme. The “pleasure principle” was mentioned by a few women, for whom the exhibiting process was enjoyable, sociable and convivial (especially where work is exhibited in a restaurant), which contradicts the sense of serious purposefulness or agonising embarrassment conventionally associated with it.

The combination of these factors contributes ultimately to a sense of validation obtainable from taking one’s work out into the public arena. Whether they mentioned “validation” as a factor or not, the women were all trying to gain some justification for their activities. This was generally related as more successful where the work existed within the traditional boundaries of fine art. In addition to women being regularly excluded from prestigious exhibitions and galleries (Parker and Pollock, Framing Feminism), where they also cross boundary definitions of art and craft, they experience further discrimination through the male structures in operation in the dissemination process (Gamarnikow et al 26).

Taking control, therefore, of the exhibiting process is one solution to the gendered closure of the art world. Only two of the sample group, however, had taken this liberating step in relation to their own work and that of other women. These women found it a very positive experience and intended to continue it in the future as a way of empowering themselves and others.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The factors which impact on the construction of women painters' identity are multiple and complex. The identities which women construct, for example, affect not only their self-identity, but also their social relations, including their family relations, which in turn contribute to their sense of self. Human relationships are at the centre of this process. The self-identities of my women artists therefore were, at least in part, formed and altered by their interaction with social groups, both within and outside of the art world. Whilst some of the women apparently operated entirely within "social" groups or "art world" groups, others attempted to combine their involvement with both groups. The latter were women who predominantly worked in isolation at home. The exclusionary nature of the "art world" which causes such artists to work in isolation effectively places their working world into their private sphere. The women were attempting, therefore, not only to combine their different social groups but also to integrate aspects of their identity formed within the private and public spheres (Edwards).

The Romantic image of the artist stresses the isolation of the individual from social group membership. Many of the women in my sample group spoke of such an isolation, suggesting an internalisation of the Romantic image. In occasional cases the isolation appeared to be self-inflicted, possibly as a result of such an internalisation. Although these women tended to be isolated from "art world" groups they were all members of "social" groups, a fact of great importance to them. They were, therefore, using the image of isolation to identify their (self) exclusion from the art world. Those working in studio groups or workshops, on the other hand, identified themselves predominantly with "art world" groups and only rarely mentioned "social" groups as relevant to their artist identity. As Whitehead suggests, studio groups frequently provide "long term support, advice, encouragement and guidance" (30) whether on a formal or an informal basis. In addition to the provision of support for their working practice, the "art world" groups of those women in my sample group appeared to give social sustenance. The women thus gained validation of their way of life. Long term development of an artist's practice and confirmation of a sense of belonging can be achieved through mentoring schemes where novice artists are matched with experienced artists who provide advice, guidance and counselling.<sup>1</sup> Such schemes are rare at present, but have proved to

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<sup>1</sup> This idea has affinities with the notion of the socio-symbolic contract advocated by Italian feminists (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective).

be of benefit to inexperienced artists where projects are available (Whitehead). Although of undoubted use to male as well as female artists, the possibilities for women are important especially when there is a tendency to work in isolation.

In addition to the wider social identity, women exist in family groups as daughters, wives/partners and mothers. These are all roles which are variously constructed by the society and culture in which we live (McDowell and Pringle; Condor; Ellmann). They establish patterns of behaviour. How women reconcile these with their gender identity has, as my research shows, a strong impact on their artist identity. Parental influence was generally greatest at the point when the women were choosing their career routes, and was predominantly experienced as a resistance to the idea of a higher education in art. Since I accessed women who had, sooner or later, succeeded in pursuing their chosen career in art I have no way of knowing how many women were never able to resist negative parental influence on their career choice. This is an issue for further exploration.

