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## NEW VOICES: The representation of female visual artists in national cultural institutions: A case study of the Ulster Museum Belfast

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### Summary:

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to examine factors that influence the programming of women's visual artwork in national cultural institutions. A single case study was conducted at the Ulster Museum, Belfast. Semi-structured interviews with three key members of staff working at different levels of the organisation were thematically analysed. The findings identified three main themes; institutional responsibilities (the public remit of a national institution) the role of trust (curatorial specialism, staff support, policy) and pace of change (collections' limitations and competing priorities for policy demands in the wider context of the Ulster Museum and NMNI). Museums are institutions embedded in patriarchal customs and systems but in the Ulster Museum gender is an ongoing conversation. The representation of women's visual art is driven bottom up by a specialised curator and it is dependent on an open framework of communication and power-sharing with senior management. Each participant supports inclusivity from a broader intersectional perspective rather than a purely feminist lens. Overall, the empirical research suggests that there is a strong programming of women's visual artwork and change is taking place.

**Key words:** cultural institutions; gender; museum studies; women's visual art

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### **Introduction: National Museums embedded in patriarchal institutionalism**

A patriarchal art establishment has dominated the production and consumption of paintings. This has resulted in museum practice dominated by 'permanent art collections which are 'the masters' collections' (Malt, 2006:121). Subsequently the 'glass ceiling' is an endemic problem for female artists. Linda Nochlin's 1971 seminal essay "*Why have there been no great women artists?*" highlights how the fault lies 'not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education' (Nochlin, 1971:64). Not only is the concept of the 'artist genius' inextricably linked to the male (Pollock, 1988), but, over the centuries women endured limited access to art training and occupied the primary role of wife and mother. However, around the mid-twentieth century in reaction to cultural shifts in society, new museology arose and dynamics within these institutions began to change. Counter-hegemonic strategies of the 1970s (revisionism, area studies and female solo shows) attempted to redress established hierarchies and feminist activist groups emerged, highlighting the gender imbalance of women represented in global galleries. In the 1980s, the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of feminist artists formed in response to MoMA's blockbuster 1984 exhibition in which only 10% of the 169 artists were women (Raizada,

2007). Despite attempts to respond to female subjugation, Clover and Sanford (2016) claim that for the most part, feminism and women's issues are still not on the agenda in museums. This is somewhat substantiated in an investigation conducted by *Art Net News* and *In Other Words* which revealed that between 2008-2018 females constituted only 14% of exhibitions and 11% of acquisitions in 26 major American museums (Solly, 2019). This quantitative data does not however provide *an explanation* for inequality in the representation of female visual artists in today's museums and galleries. Therefore, this project adopts a qualitative approach to examine factors that influence the programming of women's visual artwork in national cultural institutions.

### **Introduction to the project aims and findings:**

It is important to explore the under-representation of women artists at the highest level because 'the inclusion of artists in permanent collections and major exhibitions at national level are really the path into history' (Judy Chicago cited in Cochrane, May, 2013 pg. n.a). To better understand what is happening in national museums and how they are responding, I decided to focus on a local case study in the Ulster Museum, Belfast. The Ulster Museum consists of historical artefacts, specimens from the natural world and an art collection. It is one of four

publicly funded museums operating under National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (NMNI) and receives principal funding directly from the Northern Ireland Executive Department for the Communities (DfC). My research focused specifically on the exhibition (permanent, temporary, solo and group shows) of visual arts (painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, photography, video, film-making, design and crafts) by women/female artists (anyone who identifies as a woman, including LGBT +).

The objectives were:

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- To develop a better understanding of the influences on gender equalities issues in visual arts programming in national institutions.
  - To interrogate the agency or restrictions placed upon staff in decision-making roles in relation to the programming of women's visual art.
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### Research Methodology

A case study was selected because it is a 'method suited to *how* and *why* questioning and permits empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon... within its real-life context' Yin (2009:18). Since I am a

researcher living and working in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Museum provided me with 'sufficient access to the potential data' (Yin, 2009:26). In addition, there have been few published academic studies focusing on museums in Northern Ireland and this is the first study to look at the representation of female visual artists in the Ulster Museum.

