

The Price of Success - Becoming an Artist in America in the Seventies

A review of Freeman, M. (1994). *Finding the Muse: A social psychological inquiry into the conditions of artistic creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Research on visual talent has traditionally been focused on the analysis of the work of child prodigies and the detection of traits of outstanding ability in the childhood output of established artists. But is it really what matters when artistic success is at stake? Mark Freeman seems to find the muse elsewhere: in the intricate web of character traits, social background, effects of the living and working environment and, last but not least, sheer chance. Education, so it seems, does not matter a lot. All the artists whose fates are described in this book are graduates of one of the most prominent art schools of the world: the *Art Institute of Chicago*.

In 1963, a study on how various cognitive and perceptual abilities and personality characteristics contributed to creativity in art was initiated by M. Csikszentmihályi and J. W. Getzels at the University of Chicago. In the course of the project it became obvious that social factors were also involved in realising creative potential. Therefore, 208 artists of the original sample were successfully located and interviewed in 1980 by Mark Freeman, student and associate of the two researchers in order to reveal the interplay of personal and social factors in artistic success. His book, a mixture of interview extracts, poetic essays and scientific inquiries with various methods of art sociology shows what it actually took to succeed in America in the sixties and seventies of our century. While reading his book we are overwhelmed with the power of his beautiful narrative and are ready to accept his major point: social reality is perhaps the most significant factor influencing the fate of the creative individual. For the European reader, the picture is gloomier than expected. The cradle of modern art seems to be made of stone.

What are the components of this reality? First, *the image of the artist* - a socially constructed role model that aspiring painters and sculptors felt forced to live up to. „The hero of the sophisticated sixties”, as one critic labels this image. „We must imitate God”, as a woman artist Freeman interviewed adds another touch. To be original, *to be different and not just to create differently*, to sacrifice everything from sports to spouse - the image of the creative personality was simply too overwhelming for many of the Art Institute graduates to live with. Some „went commercial” and learnt to enjoy it, others hated the same and lived with remorse and self-hatred „after the Fall”. Many had to face the choice between living without others or without art. The best chapter perhaps, *„In the company of others”*, shows the crucial role of immediate social surroundings in the making of an artist. For the Eastern European female reviewer who had been brought up in admiration of women’s rights in America, it was a deep emotional experience to

read the stories of women who face the clash of roles just as harshly as we do here in a traditionally macho society. Freeman feels there is a - narrow - way out of the dead alley of the antagonism of professional success and family life: „Perhaps if the creation of art would no longer be constructed as a singular pursuit and artistic success a race to the finish, but something else altogether, something more integrated into the fabric of life.” (p. 126) Well, perhaps...

„*Creativity and the market*” is a chapter where the method of interview analysis seems to come short of the demands of the topic. Everybody knows that gallerists can crown or kill you - but how exactly do they operate? An analysis of art styles and trends on the sixties and seventies together with an accurate review of the gallery and auction scene at the same time would have provided the stories of success and failure the artists interviewed had to tell. - Another interesting and unexplored path could have been art education. Most of the artists in the sample tried their hands at teaching for a while. We hear about how they felt while trying to communicate art but again, the background is missing. *Art education* in the American sixties and seventies underwent profound changes that affected both the role and prestige of the teacher. The appearance of the Paul Getty Foundations with millions of dollars to be spent on the betterment of tastes and art-related knowledge of young Americans meant an enormous increase in status and resources at the same time. The paradigm of the „creative act” had gradually been replaced by the desire for „creative vision”. Educating your own audience could have been a challenge for a few artists and an impossible goal for most. It would have been interesting to see the figures whose lives so excitingly unfold on the pages of the book set against the contemporary scene of art education .

Finally, the reader is left with a series of intriguing assumptions about the *nature of creative talent and the sources of success as a visual artist*. This book does not intend to solve problems but to find more - a sure sign of creativity as the research work of the mentors, Getzels and Csikszentmihályi proves. One point is beyond doubt: „if the desire to be an artist overrides the desire to create art, the creative process itself will have in part become a means to an end other than the creation of art.” (p. 258) Finding the muse is losing yourself, in many ways.

This enjoyable and erudite documentary of the fate of the creator has important messages not only for educators, psychologists and sociologists but for its own subjects, the artists themselves. It is a sad story but one of the few basic texts all students of the arts should read, discuss and - disprove, if possible.