The mother role was a strong factor in the construction of an artist identity, irrespective of which role came first. Women who had their children before becoming artists experienced similar role conflicts as those women who had their children after training and practising as artists. As Bobby Baker found: "Within a couple of weeks of having my first child I had lost altogether my image of myself as an artist. At that time there was just no role model for being a mother and an artist." (Douglas and Wegner 16) What Baker identifies here is the need for women artists to have role models which reflect the realities of their lives. Reid argues that the lack of such a role model is exacerbated by women artists feeling unable to break the taboo on representations of the maternal experience, especially in painting (9). The artist-mothers expressed a strong sense that relationships were extremely important, but at the same time their commitment to their art work was in no way reduced. Finding a balance between these two competing forces caused the artist-mothers to adopt at least two roles which were, at times, incompatible, and always required a compromise.

The women artists in my sample demonstrated a tendency to adopt either a traditional or a non-traditional sex-role pattern of behaviour in relation to their adult partners. The non-traditional sex-role group tended to have a strong sense of their self-image as artists, in contrast to the traditional sex-role group who were much less sure about their role as artists. The single women of the sample group occupied positions in the public and private worlds in a similar manner to the "non-traditional" women who

were cohabiting. However, unlike the “non-traditional” women, this social position provided the single women with no support for their self-image as artists. Yet many were single because of their commitment to their creative work, having experienced conflict in relation to their past partners’ expectations and requirements of a heterosexual relationship. Similar conflict appeared to have contributed to the break-up of the marriages of five women in the sample group. Attempts to adopt the artist role, in terms of total commitment to their work, a desire to be independent, and immersion into the art world, made traditional relationships unworkable for them.

Age is an important factor here. Older women, generally born before 1960, attempted to combine the artist role with a traditional sex-role. Although they were usually very committed to this integration, working hard to juggle conflicting demands, they frequently had to compromise their artist self-image in order to satisfy a perceived notion of a necessary balance in their lives. In contrast the younger women seemed to want less subordinating relationships with their partners. Where this could be negotiated with a partner it appeared possible for women to construct a professional artist role in combination with a non-traditional sex-role within a relationship. Where a woman attempted to construct such a dual role in conflict with her partner’s expectations she had to make choices, often resulting in the break-up of the relationship. Superficially, it might appear that the conflict lies in the way that women construct their self-image of femaleness; that is, one which is not sufficiently nurturing to sustain a heterosexual relationship but which also allows the woman to be an artist. This would support a chauvinistic view that being a woman is incompatible with being an artist. However, one might also argue that these experiences reflect a need for men to change their views and expectations of women in order to make relationships sustainable. Alternatively, the problem could exist within the image of the artist from which women attempt to construct their artist role. As a male construction this traditional image produces conflict for women: women, therefore, need to seek alternative images from which to create their artist role. But it is also clear that there is no one role model which could adequately satisfy the different requirements of diverse women. Rather, alternative images of artists for women might evolve through taking account of issues of practice, place, and personal characteristics, drawing examples from different periods in history and a greater variety of artists by gender. As Coward argues, women need to adopt the image that fits their situation and not buy into a stereotype (199).

The formation of self-identity is therefore not finite but always in the process of



revision. Social and familial relations may result in the adoption of sex-roles such as a traditional or a non-traditional one within the family. This is neither entirely imposed nor fixed. Some of the women in my sample group moved into adult life in traditional gender roles, women like WA43, WA26, and WA18, who subsequently effected changes moving into a less traditional or non-traditional position, in line with their interests and desires. An internalisation of essentialist definitions of “woman” often complicated the process of change. The tensions created between social and family expectations of the women and their determination to construct their own complex identities were possibly greater for the non-feminist women, but were evident, in some form, in all the interviews. Feminist identity is not a simple, unitary condition, and a denial of such an identity could be used to avoid the political issues of gender in relation to art.

