

The Ultras

(2018 — 2019)

The Ultras was imagined as a discreet, year-long programme of activity within ESP and Eastside Projects, a focussed structure designed to support a new group of womxn and create space for dialogue, care and empowerment.

Twelve artists were invited to be part of the first group in 2018 / 2019:

Emilie Atkinson
Kelly Best
Laura Cooper
Anna Katarzyna Domejko
Sarah Farmer
Effy Harle
Sophie Huckfield
Joanne Masding
Karen McLean
Laura Onions
Bharti Parmar
Lexi Strauss

The experimental programme structure was co-designed with The Ultras, creating opportunities for the group to shape and organise activity which directly responded to common issues, in the hope of creating networking opportunities and context for ongoing discussions.

A series of public events amplified 'other' voices and extended ongoing discussions beyond the core group into the wider ESP community. The Ultras created this document that was shared with the audience of the final event *A 'male artist' is a contradiction in terms* in March 2019.

About The Ultras: www.eastsideprojects.org/esp/projects/the-ultras

Why do Women not progress in the same way as Men within the Arts?

Ongoing research by the Freelands Foundation on the representation of women in the arts, reveal the disparities between men and women in education, pay and gallery representation. As part of our Ultras activity, we have attempted to inform this data with lived experiences through hosting an open panel discussion at Eastside Projects.

The following questions were created from various discussions between The Ultras in order to help shape a direction for a panel discussion around the progression of female artists within the Arts. The questions were sent to various people from within our existing networks.

Many people were interested in this topic but could not give the time to respond due to heavy work loads and other commitments.

Many people were also afraid to speak out, including some people who did respond.

Many people did not respond at all.

The following responses are what we received back.

Beth Bate (Director Dundee Contemporary Arts)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

I'm interested in models that acknowledge and support the different economic and social needs of artists, from residencies that support artists with families or caring responsibilities (there are some great examples in Finland, and here in the UK, for example with Wysing). It's good to hear about organisations who can show support and flexibility during the commissioning of work and during installation periods, be that with flexibility of scheduling, accommodation, travel or help with childcare.

I do feel that the status quo is changing though there is a long way to go yet. Discourse around female artists, pay for all artists, equity, intersectionality, abuses of power and privilege, feel very present at the moment. This combined with the number of women — and often mothers — in leadership roles in galleries and visual arts organisations across the UK — means I'm far more hopeful that change is possible.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

This is a huge question and not one that can be answered by solely looking at the art world. Society as a whole could be seen as structured over centuries to hold women back — from enforcing gender normative stereotypes on both sexes from early childhood, to workplace cultures and practices that don't support those who have childcare or caring responsibilities (for either parent), to a long history of abuses of power that range from the treatment of "difficult women" to the downright criminal. Layer on top of this the intersectional issues that women who are not straight, white, cis gendered, or able-bodied face — these obstacles are real and, for many, incredibly difficult to overcome. And these obstacles are in every sector I can think of.

What makes it particularly infuriating in the art sector is that there is tendency to think of ourselves as different to this — as supportive of women's rights, of understanding of intersectionality, as

liberal thinkers. And yet, in practice, behaviour within the sector hasn't actually reflected this.

I think of: a high profile female artist telling me she'd never bring her child to one of her private views "it's OK for men to do that but I know how I'd be viewed".

I think of: a successful female curator being selected for a senior role, only to have the offer revoked when the employer realised she was pregnant.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

There absolutely is an underlying structure — see above. It's patriarchy and its stronghold on society and culture ensures the odds are often strongly stacked against women to achieve the self-determination, choice and independence that many of their male colleagues, friends and family members are able to enjoy. Men also do not fare well under patriarchy as the pressure of gender normative roles and the expectation to live up to unrealistic stereotypes can be incredibly destructive.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

People who fear they may be condemned for speaking out need to find allies and supporters. Share your stories, seek suggestions. Don't be afraid to talk about money. Ask other people how they manage it. Ask artists, curators, directors. We can all learn.

Talk to women who have managed to raise children, either by themselves, or with partners, and have combined it with a career as an artist. In our own programme, by the end of 2018 and since I took over in 2016, five out of the six women who have had solo shows are parents, with their children ranging from new babies and toddlers up to teenagers.