To collect qualitative data for the case study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three key members of NMNI staff involved in decision-making processes. Participant A is a curator and Participants B and C are senior members of staff. Participant names were anonymised to protect identity. However, each was informed that it would not be possible to eliminate all identifying factors because of the specificity of the topic. All three participants are women. This was not an act of gendered selection on my part. In fact, all curators in the art department at the Ulster Museum are female and in addition, the CEO of NMNI is also a woman. We must remain cognisant that the gender of arts managers and representation of women artists is causal. Nowhere is it automatic that a female curator will change the gender balance.

The underlying epistemological approach for this research project is interpretivist. I consider myself to be an 'insider-researcher' sharing the same 'gender, race, class, education, [giving a] lived familiarity with the group being researched' (Griffith, 1998: 361). In order to conduct credible research, data was collected in a reflexive manner. I limited the number of questions and eliminated subjective prompts/probes during each 30 minute interview to maximise the flow of dialogue from participants. Whilst I did not adopt

a feminist methodology, I did apply a feminist perspective but sought to limit the colouring of my findings that veer towards a predisposed advocacy of the female. Data was analysed thematically which ‘allows us to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within data’ (Braun and Clark, 2008: 77-101). Themes *within the data* were analysed inductively or in a bottom-up way. This allowed for the research to evolve through the coding process. It included descriptive coding- where a one-word code summarised the primary topic and in vivo coding- where the code was derived directly from what the participant said. Three themes emerged from my analysis of primary research; Institutional Responsibilities, The Role of Trust and Pace of Change. These will be discussed in the findings.

In addition to the interviews, staff were asked to provide numerical data because quantitative studies can ‘firm up’ qualitative knowledge (Bryman, 1984:85). Restrictions were heightened by the COVID-19 lockdown. Museum closure in March 2020 meant that it was not possible to conduct an exacting count of female works currently on display. A single case study also presents limitations because it cannot be claimed that the research holds for all situations relevant to the area of study. By conducting multiple case studies, as a researcher, I would be able to analyse the data within each situation and across situations.

## Main Research Findings

### Theme 1: Institutional Responsibilities

#### a) Adhering to the Public remit of a National Institution

The programming of visual exhibitions in the Ulster Museum is determined by a number of factors. Many are similar to those outlined by Peter Vergo such as; adhering to policy, responding to large events, curatorial specialism and showcasing collections (1988). However, all participants highlighted that the Ulster Museum operates as a publicly funded body with a national remit and as such, it is the *audience* that ultimately determines *why* they program *what* they programme; it is important to be inclusive and show all visitors themselves on the wall. Participant C highlighted how this aligns with the organisation's core purpose *Here for Good* which she referred to as 'being here long term and being here *for everyone*'. Within this remit, proposals in the area of women's art are looked upon very favourably. According to Participant C showcasing the work of women 'is representative of society and women are as equal and as creative as men so deserve to be exhibited'. Participant B is of the opinion that the representation of women's visual art is not something The Ulster Museum is falling behind on 'like all museums, I think there is more we could do, but I don't think that it is particularly a problem for us.' She does, however, raise an issue discussed by (Fleming, 2012): programming must not be tokenistic but an on going conversation

to create a lasting impact. Participant A, who specialises in women's art is particularly interested in how and why women are invisible in art history, finding 'where they are, why we can't find them and how we can find them'.

#### b) Meeting the demands of curatorial specialism

Participant A feels that it is her responsibility to inform people that; history is a lot broader and more nuanced than people have been led to be aware...art can help people to communicate the struggle of women throughout society and.....[it should] inspire people from any background that you don't need to be from this very set wealthy, white, male in order to make art. Participant A

Participant A informed me that she networks, researches and applies for works on loan to drive a strong programming. Whilst curatorial activism was not discussed during the interview, the choices she makes demonstrate revisionism. Recently, she increased the visibility of marginalised women artists by unearthing the vellum works of Susanna Drury (c.1698- c.1770) from storage. Participant A also recently curated the female only group show *Making Her Mark*, (Reilly 2018). The priorities of Participant A in the next few years will be 'to represent more women of colour and trans people in our collection.' This is echoed by Participant B who informed me they are 'trying to prioritise contemporary rapid response collecting to be much more responsive to the world out there.'