Many of the women artists found their higher art education experience tended to compound early socialising forces in only permitting an artist identity with conditions attached. In spite of changes made in higher art education in 1975, art education is still largely founded on Modernist concepts such as those discussed by Frascina and Harrison, and Dalton (44). This also accords with the Romantic artist myth of the lonely outsider, the free spirit driven to create, with an added machismo derived from the influential American Abstract Expressionist period. It raises conflicts for many women students in relation to issues such as what constitutes appropriate use of media, content of work, style and context, and as regards the expectations of staff and (other) students.

In addition to the lack of appropriate tutor role models and contextual information regarding women artists and their work, the discipline-specificity practised by art education institutions provides a fixed paradigm which limits students to an archaic model of art practice (Becker and Lacy 12). Art educators need to engage with the issues around hierarchies of art forms and media-specific disciplines, within their departments and courses, to enable women art students to develop the working practices most relevant to themselves.

In Modernist rhetoric about art there can be no narrative nor the kinds of meaning common to literature: painting must reflect itself (Greenberg 8). Irigaray argues that men see their own reflection in a mirror, but that women are unable to see themselves because their image has been appropriated by men (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 134). The masculine gaze is one of objectification which leads men to see the object as object. In contrast, the feminine gaze seeks connection which requires women to see the object in relation. “Painting-for-painting’s-sake”, therefore, may well be a more comfortable

approach for men than for women, as women are conditioned to see something other than painting-for-painting's-sake when looking at a painting. This was apparent amongst my sample group who tended to find that staff on their art education courses were unable or unwilling to discuss aspects of the work other than the purely formal or technical. They seemed especially to avoid involvement with any subject matter that was of a personal or political nature. This led to difficulties for many women students, especially those mature students who wished to produce work about their life experiences.<sup>2</sup>

The importance to my sample group of their time at art college was that it provided the time in which they worked through issues of what it means to be an artist, the point at which they engaged with notions of professionalism and commitment. A higher art education, however, at best gives women students mixed messages about what it means to be an artist, and at worst creates conflict between their sense of themselves and the hegemonic values of the art world. For my sample group a higher art education served to reinforce the mature women students' previous experiences of social construction and encouraged younger women students to adopt masculine norms.

The women made choices within the scope of their personal histories, including their social, familial and educational experiences, and their present situations, in order to achieve their senses of self. Having assumed a particular sex-role, at least for a time, they then attempted to unite this with their artist identity. It is significant that of the two major positions adopted by my sample, the traditional sex-role women were often also mothers, whilst the non-traditional sex-role women rarely had children. The conflict of roles became most apparent where a woman tried to balance the roles of mother and artist. It is possible, of course, that the women who had negotiated non-traditional life styles might choose as part of that process not to have children, or manage the dichotomy of creative production and raising a family in the future differently. As Coward states the conflicts can be "pushed aside" but frequently re-emerge when a woman has children (102). Internalising messages about roles and responsibilities created difficulties and conflict for many women and "this aspect of the female psyche is at its clearest in relation to mothering" (Coward 75).

Traditional ideals of good mothering still persist in spite of changing attitudes and employment patterns (Coward 81). Through the framework of domestic labour,

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<sup>2</sup> This carries implications for male as well as female students, as Bonaventura argues, there is a profound "disengagement with the real world [which] has its roots in the way art is taught in art schools."

traditional notions of gender have resulted in siting women primarily in the private sphere. Many of the women in my study have accepted this positioning, for a variety of reasons, and maintained their relation with the home by working in the domestic space. Other women negotiated a move into the public world by renting external studio spaces in which to work. Even though today's art world suggests that the possession of a studio space is essential for a professional artist, feminist readings encourage women to challenge such patriarchal presumptions, which would reject as valid the work sites of 66% of my women artists.

