West German Feminist Book Publishers

Mary Grunwald

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/398

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Feminist publishers are the sensation in the German book trade. Fifteen participated in the October 1978 Frankfurt Book Fair—up from five at the previous year's fair; but even five had created a stir in the establishment. The entire phenomenon has sprung up in four years, a measure of the great accomplishment of the women's movement in a society that, compared to that of the United States or England, holds women in open contempt.

Far and away the biggest, most stunningly successful enterprise is the Frauenoffensive Verlag in Munich. Its rise to a snug place among established publishers was aided by a lucky strike early on—Verena Stefan's best-seller, Häutungen (Shedding). The eight-woman publishing collective had been working together for two years, tied financially to a left-oriented male publishing house, when Stefan walked in with her manuscript. The novel was introduced at the October 1975 book fair; two months later, the first 3,000 copies were sold out; a month after that, Frauenoffensive cut loose from its male patrons. Over 150,000 copies of Häutungen have been sold since then, and it has been translated into seven languages, including English.

The women pay themselves equal minimal salaries (approximately six hundred dollars per month) and plough profits back into the business. Even Stefan's Häutungen returns remain in the company account; she is paid a monthly amount for "translation services."

Frauenoffensive is strong on translations from English—they've published Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's The Revolt of Mother, Anne Kent Rush's Getting Clear and Moon, Moon, Ti-Grace Atkinson's Amazon Odyssey, and Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas. But the big hits so far have been indigenous. This year's: Das Geschlecht der Gedanken (The Gender of Thoughts), a novel by Jutta Heinrich about a girl's bizarre behavior and flight into fantasy rather than submit to the "dispossession of body and soul" demanded by social and sexual convention (says the blurb). This book was already well into its second edition when, after the 1978 book fair, it was warmly reviewed in the prestigious weekly newspaper Die Zeit.

Frauenoffensive does not accept books by males. They do not want to expand beyond 12-15 titles yearly. Besides books they publish a handsome quarterly called Frauenoffensive and recordings.

A second feminist publisher in Munich is the Frauenbuchverlag, financially tied to the left male Weismann Verlag. Author Antje Kunstmann, whose sex education book Mädchen (Girls) has sold more than 16,000 copies, heads the enterprise. Frauenbuchverlag has published a volume of short stories by Monika Walter, journalist and founder of another publishing house, the Verlag Frauenpolitik in Münster.

Walter started in 1976 with a magazine called Mama's Pfrisische (Mama's Peach/Yum)—"Mampf" for short—three-times-yearly, 144-page issues with a literary accent. Frauenbuchverlag employs five women permanently plus occasional temporary and part-time workers. Walter gets more money than the others; but the goal is to equalize pay eventually (by increasing the others'). Salaries are meant to be kept low, and profits ploughed back. In an interview with the book trade journal Börsenblatt, March 28, 1978, the Frauenpolitik insist they're a normal, everyday place of business—not a utopia where oppressed women can find fulfillment. They provide one position for a young woman as publisher's bookseller apprentice—coveted vocational training in the present job market. The name Frauenpolitik refers to a combination of feminism and socialism—the first being a necessary preliminary to the second, in their view. They accept books by men; and Male Sterilization, the Lesser Evil, by Norbert Ney, is to be published soon. They prefer to translate from French "because French feminism is more political than Anglo-Saxon." They work with left-oriented organizations to support various projects but draw the line at communists, who "dismiss the woman question as a subordinate contradiction and therefore hardly bother with feminism."
Besides “Mampf,” Frauenpolitik puts out Protokolle (Minutes), a feminist news journal, six times a year. It has published the Memoirs of Louise Michel, heroine of the Paris Commune, and works by Alexandra Kollontai, Russian writer, diplomat, and high party official (d. 1952), in an “Historical Texts” series. Three other series, each with several books so far, are “Third World Women,” “Sexuality and Dominion,” and “Women and Fascism.” Recently published: The Social History of Servant Girls—Doubly Exploited in Germany during the Kaisereiche, by Uta Ottmüller.

The Frauenverlag (women self-publishers) grew out of the Berlin women’s movement. Its first project was a pirated edition of Mathilde Vaering’s anthropological/historical study Frauenstaadt-Männerstaadt (Matriarchy/Patriarchy), published in 1921 and ignored. In it Vaering cites matriarchies where men have been the housekeepers and child-rearers; where men were considered kind and gentle but intellectually inferior creatures; and where they tended to be chubby, small, weak, and modest. This book, published together with a translation (also pirated) of Anne Koedt’s The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm, is in its third edition of 5,000.

Other books reflect the scholarly specialties and political interests of the self-publishers—focused mainly on health and the social sciences. Eight women worked at least 100 hours each to bring out Hexengeflüster (Witch-whispering), a feminist health handbook which has sold 40,000 copies. In connection with the Feminist Women’s Health Center, the Frauenverlag puts out a self-help health kit with instructions for self-examination and information about the politics of population control and dangerous drugs on the market. The journal Clio, also published by the Frauenverlag, devotes each issue to a single health topic. Two new books will benefit students and teachers particularly: “Ein Mädchen ist fast so gut wie ein Jungen”; Sexismus in der Erziehung (“A Girl Is Almost as Good as a Boy”; Sexism in Education), by Dagmar Schultz, presents and interprets first-hand accounts of the routine humiliations suffered by German schoolgirls; and Mariechen’s Weg ins Glück? (Little Marie’s Road to Happiness?), by Gabi Karsten, provides a devastating analysis of sexist elementary readers.

Frauenverlag women all have other jobs and do their publishing in off-hours. All profits are used to finance feminist projects.

The Amazonen Verlag in Berlin was started by four women on pooled savings and borrowings (from women). Five women now produce the books; all have jobs and can work at publishing only part time. Of seven titles published so far, none has cleared a profit; so the gallant optimism of the publishers “comes purely from our love of the work itself,” they say. They were hurt, for example, by a hostile review of Jill Johnston’s Lesbian Nation in the feminist monthly Courage, and discouraged by the slow sales of Monique Wittig’s Le Corps Lesbiens, a masterpiece, they feel, that would be a major success were it published by the establishment. Their books are beautifully produced; among the other titles are June Arnold’s Sister Gin and Elana Nachman’s River Finger Women. Kathe Trettin’s Philosophie des Tanzes (Philosophy of Dance), 1978, was inspired by Lesbian Nation and written as a doctoral thesis.

This is by no means a complete account. Many of the smaller presses have only one or a handful of titles—so far. Feminist publishers, and Berlin booksellers and readers, are all lucky to have the Frauenbuchvertrieb, a feminist book distributor started in 1976 by “one woman delivering the books in a VW.” It is now incorporated, employs four full-time and two part-time women, and receives two or three new books a month for consideration. The women also distribute posters, recordings, and magazines; they work on commission and settle accounts with publishers monthly.

Mary Grunwald is an American who lives in Germany. Samples of her poetry and artwork appear on p. 27 of this issue.

WEST GERMAN FEMINIST PUBLISHERS

Frauenoffensive, Kellerstrasse 39, 8000 Munich 80
Frauenbuchverlag, Kreittmayrstrasse 26, 8000 Munich 2
Verlag Frauenpolitik, Wolbeckerstrasse 78, 4400 Munster
Frauenverlag, Gustav-Müller-Platz 4, 1000 Berlin 62
Amazonen-Frauenverlag, Kantstrasse 125, 1000 Berlin 12

Distributor
Frauenbuchvertrieb GmbH, Mehrgendamm 32-34, 1000 Berlin 61