What would things look like if they were different / improved / better? How would women artists fare?

We wouldn't be having this conversation any more. We would be seeing a diversity of people from all backgrounds — sex, gender, class, race — represented in public spheres, including a range

of women artists with shows in galleries. People would be paid properly, they would feel valued and their care needs would be met.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

Our process for selecting artists is lengthy and develops out of months, sometimes years, of research. We often seek to champion artistic positions that have been overlooked or underrepresented by wider cultural discourses to date and, because of this, our research process must be lengthy and thorough.

We visit studios, graduation shows, exhibitions and biennials; we read books, magazines, blogs and press releases; we speak with artists, curators, commissioners, gallerists, teachers and directors; we bring suggestions to the table, make long lists, short lists, agree, disagree, then agree again; we look at balancing across a diversity of backgrounds, chosen media and tone, so that a programme can be viewed across a year, or two years, or five years, and will seem rich and complex and multifaceted. We always think about what an artist might want from working with us and what our audiences will want from our programme. We are always looking, and watching, and talking, and listening, and thinking.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

For change to be made — and it can be, has been, and will be — we all have to undergo a process of checking our privilege. I am a woman — a straight, white, cis, able-bodied woman, who has had the benefit of a good, free education. I had access to decent childcare that I could afford and I am in a position of some power, with a platform, as the Director of a contemporary art centre. I am not an artist. I do not speak for all directors. I can't speak for all women. But I want to use the voice I do have to speak for those who may not have one, or who do not have access to the privileges I enjoy, through a process of listening, and then considering what changes I can make, with the power I do have.

I can start within my own organisation. We used the seismic shift in the public debate around the misuse of power to review our own policies and procedures. These now cover all staff, volunteers and people we pay to work with us, including our

Trustees and artists who exhibit in our galleries. This stems from a fundamental belief that people — all people — have the right to dignity at work. This policy makes explicit what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, who to go to if you have been affected in any way, how your concerns will be heard and dealt with, and who will do this.

Crucially we need to be able to talk about ALL of this.

We need to talk about motherhood and parenting and the outrageous and, frankly criminal, pregnancy and maternity discrimination that happens across the UK. Some of the issues affecting female artists are shared by women everywhere — this is one of them. But the precarious nature of artists' income, the time and space needed to think and make work ("a room of one's own" of course), undertake residencies, and install shows, means female artists are doubly, triply bound. The odds are further stacked against those who are single parenting or whose partner may be in a similarly precarious position.

So, in short, we need to listen and then we need to use our power to act.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate but gets put into practice?

Yes, there is awareness about this topic but I don't agree that there is plenty of it. There should be more. If it was really felt and understood by all of those in power, who can make a change, then we wouldn't be having this discussion. There is much, much more to be done.

Look at models of best practice. Hold people to account. Ask what they're doing to match these models. People in power, myself included of course, have to be challenged, to be asked difficult questions, to listen and to be open to change. We have to acknowledge our power and our privilege and always ask what we can do to share it.

Fiona Bradley (Director Fruitmarket Gallery)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

An organisation that I am very interested in and supportive of is the Glasgow Women's Library. Their management practices and their porosity to visitors and the outside world (witness their response to not winning the Art Fund Museum of the Year award — making a bag celebrating other notable runners up, publishing their application in full etc) are feminist and intersectional and properly groundbreaking.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

I would reference Mhairi Black's contribution to the Committee on mysogyny as a hate crime. She talks eloquently about how hard it is for women to function in a society / economy designed by and for men.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

See above. Yes, I think it can be and must be, in what we do rather than what we say and by using the platforms we have. So, I can show the work of women artists, I can recruit women and pay them properly to positions at every level of the organisation, I can ensure that we never have public panels without proper representation of women (at least 50%), I can support practical staff initiatives such as making sanitary products freely available in our toilets and I can ensure we have the kind of flexible working practices that make caring responsibilities whether for children or older relatives easier to combine with working life.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