Artist identity is about perceiving oneself as an artist, and within that, as possibly being different types of artist. All my sample were able to perceive themselves as artists, although some preferred the word "painter", seeing the word "artist" as too rarefied. The term "artist", however, was deliberately chosen by some women as descriptive of all their creative activities, to validate their multi-media approach to work. Some women were able to perceive themselves further as professional artists, certainly in their approach and attitude to work, if not in economic terms. This latter term proved problematic for those who interpreted it as being purely about status and "other" to an integrated way of life. This can be seen as related to the desire for connection expressed by many of the women, and is explained by Gablik thus:

generally speaking, the dynamics of professionalization do not dispose artists to accept their moral role; professionals are conditioned to avoid thinking about problems that do not bear directly on their work. (*The Reenchantment of Art* 180)

Debates such as these are about choosing a label which fits or sustains one's self-image, and not about working with a given mark. As artists we can choose, within certain limitations, how to categorise ourselves, and whether to call ourselves "artist" or "painter". However, the label we are frequently given by the art world and society is that of *woman* painter/ artist/ professional. Although none of my sample group chose the label *woman* artist it remains an issue on which women producers must have a position, whether they declare it publicly or not.

Two distinct patterns emerged in my sample group regarding the various ways of constructing an artist identity. One equated a traditional sex-role position with working at home in a pluralistic way; more likely to be a mother aged forty years or over; educated before the 1975 Equal Opportunities Act had an impact on the gender experience of schooling; having a desire to connect "social" and "art world" groups; having no involvement with professional art groups; with little in the way of paid employment and a

tendency to be unable to perceive oneself as professional or a “serious” artist. The alternative pattern consisted of the non-traditional sex-role position with possession of an external studio space; working predominantly as a painter; less likely to have children, aged under forty years; educated in a more overtly gender-equal era of schooling; more likely to interact solely with “art world” groups and be a member of a professional art group; with part- or full-time paid employment and an ability to see oneself as professional or to consider oneself a “serious” artist.

It must be stressed, however, that these are identified patterns of behaviour and not recipes *for* a way of life. It would be a negative step to suggest that all women artists should choose one of these role models, effectively perpetuating a divide which already contributes to the dichotomy experienced by many. They are effectively the only two models of artist identity available to women artists as constructed within socio-cultural frameworks. Further, this does not demonstrate that all the women who tended towards one pattern of behaviour were the same. Within these patterns different women negotiated and constructed many variations. Some of the women provided evidence of changes in awareness of their selves and the way they act. Some had ideas of change they would like to effect when they could combine that with other changes in their lives, for example, their children becoming more independent. What these patterns demonstrate are the limited options that appear to be available to women artists. Such patterns are social constructions that require women to adopt either a traditional female role around which the artist identity has somehow to be worked, or a traditional artist role which still challenges the adoption of a certain kind of female identity. There are indications that, with little support, the women artists in this group were beginning a process of constructing their own pathways through this minefield. By accepting the myth of the isolated artist, however, they necessarily had to proceed as individuals.

It is unclear from this research to what extent these patterns of behaviour are typical of women artists on a general scale. As identified in Chapter 1 (49), the ethnic mix of my sample group was limited, with two exceptions, to white, British women, which leaves scope for a study that includes women with a greater range of ethnic backgrounds. A longitudinal study based on one educational institution with graduates being studied at different points in time would allow for an analysis of changes in the education of different cohorts and might indicate changes in the way women construct their artist identity over a period of time. Equally, different findings might emerge if this research is replicated in a different geographical area of Britain. However, until more

voices are heard the available models women artists have will remain limited.

