

# Cultural Ageing – Ageing In and Through The Arts

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*„Celebrate Ageing!  
As people live for longer  
societies need to adapt.  
Creativity is key to  
adapting.“*  
(Creative Ageing International, 2019)

NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**CREATIVE AGING**



## Successful Ageing and Late-Life Creativity

- New-found interest in creativity in later life (Bernard & Rickett, 2016)
- Beneficial effects of creativity on older adults' quality of life (Fraser et al. 2015), health (Castora-Binkley et al. 2010), social inclusion (Gutheil, 2016) and self-confidence (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2017)
- Creativity as a method to unpack the potential of older individuals (O'Neill 2011)

### 'Writing to make ageing new': Dutch poets' understandings of late-life creativity

AAGJE SWINNEN\*

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents the results of a study that examines how older professional writers experience and understand creativity in later life. In psychological, humanities' and gerontological approaches to ageing and creativity, this question is still under-explored. The study's data-set consists of transcriptions of lengthy interviews conducted in spring 2015 with five Dutch poets over 65 who have achieved some eminence in the field. By means of interpretative phenomenological analysis, three superordinate and 12 subordinate themes came to the fore that offer an account of the ideas, thoughts and feelings characteristic of the way these writers perceive the later stages in their career. The first superordinate theme, Securing Sustainable Writing Practices, comprises the subordinate themes of maintaining continuity in writing approach; drawing on wealth of experience; emancipating from earlier literary conceptions; and reinventing oneself as artist throughout the years. The second superordinate theme, Negotiating the Literary Field, encompasses the following subordinate themes: challenges regarding finding or keeping a publisher in later life; developing self-acceptance and relativising literary awards; handling continuity of reception, or the way literary work is pigeonholed by critics; and staying visible in the literary scene. The third and final superordinate theme, Writing as Art of Living, refers to: not feeling old(er); writing as a practice of good living; writing as a way to recreate what is lost or unknown; and confronting cognitive decline. Together, these superordinate and subordinate themes diversify ideas of late-life creativity that are based on questionable generalising conceptualisations of the psychology of later life and artistic careers.

## An Imperative of Late-Life Creativity?

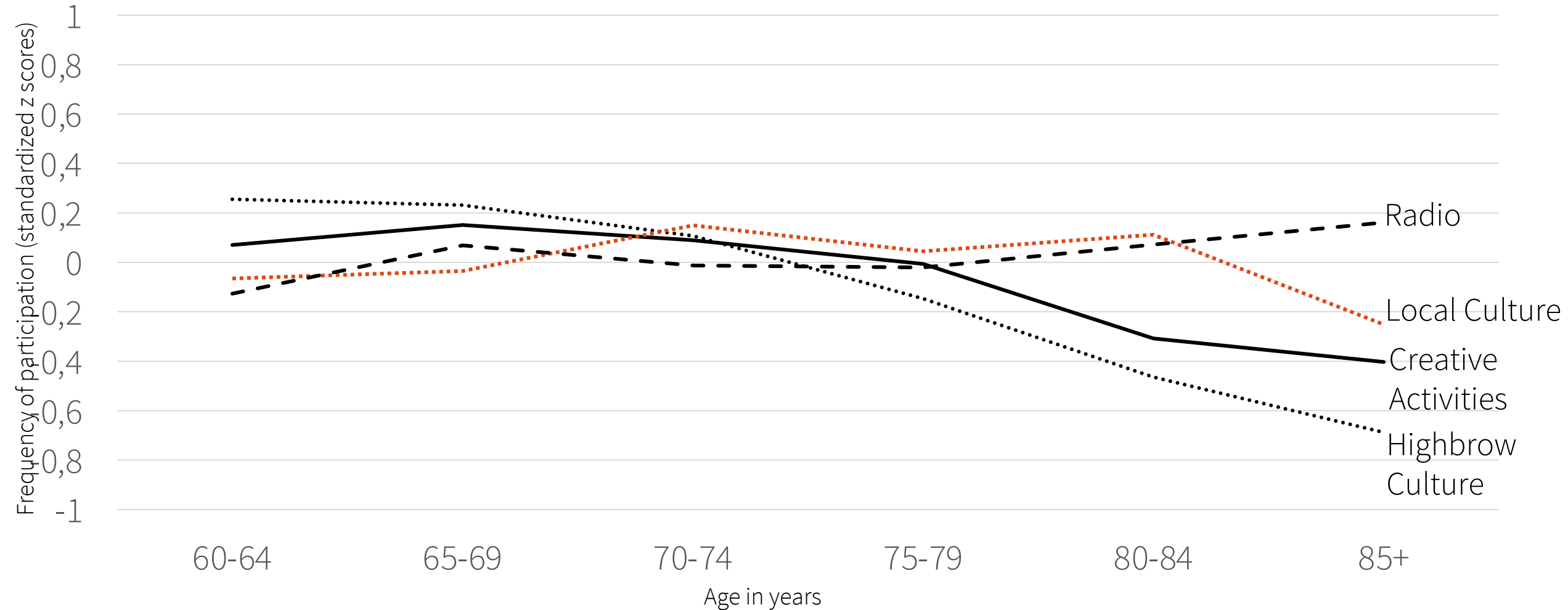
- Creativity has been commodified to fit neoliberal agendas of productivity and self-realization (Florida, 2004)
- Late-life creativity as a powerful discourse used to discipline individuals to showcase their productivity and activity in later life