I don't know. I feel somewhat overwhelmed by the extent to which social media has legitimised, promoted and supported instant criticism and condemnation. I support and encourage people personally as much as I can, but I don't know how to protect them from online and other abuse.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

I select artists for the programme through a combination of my own research, knowledge and understanding of what is out there, that will work in our programme and the research, knowledge, enthusiasms and understanding of colleagues and professional contacts. We have a reputation for showing the work of women (although actually I think it is more that we don't show predominantly men!), and I am concerned to ensure that the work of women is promoted and viewed, both in terms of women working now and more 'overlooked' artists of the past (we have recently shown the work of Lee Lozano and are planning to show both Howardena Pindell and Senga Nengudi, all women, and two of them women of colour, who were key figures in the 1960s and 1970s but whose work has not had the recognition of some of their male peers). Our statistics are that over the last 10 years, the ratio of women to men in terms of solo shows is 13:15 in our main programme, and over the last five years 9:4.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

I think all of us — directors and their colleagues — need to inform ourselves, question, read, reflect check our own practices and constantly horizon scan to see what we should be learning and how we should be doing things better

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

I think it is hard to over-emphasise how new the conversation right now actually is. As a woman in my 50s I think the awareness and the shifts in feminist consciousness and debate that have happened over the last year or so are seismic. There is a long way to go, but perhaps we really will see the patriarchy called properly into question and overthrown. Men (not all men!) are changing their behaviours, young women are demanding more and expecting more. I am pleased that initiatives such as yours here, organisations like the Glasgow Women's Library and prominent politicians such as Mhairi Black and Nicola

Sturgeon are doing everything they can to keep the debate lively and urgent.

Anna Falcini
(Artist / Ph.D. Candidate
in Fine Art Practice,
University for the Creative Arts)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

I am seeing encouraging signs of women in the art world being recognised but also it is slow progress. I do not know specifically of models that are changing the status quo but glimpses of it changing.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

At the high end of art, i.e. the commercial galleries, it seems to me, that predominantly, rich white men are often buying art so that may influence which artists are promoted and what kind of art is selected. What I am suggesting here is that art made for a more masculine audience and is valued more highly. Having said that, female artists are beginning to be recognised or older female artists who were overlooked in their youth are having a renaissance — Paula Rego and Phyllida Barlow come to mind. There is also a lot of resistance to the work of women and with the exception of Rego and Barlow, older female artists are particularly discriminated against.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

I think the structure is being challenged but we need women who have greater earning capacity to be art customers (equal pay still well behind what it should be and women not able to be in the top

jobs), and we need women in roles of influence such as the bigger museums and galleries such as Tate or MOMA. It is great to see Maria Balshaw at Tate Modern but it has been a long time in coming and there is still a long way to go.

What I've noticed in my teaching at HE level is that female students are often a lot more conservative than their male counterparts, they often work really hard but are not confident, so culturally they've adapted to behaviours imposed upon them by society that is still male dominated and they are disadvantaged in their early 20s. Could there be a greater system of mentoring and empowering women by those in the industry, alongside highlighting the inequalities of the art world?

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

Perhaps there can be a collaborative piece of work / exhibition about this issue, that is made by women in the industry, curated by women in the industry and written about by women in the industry? Then it is a statement that brings many together. Individually, women can also highlight their positive experiences as good practice whilst citing negative experiences.

What do you think directors should doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

Directors can encourage female artists, writers and curators, if they aren't already. They can seek out work from women to add to their collections or they could programme shows that showcase women artists. They can profile women artists more vigorously. They can be tuned into the work being made by women and the issues that they are exploring. Retrospective exhibitions can re-address women's art that has been largely ignored, to flag up their interesting work that has been overlooked.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Women who are in this creative industry need to ask questions and keep highlighting the issue. There are a number of approaches needed and a

collective voice. The #MeToo campaign became big news when prominent females started to discuss the endemic culture that exists in the film industry and when they began to group together on it. The creative industries are often opaque and without transparency then it is hard to challenge. I think there could be a manifesto that promotes women in the industry that could be presented to museums and galleries — a code of conduct to sign up to and then artists should be encouraged to work with those galleries that recognise this manifesto. We need also our male colleagues to support us so it is important to bring them into the discussion.