## Theme 2: The Role of Trust

### a) Shared leadership

The primary research uncovered a relationship of respect and communication between staff from different levels of the organisation. Senior staff expressed having ‘trust’ in curators’ expertise. This was substantiated by the curator who reported support for her applications to exhibit women’s visual work. Another example of trust is demonstrated by the action of senior staff asking curators to contribute to policymaking. Participant C informed me that her recent restructuring of NMNI placed greater focus on shared leadership. Butt and Time (2016:13) explain that effective leadership is derived ‘[not from] the taking or relinquishing of responsibility but opening fissures in the distribution of responsible isolation.’ Throughout the interviews I became aware of the use of inclusive language ‘our’ ‘we’ ‘us’. According to Basinger and Peterson (2008:249) in major organizational change...[it is a] challenge to go from a “them” versus “us” mentality to a “we”. An explanation for NMNI staff using inclusive language in practice may be testament to such language written in the ‘*Here for Good*’ staff document co-ordinated by Participant C. Participant C came to the organisation from a background in business. Selecting executives from outside the arts has become a trend

adopted in the cultural sector (Caust, 2003). In the past, directors who were ex-curators have not generally been acclaimed for their managerial capacity (Kawashima, 1997). Yet, it may be argued that replacing curatorial knowledge with business executives may be perceived as losing the nuance of representation. However, Fleming points out that, responsibility not only lies with those in charge of institutions but with staff working at different hierarchical levels of an organisation (Fleming, 2012).

#### b) Benchmarking policy and ethical decision making

As an organisation, NMNI operates under one set of internal policy documents. Whilst there is no specific policy on gender, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act is written into the NMNI Collections Development Policy (2018-2021). This addresses equality of opportunity in policy-making and service delivery (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2012). Within this policy, The Olive Letitia Nelson Bequest is dedicated to the purchase of prints and drawings by female artists. NMNI also responds to cultural policy objectives which have been intrinsically linked the transaction of funding (Durrer et al.:2018) introduced from 1997 by the New Labour government in the United Kingdom. There is a dichotomy between arts managers being passive delivery agents of cultural policy goals and as active "operators and mediators at different

levels of action and decision” (United Nations 1972 quoted in Suteu 2006 cited in Durrer et al: 2018:69).

A discovery around the theme of trust is how individuals see themselves performing in relation to their policies. The decision to programme women’s art varied among participants from being ‘just the way we think’ to making deliberate attempts to effect change. Some difference in staff perceptions is understandable due to the different roles they occupy in the organisation and since policy has no formal benchmark, it is open to interpretation. Chibici-Reveanu (2018:104) highlights that there are often insufficient initiatives “to address these issues from within the field of cultural policy studies which contrasts with the pressing need to right gender wrongs within the cultural field.” At this point, it is important to acknowledge the role of intersectionality. Acker (2006:422) argues that ‘gender’ is fundamentally complicated by class, race/ethnicity, and/or other differences”. This leads to greater complexity when constructing a policy relating to gender.

Whatever the shortcomings in policy, within NMNI a code of conduct based on best practice exists. This is one of the main unexpected findings from my research. Participant A has set herself the target of achieving a 30% quota for female artists on display. She explained that this is to reflect ‘women [making] up 30-40 per cent of all “art making”

for the last 300 years'. Quotas can be considered controversial because decisions curators make must abide by aesthetic, ideological and ethical practice (Campolni, 2017). Within NMNI it was emphasized how women artists must be selected on the basis of merit;

A female artist must not be on the wall because she is a women...but because she is an exceptional artist and her work is the best example of its kind. To get beyond that, is really the end goal. Participant A

There is a resounding commitment from all staff to 'do everything right' and that "recognition of and respect for 'otherness' is an ethical 'glue' and involves exercising 'moral judgement in decision-taking so that morally 'right' outcomes are generated (Collier and Esteban, 1999:182). The outcome of this case study that women will have to wait their time to 'get on the walls' because staff believe that moderating the pace of change is the best way to affect long term sustainability.

### Theme Three: Pace of change

Cultural institutions often reference funding as a factor preventing change (Vergo, 1988; De Roeper, 2012). However, Participant C made an interesting statement; 'funding helps us to deliver but it does not state the direction of travel'. Instead, NMNI participants placed most

emphasis on collection limitations and multitudinous demands as the main barriers hindering the pace of change in women's visual art on display.