*„In late modern times, creativity embraces a duality of the wish to be creative and the imperative to be creative, subjective desire and social expectation. We **want** to be creative and we **ought** to be creative.“ (Reckwitz, 2017)*

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## Frequency of Cultural Participation by Age



Note. N = 1518. Significance was tested using one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni Post Hoc Tests. Standardized means (z score). All associations significant ( $p < 0.05$ )



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## Doing Creativity

- Creativity as a bundle (Schatzki, 2014) of practices
- Creativity should be considered not as a human capacity, but as emergent from relations between the human and the non-human (things, ideas, social formations) (Fox, 2015)



## Max, Drag Artist, 64 years

- Dancer, drag artist, (soon to be retired) salesman
- Made a name for himself as the oldest drag artist in Austria
- Pursued his creative activity his entire life, and takes pride in his artistic achievements
- Retiring means “switching“ from one line of work to another

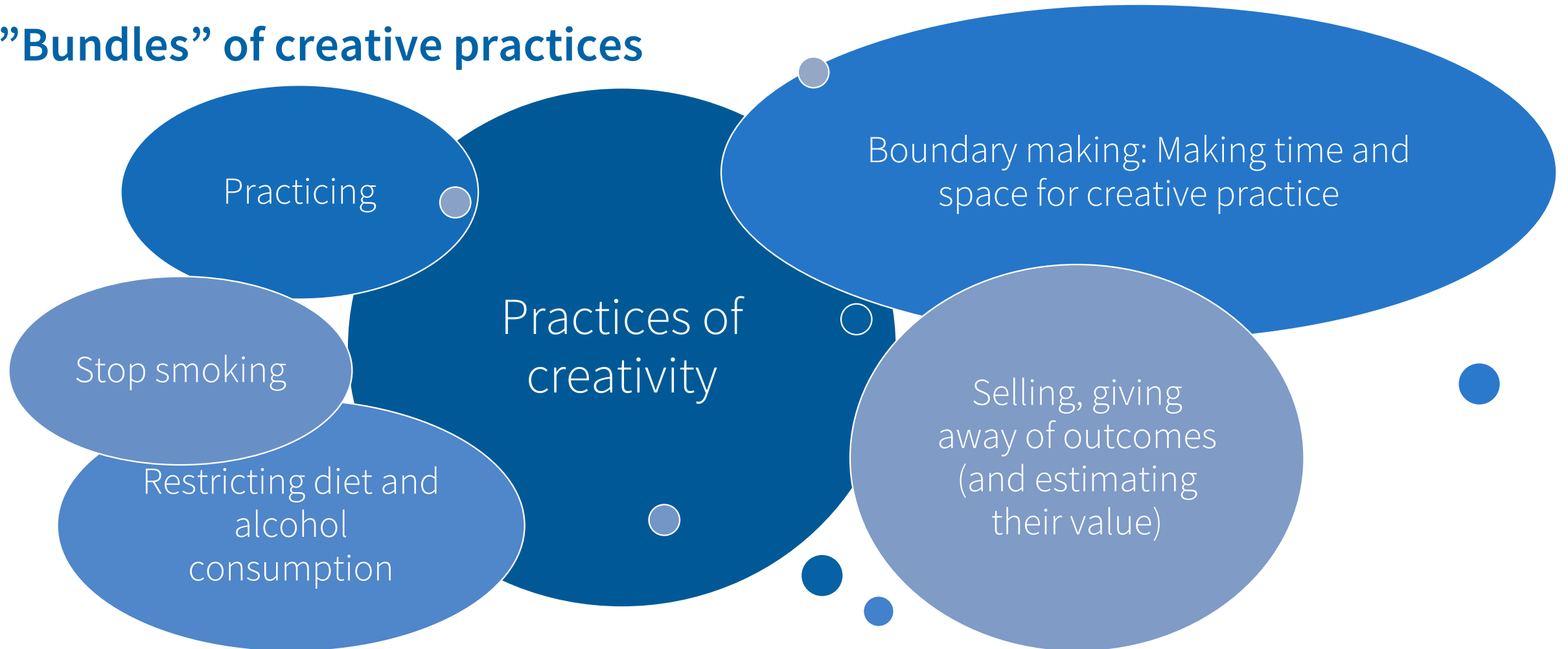
“[Creativity] is work that one, as I hope, enjoys. And if one is too lazy just to think about how one could be creative! You stay home, in front of your TV and you wait until it turns itself off. Over and out.”

