

Women Getting Down to Business

BY REGINE WOSNITZA

After 15 years of working in black and white photography, Sobotka switched to color last year. The professional photographer says that moving her studio to WeiberWirtschaft an all women's business center in the middle of Berlin was a significant factor in making this remarkable shift.

Women deal with each other with more understanding, according to Sobotka (who refers to herself by only this name), which inspired her greatly, she says. When changing to color photography, she explains, she underwent a change of perspective. In contrast to her former strictly structured compositions, she has now turned to haphazard details both pretty and ugly an old woman's neck, hands peacefully resting on a table, dog excrement surrounded by flowers.

When talking to Laura Gallati, a Swiss composer and tenant of one of three studios at WeiberWirtschaft, the two women discovered they were following very similar ideas, albeit using different forms of expression. "By focusing on the detail you can return some kind of dignity to the world," Gallati says of her latest composition in which she electronically altered and mixed everyday noises normally considered a nuisance.

At the end of May, Sobotka and Gallati presented their project "berlinprofan" to the public in a makeshift gallery upstairs of Solvay Herschel's bookstore located, of course, at WeiberWirtschaft.

"The project [WeiberWirtschaft] is unique in its organization as a collective," says managing director Katja von der Bey. There are similar business centers in Glasgow, Bologna, Bremen, and elsewhere, but they have a different financial setup.

With WeiberWirtschaft, a group of West Berlin sociologists in 1987 revived an idea that was common during Germany's Weimar Republic: an economic collective made up of female entrepreneurs and businesswomen. Linda Gustava Heymann had founded the first trade association for female employees under the motto "Female Capital A Power To BC in Hamburg in 1897.

The name WeiberWirtschaft, selected by Heymann's 20th century associates, was both program mad c translated literally as women's economy and humorous translated derogatorily as women rummaging.

After its complete conversion the five story yellow brick building that used to house Berlin Kosmetik VEB, the leading east German makeup company, was to provide room for some 50 enterprises with about 200 offices in several buildings that surrounded four courtyards.

The collective's statutes decreed the promotion of newly founded female enterprises through low rents and services like a daycare center. Mutual solidarity and exchange of expertise among tenants was to break the proverbial glass ceiling, the invisible barrier that continues to block the advancement of women entrepreneurs and white collar professionals in the male dominated workplace.

Thus, the official opening of WeiberWirtschaft in 1996 was like a dream come true. Not only had it taken major negotiations to get banks and public backers convinced of the DM 36 million (\$21 million) project, but nearly 1,000 female shareholders made up the collective so that the renovation of the 6,000 square meter complex could be completed between 1993 and 1996.

For some, the time span proved too long. Others planned for the opportunity. After putting in years at major insurance brokerages, Gerda Plate and Inge Schassberger decided to go it alone and founded the insurance company Fair Ladies. In 1993, while the complex was still a major building site, they were among the first ten tenants to move in.

Whenever it rained they would advise their customers to wear rubber boots and tread carefully on the wooden

planks bridging the mud covered courtyards. Once people had maneuvered two flights of slanting staircases and a labyrinth of smelly passageways, they reached the two white painted and pink carpeted offices.

Despite the external grubbiness, "The atmosphere was one, of friendship and solidarity," Plate recalls today.

"We had regular meetings, exchanged information, and created a monetary fund to which everybody donated regularly and which we used whenever somebody ran into financial hardship."

Today Plate and Schassberger run a successful office with 70 percent of their customers being female. It is not only their situation that has improved in recent years but that of female entrepreneurs as a whole.

"Women used to go into business for reasons of self realization and independence," says Anne Katrin Steinborn of Gründungsrausch (foundation euphoria), a consulting firm for newly founded businesses at WeiberWirtschaft. Today, ever more women admit they want to earn real money, not just a minimum.

With no surveys available, estimates speak of every third company in Germany being founded by a woman.

Most of the one million female entrepreneurs still establish themselves within the competitive retail and service sectors, but they are slowly advancing into other areas as well. At WeiberWirtschaft, a veterinary surgeon, an architecture and town planning business, an online dental service, and a shoemaker supplement the more common branches of travel agency, physiotherapist, psychotherapist, and children's books illustrator.

The tenants have set up a committee that screens newcomers. So far, extending a varied network of unique and specialized companies is regarded as more important than competitiveness. As a consequence hardly any profession is represented twice, and the female entrepreneurial endeavor is becoming more natural.

