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Still Invisible?, Patricia de Montfort and Robyne Erica Calvert



# Still Invisible?

Patricia de Montfort and Robyne Erica Calvert

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## Provocation

In the inaugural “Conversation Piece” in *British Art Studies*, Issue 1, Richard Johns makes the observation that at the National Gallery, London, “British art” is represented by a selection of work by just ten artists—mostly English, all white, male, and born within eighty years of each other. Is it any wonder that British art can appear like an exclusive club with prohibitive requirements for entry? This exclusivity is particularly striking where British women artists are concerned, for the leading female artists in the collection—Rachel Ruysch, Rosalba Carriera, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, and Rosa Bonheur—are all from Continental Europe. That these women were all painters is also a reminder of the extent to which gallery acquisitions have traditionally been dominated by painting, on occasion to the detriment of artists working in other media.

The issue for us is not necessarily about the lack of women’s work in British public collections, but rather, is it on display? Does it receive curatorial care and scholarly attention? And if or when it does not—when it lingers on the darkest racks of museums stores, collected for a posterity it will never achieve—how has this happened, and why? Or should we be especially concerned about the display of women’s work in public collections, in an age of digital images and online archives? As our recent seminar, *Overlooked Women Artists and Designers, 1851-1918*, at the University of Glasgow highlighted, an ever larger and more diverse body of women’s work continues to emerge through scholarship that may criss-cross boundaries between professionalism and amateurism or be produced in contexts not always readily associated with artistic and market value. Should scarce curatorial resources be devoted to the display and interpretation of this work?

Certainly, concerns remain about the policies of many public institutions towards collecting and preserving women’s work. In the United States, for example, an *Art News* article, “We’re Finally Infiltrating”, claimed that the year 2007 would be “the year of institutional consciousness-raising”, with a plethora of major events devoted to the past, present, and future of feminist art practice and historical scholarship due to take place at high profile museums: at MoMA, paradigmatic scholars of the 1970s and 80s including

Lucy Lippard and Linda Nochlin were lined-up as speakers at a two-day symposium: The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts; the LA Museum of Contemporary Art held an international retrospective of the work of 1970s feminist artists; and the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, billed as the first dedicated museum space of its kind, opened at the Brooklyn Museum. Since then, the Brooklyn Museum has hosted the Feminist Art Base, a digital archive for feminist art since the 1960s, and it continues to run its longstanding Women in the Arts award honouring the contributions of American women. The National Museum for Women in the Arts, founded in 1987 in Washington, DC, continues to expand upon its original mission to exhibit, collect, and preserve the work of women artists of all periods and traditions, and to promote women's art educational programming and advocacy. However, feminist art collectives like the Guerrilla Girls, veterans of some thirty years of concerted attacks on art-world sexism, with slogans like "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?", claim that broader progress continues to be hindered by the ubiquitous presence on museum boards of wealthy art collectors with an ability to influence market trends and museum acquisitions. In its 2015 review of women in the art world, *Art News* noted that the percentage of female solo exhibitions during the period 2007-14 across five major museums (including MoMA) was less than half that of their male counterparts. Gender disparity remains deep-rooted at institutional level.

Where does that leave us in the United Kingdom? Digital scholarship and the efforts of charitable organizations like the Public Catalogue Foundation's Art UK have, in recent years, increased the visibility of paintings in collections across the UK, in particular by bringing to light works usually hidden in museum stores. A welcome by-product of this has been increased exposure of little-known work by women artists. Catalogue raisonné projects like de Montfort's Louise Jopling 1843-1933 are indicative of a broader upsurge in open-access publishing that offers promising pathways for future scholarship on women artists, especially in the area of provenance. The Jopling catalogue was launched online (with some apprehension) as a work-in-progress, but this move has proved to be richly productive in research terms, stimulating new discoveries and enabling numerous new works to be traced and sitters identified. Exhibition projects like The Rise of Women Artists at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (2009-10) and the current Modern Scottish Women: Painters and Sculptors 1885-1965 at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, exemplify recent efforts among UK museums to commit serious curatorial attention and institutional resources to the work of women artists. Such projects can make complex and unusual demands upon the researcher and exhibition curator. For example, at the recent Women in Scottish Art Study Day, curator Alice Strang highlighted the difficulties involved in presenting the work of the forty-five women in the exhibition. She noted how, for the first time, she found it necessary to use text panels to explain how and why the names of the artists were selected, since many had two or more

surnames attributed to them over the course of their careers—a problem not encountered among male artists. Moreover, for the viewer, such exhibitions (however well-intentioned and underpinned by excellent scholarship) can provoke complex results: the effect of concentrated groupings of works by women artists showcasing new and worthwhile artistic discoveries, biographical facts, and visual connections, seems to us at once both gratifying and wearisomely familiar. It's also easy to feel discomforted by the display of “hidden” women's works separately from that of their male counterparts: arguably, this only highlights difference.