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## ”Bundles” of creative practices



## Creativity as a Productive Activity

- Creative practice as regular part of older adults' daily lives, referred to as „work“
- Description of disciplinary practices

“I like eating, I enjoy having a drink, I **would like to let myself go**, but when I know that in ten or eight days I have another show, then I can't do that. I won't fit into the costume anymore.”  
(Max, Drag Artist, 64 years)

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## Joseph, Musician, 73 years

- Has started a „second“ career as a cello player after retiring
- „Training creativity“: Training and preparation has been challenging for his (ageing) body
- Creativity calls for discipline, practice and determination to develop yourself further

“Among musicians, there’s a saying: **If there is no aim, you can’t succeed.** (...) I am always determined to **develop myself further.**”

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## Late-life Creativity and Successful Ageing

- Manifold negotiations, evaluations about what it means to grow older
- Ageing process as something that can (and needs to) be done actively
- Anti-Ageing: Working against ageing through creative activity

“No, I believe that you always (!) need to **stay active**, no matter what. Even more so when you’re older (...) Otherwise, I am convinced, you will deteriorate!”  
(Joseph, Musician, 73 years)

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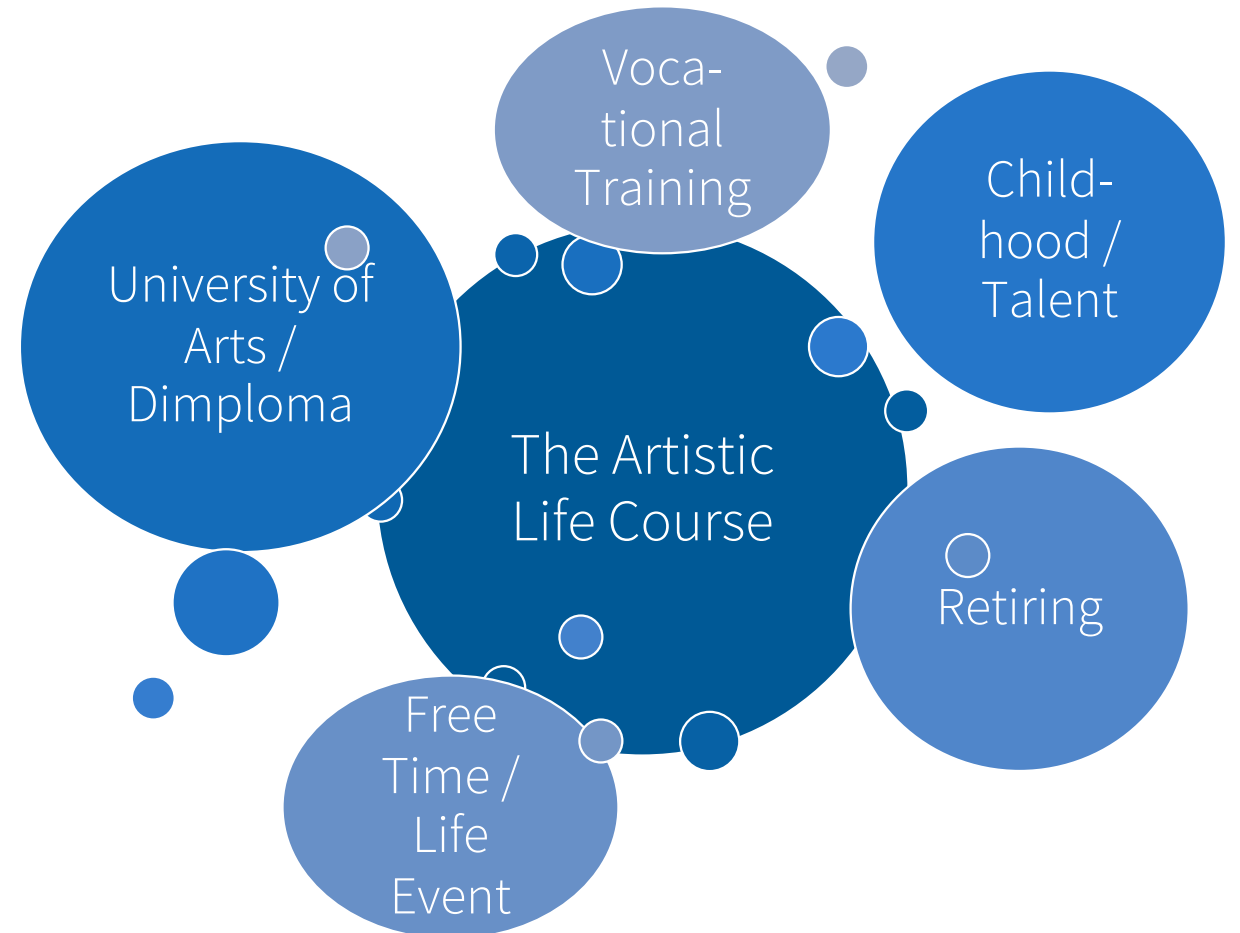
“I told myself, I **want to be like Dorian Gray**. And I will do everything I can do to make that happen. And it will only end, when I, myself, detach emotionally from myself. I would not have to be sick for that, it is more about me saying: ‘Now, it’s enough’” (Max, Drag Artist, 64 years)