#### a) Collections limitations

In the Ulster Museum most programming comes from a body of collections that predates contemporary thinking around the representation of women. At the time of carrying out this project, NMNI did not have an exact count of women's visual artwork in the collection and on display, however staff calculated a guideline. There are approximately 15% women artists in the fine art collection. According to Participant B 'We can't address those old collection problems but we can do better now'. Since 2018, 7 out of 12 purchases have been work by women visual artists. Changing a collection takes time; it is dependent not only on budget but available works for sale. The waiting time is then multiplied because planning an exhibition takes 3-5 years. During 2018/2019, 29% of visual art works on display were by women artists. For the most recent NMNI exhibition, *Changing Views: Exploring the artist as traveller* (Nov 2019-May 2020), the scope of including women artists from the collection was more limited because people who were able to travel were not only wealthy, but they were men. To resolve this issue the curator purchased new post-war work by women artists. She

remarked that in the next few years, having sufficient work by women artists in the collection is going to continue to be one of the main barriers when curating thematic exhibitions.

#### b) Multiple demands

The representation of women's visual art is one very specific undertaking within the art department. Gender is competing with other protected categories and wider demands for time and space on display in this multi-functioning institution. However, staff look positively at the balancing of art with history and natural science as a USP, making the Ulster Museum very special. Nevertheless managerial demands required to balance internal operations, the public, collections and four sites governed as one entity is complex. Participant C said that they are two/three years into the restructuring of the organisation, however, they argue, it will take five years to make any significant change. To reference the balanced scorecard (BSC); it is imperative to balance off all quadrants of the business otherwise leaning too heavily in one direction you tip everything off course. (Sharma and Gadenne, 2011). In particular, Participant B acknowledged that change is hard to drive through where you have institutional hierarchies, especially in a national institution such as the Ulster Museum with an elitist, patriarchal past. Therefore to 'deinstitutionalise' the patriarchal past of a museum is going

to take a substantial amount of time. It has become apparent that there is a pace of change that can be tolerated beyond which it can become detrimental to the entire organisation.

### Key conclusions

This research project set out to identify factors affecting the programming of women artists in national cultural institutions. In the Ulster Museum, decisions about the programming of women artists are considered on the basis of public remit, curatorial specialism, staff support and policy. Barriers are mainly attributed to collections' limitations; a curatorial commitment to ensuring choices for the overall good of the institution; and competing priorities for policy demands in the wider context of the Ulster Museum and NMNI. Findings from the primary research reveal that the representation of women's visual art is driven bottom-up from an active intuitive and specialised curatorship working in synergy with senior management. It is dependent upon the role of curators *and* senior staff. An unanticipated finding was the importance of establishing an open framework of communication to impact upon curatorial autonomy, power sharing and organisational inclusivity. Although there is no causal link between gender of curators and representation of women, it would appear that women working in NMNI are making a difference. However, each participant supports inclusivity

from a broader intersectional perspective rather than a purely feminist lens. There is a resounding and recurring emphasis that gender *is* very important to NMNI staff but it is no less important and no more important than other marginalised categories. All of this is subject to the pace of change limited by the nature of the institution embedded in a patriarchal past. To increase the representation of women in visual arts programming requires commitment, time and many stakeholders who are interested in pursuing gender equality. With staff skill and organisation strategy in NMNI, there is a strong representation of women's visual artwork and systems in place to ensure that female artists are journeying towards a more equal representation.

### Impact

This single case study examines what is happening in a local context demonstrating rigour and reproducibility. It is hoped that the findings articulate a repository of information that contributes to a new body of knowledge in the disciplines of arts management and cultural policy, namely in the areas of gender studies and museum practice and that this can be transferred to the examination of other national institutions. There is a need for greater emphasis on gender in policy. I have noted that difficulties arise due to the intersectional nature of gender and that quantifying policy is rendered abstract. Therefore, further investigation is required in the field of intersectional work and policy

framework analysis. Ultimately, what is required is more than curatorial will but an institutional approach and even with that, the pace of change is inevitably slow because of historic collections and demands from a range of other priorities.

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