One way or another, access to women's work remains challenging in the twenty-first century: it tends to be widely dispersed across the UK, often singly, in increasingly hard-pressed regional and local collections. Other work survives only in family collections, hidden from public view and often inaccessible to scholars. Sometimes these collections emerge into the public spotlight for a time, only to disappear again. A recent exhibition of the work of “lost” war artist Evelyn Dunbar ([Evelyn Dunbar: The Lost Works](#)) who died in 1960 aged only fifty-three, drew on a family collection of some five-hundred paintings, drawings, and related studies previously unknown to scholars. However, such finds are unusual. More often, archival records of a woman's professional life and work are scant (or lost) and visual records depend on grainy black-and-white reproductions from period art magazines, making detailed comparisons between works and oeuvres (the art historian's traditional stock in trade) unrewarding.

For all feminism's attempts over the past few decades to expose cultural inequalities that have written women out of art history, it's difficult to imagine how a comprehensive picture of women's cultural production a hundred or more years ago might emerge when the surviving records are often fragmentary. But on a more cheering note, our recent [seminar](#) also reminded us of the breadth of women's artistic practice and economic activity in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art world. We were struck, for instance, by how botanical works by women artists came to serve a dual social and educational purpose at the Manchester Art Museum in Ancoats, a densely populated working-class district of Manchester. We were also surprised by the extent of women's presence in hitherto neglected contexts, such as evidence of over 2,000 female account holders in the archives of artists' colourman, Charles Roberson & Co.; of women not only joining archaeological expeditions to visually record and interpret found objects and materials, but also publishing the results, seemingly to their professional benefit. Above all, we were struck by the need to continually question scholarly assumptions about women's cultural agency: as one of our contributors, Sophie Hatchwell, asked in relation to women at the Fitzroy Street studio (whence sprang the Camden Town Group), were women artists always a secondary presence by contrast with their male peers?

We think that a broader and more dynamic mapping of women's art work, that pays particular heed to the geographical and disciplinary boundaries of their practice, would assist this quest. For scholars, this task requires us to remain vigilant—to avoid seizing upon surviving evidence of any one individual as “typical” of female practice in favour of a more strongly comparative and interdisciplinary approach. This may require us to ask difficult questions of material that may lie uncomfortably outside our own disciplinary boundaries, and to synthesize it in new ways. Therein, however, may lie possibilities for new kinds of visibility and, indeed, opportunities for institutional consciousness-raising.

After our initial three waves, released at two-week intervals, and themed around visibility, reputation and legacy; contexts and networks beyond the studio; and display and re-evaluation, respectively, our fourth wave of contributions will be based around the effective, profile-raising, and collaborative work of a number of recent projects to raise the visibility of female practitioners in the field of art and architecture. This includes a précis of the aims of the 2017 AA XX 100 project to celebrate the centenary of women at the Architectural Association by Yasmin Shariff; an introduction to the exhibition *Modern Scottish Women: Painters and Sculptors 1885-1965* by the curator, Alice Strang; and pieces recording and analysing the results of Art + Feminism wiki edit-a-thons held in 2016 at YCBA and the ICA. The Glasgow School of Art and the Paul Mellon Centre are convening a “Still Invisible” edit-a-thon in Glasgow on 25 May 2016 at the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), where many of the contributors to this conversation will gather to learn the skills involved in editing wikis, and to create new pages and update existing ones with information about overlooked women artists. In a 2011 survey, 90 percent of wiki editors identified as male (9 percent as female, and 1 percent as transsexual or transgender), which may go some way to explaining the current low coverage of women and the arts on Wikipedia. Through gathering for this event, which will incorporate training with Wikimedian, Sara Thomas, we will encourage female editorship and ensure that this digital conversation continues.

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