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## Building an Artistic Lifecourse

- Discussing the “artistic life course“ was one important (opening) narrative in all interviews
- Common topics were the display of a linear success story and “life-course productivity”



Overview of the codings „Start of Artistic Life Course“

## Two comparing cases

### Case I: The painter Freddie (84 years)

- Freddie Lohner is an retired professional painter who lives in the outskirts of Vienna. In his retirement, he continues to paint and sell his art in Vienna. Every summer, he invites a small group of „followers“ for a week in his studio in the countryside, to teach them painting techniques.

### Case II: The singer Elisabeth (76 years)

- Elisabeth Karatschik is a retired singer based in Vienna. Together with her husband, she has built a reputation as a singer of Viennese folk music. After her husband's death, she occasionally sings in retirement homes and Viennese cafés for a small entrance fee.
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## Case I: The painter Freddie

- *VG: First, I'd like to ask you to tell me about your artistic practice. What you do, how you do it....*
  - *FL: Well I (1) paint pictures // and I have been doing that for a very long time // I always painted and the // way into arts was more or less determined for me, // because after school I wouldn't have known what to if I had failed the acceptance test for the University of Fine Arts...*
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## Case II: The singer Elisabeth

- *EK: Where can you start when you are that (!) old? Well, as a child // I was the daughter of a folk violinist and my mother stayed at home (...) we were free children in a very rural area // (...) so after the war we had to go back to Vienna of course (...) and we were playing in the debris (...) everywhere, there were plants growing // and I have always been interested in everything green and small and I always made little gardens out of the flowers and so I motivated the other children to play creatively... I wasn't just a wild child, I was a creative child.*
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## Two case studies

### Case I: The painter Freddie

- Artistic life course as a linear success story
- Determination into artistic practice
- Unquestioned status as an "older artist"

### Case II: The singer Elisabeth

- Artistic life course was less linear
  - Harder to find "checkpoints" in the life course
- "Artistic self" was less prominent
  - Life course evolved around parents, teachers, institutions

## Challenges of Late-Life Creativity

- Especially those artists who started creative practice later in life, or did not pursue their artistic career regularly over the course of their lives, were often struggling for artistic legitimacy
- Importance of (formal) training and education in late-life creativity
- Negative images of ageing and ageism in the field of cultural production

„When I’m at a casting, and I see a younger actress walk in, I say to myself: „Okay, well, that’s it.“ (Actress, 63 years)



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# Concluding thoughts and discussion: Creativity and Successful Ageing

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## Discussion

- **Late-life creativity** has been situated as a method to develop, explore and advertise **positive images of ageing**
  - Overwhelming evidence **demonstrates the positive effects of creative activity in later life** on older adults' quality of life, health, wellbeing, and self-confidence
  - However, there is also evidence suggesting that older adults experience **barriers in their access to the arts and culture**, as well as critical voices that raise concerns about imperatives of creative ageing
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## Discussion

- For older artists, **creativity is situated as a piece of work**, that called for the careful orchestration of everyday life to make it ,fit‘ with creative activity. In some cases, this was a challenging process.
  - **Images of ageing** related to creative experiences often drew upon images of successful ageing and at times also anti-ageing. This focus on anti-ageing practices of creativity is in line with existing research on the topic (Swinnen, 2016), but is problematic, as it aims to hide or delay ageing, instead of re-defining it.
  - **Building an identity as an ,older artist‘** was an important part of creative activity in later life. This was, however, challenging for those who started their creative activities later in life.
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**Thank you!**

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