Buxton suggests that the role models for women with children have been reduced to that of Superwoman, i.e. “having it all”, or Earthmother with her entire devotion to her family. She argues that feminists like Coward, in her challenge to the notion of an essentialist mothering instinct, deny a real, felt need by women to spend time with their children, especially whilst very young (35). The feelings expressed by my sample group endorse Buxton’s argument, although whether this position is innate or socially-conditioned was not clear. On one point, however, Buxton and Coward are united: the dilemma for working women in the late 1990s really begins with motherhood. Superwoman and Earthmother both refer to women with children. Mothers who are in paid employment frequently take on the “double shift” of work and home (Glazer 171). However, when women artists try to “do it all” their commitments form the “triple shift” of working, creating and caring. As both Coward and Buxton argue, maybe women who want to be artists, fulfil their perceived female role and support themselves financially should be directing their energies towards challenging myths of ideal motherhood, traditional expectations of the good employee and the anti-social traits of the Romantic artist. Existing role models of the artist reduce the opportunities for women artists to explore and develop the complexities of their self-identities. Women artists, therefore, can only benefit from a greater number and variety of role models which should be made available, *inter alia*, through and within the art educational system.

## **Appendix A.**

### **Questionnaire.**

#### **Biography.**

1. Name:
2. Address:
3. Telephone:
4. Date of birth:
5. Studio address:
6. Telephone:

#### **Training.**

7. At what age did you demonstrate a clear interest in art?
8. Did you have a formal art education, post - 16?

Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Self-taught \_\_\_

If "Yes", please list the institutions you attended, with dates :

Type of qualification(s) gained:

Main subjects (eg. graphic design, 3D, women's art, etc.) studied during formal education:

Appendix A, continued.

**Lifestyle.**

9. Where is your workspace (eg. home, studio, etc.)?
  
10. How frequently do you use your workspace?
  
11. Are any of your relatives, including partners, involved in the arts?
  
12. Would you describe your artistic activity as an interest, a job, a way of life, or other?
  
13. How do you work eg. regularly, fitfully, wait for inspiration, etc.?
  
14. a) Do you think there is such a thing as a conventional/stereotypical 'image of the artist'?
  
- b) If yes, can you briefly describe it?
  
- c) What is your view of that image?
  
15. Do you read about art and artists?
  
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
  
- If "Yes", what do you read, eg. biographies, journals, etc.?
  
16. Please name any artist(s) whose life has influenced how you work.

Appendix A, continued.

Work.

17. Please name any artist(s) whose work has influenced how you work.
18. Who from your point of view are the most important contemporary artists?
19. Do you visit other artists' exhibitions?  
Never \_\_\_ Occasionally \_\_\_ Frequently \_\_\_
20. On what basis do you choose which exhibitions to visit?
21. Do you discuss your work with other people, and who?
22. Do you think role models are important for artists?  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Undecided \_\_\_
23. Why are you on the Artists' Register?
24. What are your views on the traditional gallery system?
25. What does being an artist mean to you?

Appendix B.



Nene Centre for Research  
Nene College of Higher Education  
Park Campus  
Boughton Green Road  
Northampton  
NN2 7AL

Dear

I am a practising artist and a postgraduate research student at Nene College, Northampton, studying role models and influences of contemporary women artists. This entails finding out from women about their lives and work as practising artists. The information gathered in this questionnaire will be used as part of the data in the dissertation of my PhD. As I mentioned on the telephone, I have obtained your name from the Artists' Register at East Midlands Arts.

Participation in this research will involve the completion of a questionnaire, followed within three months by an interview with myself. I will be holding a seminar and get-together for all the participants in early November 1996, in order to give feedback on the interviews and to enable people to meet each other.

Please complete and return the questionnaire by **10 April, 1996**. The completed questionnaires will not be made publicly available and participants will remain anonymous.

I would like to thank you, in advance, for your co-operation and help in conducting this interview, which is being voluntarily given.

Yours sincerely,

## **Appendix C.**

### **Interview Questions.**

#### **Education**

Courses taken                - was any one more important than another?  
                                      - other courses taken?

Work produced   - any themes?

Tutors                - what was your relationship like with them?  
                              - relevance as role models?  
                              - any female tutors?

Why did you wait until \*\* [insert age] to study art?

Parental attitude towards studying art?

#### **Work**

Work space                - why do you work at home/ in a studio?  
                                      - how do you feel about this?

Work time                - why do you work in this way?