"I used to have a female boss and do not think it's anything special," says Katja Kolbe. "I do not belong to the generation that feels thrown for a loop because of that. That's more my mother's generation, who used to run around with pink scarves."

Ever since Kolbe opened her sweet shop in March 1998 a luscious smell pervades the building, and groups of children and adults eager to learn the secret of candy production regularly cross the green courtyard. Kolbe says she did not move in because of the all women environment but came to appreciate the different atmosphere as well as the fact that the mostly male deliverers seem to have learned a lesson as well. At this business center remarks like "Are you allowed to pay the bill?" and "Could I talk to your boss, please?" are definitely a thing of the past. And the fact that Kolbe runs her business together with her husband shows that WeiberWirtschaft are not entirely rigid, although no all male management is allowed.

In the past two years consultant Steinborn has noticed that women are increasingly taking this big step as a refuge from long term unemployment. "I regard it as dangerous to choose self employment as a last resort and especially dangerous if women have no vision of what they want to do," Steinborn says. "I have never advised as many women against doing it as I did in the last year."

Bookseller Herschel, though, was driven by unemployment just as much as by a vision. Since unification the single mother of two teenage children had been unemployed twice. "I became so angry and was fed up with the reproachful eyes of the woman at the unemployment office," says Herschel today. "I did not want to work as a cleaning lady but wanted to do something that I could relate to."

Books held the answer. Although she knew a lot about women's reading preferences but very little about store management, Herschel rented a shop 'An one of the WeiberWirtschaft courtyards in 1996. Her well assorted stock and high-class reading events soon turned the bookstore into a hit in the neighborhood and beyond. She quickly gained regular customers among the tenants, and the health food store next door provided her with occasional customers. The shop's growth at 30 percent was very healthy in 1998, Herschel says. But when thinking of the problems that WeiberWirtschaft is currently facing, Herschel can only utter a deep and worried sigh.

Women at Ban Ying a nongovernmental organization helping women from Thailand who are in need or have been forced into prostitution in Germany first noticed the smell in 1997, but long time they put their constant exhaustion and headaches down to either an early start of menopause, strain of work, or the effects of the

recent renovation. When other tenants reported similar symptoms, they finally raised the issue with the management, but met with polite repudiation rather than open ears.

"We thought that women would deal differently with complaints like ours and that we could solve the issue by talking to the management," says Gabi Owusu. "But we were not taken seriously, and in the end we wrote an angry letter."

From management's perspective, the situation does, of course, sound somewhat different, but the results of an analysis conducted last year threatens all women alike. It third of the quarters is polluted which started evaporating from layers of tar in floors and walls once the renovation had insulated the building.

"Health authorities play down the danger and claim it riot to be dangerous manager von der Bey, says. "But as an ecological model project we do not want to live with this situation." The necessary renovation not only means that tenants have to leave their just opened businesses but that part of the building cannot be used for approximately six months. In addition, public authorities are not forthcoming with subsidizing the DM 3 million (\$1.8 million), and WeiberWirtschaft will have to raise at least DM 500,000 (\$295,000) themselves.

There is, however, more at stake than financial ruin. "WeiberWirtschaft has a highly symbolic value," says von der Bey. "There are so many women who visit us from all over the world and are convinced that they can make it just as we have."

In the already strained environment, other areas of discontent have also surfaced. Are rents still as reasonable as they used to be now that the real estate market in Berlin has slumped? Does management still act in concert with the tenants, or are they slowly turning into an administration like any other? Didn't they lack in solidarity with women who had difficulty paying their rents?

"The reality that women cannot opt out of capitalism is devastating," composer Gallati concedes. "Even in women's hands money must be administered. Women come under the exact same constraints as others."

In Switzerland Gallati had split her time between a career in politics and music. Her ambition when moving to Berlin in 1996 had been to focus entirely on composing, but clearly to no avail. Not only is she a member of the WeiberWirtschaft's board, but two years ago she established a monthly fixed date at her studio when women from all walks of life meet to discuss current events under the heading of "Dialogue as a Political Principle."

Is there anything special about female dialogue? And do women deal differently with constraints? Currently WeiberWirtschaft does not present a convincing alternative, but even those who struggle through the immediate crisis are adamant that the project must not fold.

"At the moment the [WeiberWirtschaft] idea gets a raw deal because of the financial situation," Sobotka says like many others. "I however, fully back the project."