Professionalism   - do you think of yourself as a professional artist?  
                              - how do you define that? or Why not?  
                              - if not, how would you describe yourself?

Balance                - how do your work life and other aspects of your life inter-relate?

Approach to work        - emotional responses?  
                                      - strategies for dealing with 'bad times'?

Do you think you would be / act differently if you weren't an artist?

#### **Product**

Formal issues in the work, eg. media used; size/scale; abstract/representational; etc.?

Subject matter            - where do your ideas come from?  
                                      - conception and progress?  
                                      - formal issues v. ideas/feelings?

Any other creative outlets?

Appendix C, continued.

### Exhibiting

Importance to you as an artist?

Where do you / would you like to exhibit?

Public reception - how do you react to it?

Censorship - has this been an issue for you?

### Image

Discuss description of stereotypical image of the artist, given in questionnaire.

Is there an image of the woman artist? - any stigmas?

How relevant is this image of the artist to you?

How would you like to be seen by other artists?

Do you think there is a different status for different art forms, eg. art v. craft?

Do you think you/your work would be different if you were a male artist?

### Artists

Other artists - how important are they to you in your working life?  
- contemporary / historical?

Either: You say you're not influenced by the life of any other artists, have you ever wanted to be like one?

or: In what way have \*\*\* [Insert artist(s)' names] lives influenced you?

In what way have \*\*\* [Insert artist(s)' names] work influenced you?

Appendix C, continued.

Domestic Issues

What does your family group consist of?

- has it affected your creativity?

Attitudes / feelings about marriage / children?

Any conflict in balancing your time?

As you work at home, do you have any friends who you can share ideas, hopes, disappointments with?

How did you choose to live where you do?

- would it affect your work if you lived somewhere else?

Feminist Issues.

Do you think men and women have different roles in life?

- how does this affect you?

Have you ever been involved with the Women's Movement?

- has it changed anything for women artists?

Do your feminist views have any relevance to your work?

Do you enjoy being a woman?

**Appendix D.****Questionnaire (Exit).****Biography.**

1. Name:
  
  
  
  
  
2. Have you received any grants or awards?  
  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
  
If “Yes”, please specify:
  
  
  
  
  
3. Have you done any travelling, for education / work purposes?  
  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
  
If “Yes”, please specify:
  
  
  
  
  
4. Is your studio individual or part of a group:
  
  
  
  
  
5. Are you a member of any artists’ groups:
  
  
  
  
  
6. Main employment / positions, please list with dates:

Appendix D, continued.

7. Exhibitions (Individual), please list:

8. Exhibitions (Group), please list:

9. Publications:

10. Reviews:

**Appendix E.****List of Artists, by Gender, Cited as “Life” Role Models.****Female artists cited as “life” role models:**

Louise Bourgeois	Kathe Kollwitz
Judy Chicago	Lee Krasner
Tamara de Lempika	Gillian Lyons
Isadora Duncan	Agnes Martin
Jill Flowers	Paula Modersohn-Becker
Evelyn Gibbs	Louise Nevelson
Barbara Hepworth	Georgia O’Keefe
Vanessa Jackson	Jacqueline Swift
Gwen John	Suzanne Valadon
Frida Kahlo	Nan Youngman

**Male artists cited as “life” role models:**

Geoff Beasley	Alan McPherson
Joseph Beuys	Claude Monet
Georges Braque	Piet Mondrian
Paul Cezanne	Giorgio Morandi
Leonardo da Vinci	Robert Morris
Salvador Dali	William Morris
Edgar Degas	Ben Nicholson
M.C. Escher	David Oxtoby
Bob Frankland	Pablo Picasso
Alberto Giacometti	Mark Rothko
Robert Harvey	Peter Tate
Wassily Kandinsky	Vincent van Gogh
Ron Kitaj	Alfred Wallis
Paul Klee	Joseph Weiss
Franz Marc	Wyland
Henri Matisse	WA17’s father

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