Has there been some academic research done on this subject? If a research project could be developed, bringing in voices across the regions and expertise, then this can give firm evidence and a range of evidential material. Questions need to be asked of politicians too and their influence gained. I wonder how many artworks in the government collection are female? I think it is a multi-layered approach needed that gains momentum.

Vickie Fear
(Independent curator +
Curator/Programme Manager at
Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

In visual art specifically:

A Woman's Place (Day + Gluckman)

The White Pube

OOMK

GU Women

AWITA

AWAD

Marguerite

Outside of the visual art field specifically:

Chwarae Teg

Galdem

The Wing

The Guilty Feminist

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

I think there a number of causes, one being that men have held the power and money to make decisions and privilege people that look like themselves for a very long time.

Also, women often commit time to creating platforms for and supporting others before themselves — professionally and at home. Women are conditioned to be polite and accommodating and not be difficult, loud or too confident. We have not been trained to self-promote or expect people (men) to value our opinions.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

Definitely. We know that there are more women arts graduates and actually there are more women in the general public. Straight, white, cis-gendered men are a minority but they continue to dominate the statistics of solo exhibitions, prizes and awards, as well as senior management and directors of arts organisations.

We're not doing enough to call it out when we see that there is inequality and this is probably down to fear of getting individual reputations as 'difficult women' so this needs to be addressed. We're also not doing enough to support other groups who are dealing with prejudice and oppression; we need to build allies and open up the perceptions of feminism beyond middle class white women.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

Men who speak up are praised. The Simon Cowells and Boris Johnsons of this country are held up as good examples of successful people with strong opinions. We need to support each other to speak up against inequality. Hashtag campaigns have made notable progress for the MeToo and BlackLivesMatter movements, we could think about similarly simple strategies to amplify the voices of whistleblowers. There needs to be collective belief in publicly supporting each other.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

Although early career and without a regular programme to fill I am interested in finding artists whose work I feel has conviction and demonstrates an ongoing strength of practice. I am also very keen on artists who support other artists and contribute to an 'artist-led' / self-initiated / DIY approach to working.

I'm currently working with an intentional woman bias but am aware that I could work harder to find artists from BAME backgrounds and to work with artists who have disabilities.

As I'm based in the South West I do find it hard to see as many exhibitions outside of the region as I'd like to (travel is expensive) so I use Instagram and the links in newsletters such as Art Licks, Art Monthly, LADA, VASW etc to research artists.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

Directors should be setting quotas not targets — for programming, for staffing, for trustees.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Again, quotas not targets. We also need to be better at celebrating success, sharing good news stories and articulating why better equality makes for better working.

Lucy Day
(Independent Curator +
Director Curator of A Woman's
Place Project)

(Very much in note form!)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are

you aware of that are changing the status quo?

A Woman's Place Project CIC!

Idle Women

Mothers Who make

www.procreateproject.com

Feminist Curators United

BROOD — art work / publication brought out by artist parents Townley and Bradby — roughly quarterly

See also: blog.creative-capital.org/2014/09/artists-raising-kids-thoughts — not read this article as yet but his Making Your Life As AN Artist pdf is good.

Craftivist projects happening nationally. E.g. One Day (commissioned by A Woman's Place Project and produced by Quiet Down There with artist Alinah Azadeh for our ACE funded project); Makers of Change with Alinah Azadeh (fund by the Women's Vote Centenary Fund) and some offshoot workshops and plans for local monthly craftivist meetings

Residencies:

I seem to recall that Wysing's new residency programme structure was welcoming of children (From their site: www.wysingartscentre.org/images/uploads/PDFs/Retreat_Open_Calls/Residencies_FAQ.pdf We are interested in hearing from artists who are already working within self-organised groups who would like to use this opportunity to strengthen the group, those who want to come together for the first time to collaborate on new ideas, and artists who might want to bring their children or families. FAQ: If I bring my small child, will there be provision for childcare? There isn't provision in place but we can help arrange this though you would need to write the costs into your proposed budget.)

A Woman's Place Project is looking at researching the provision and structures for parent / carer friendly residence (I need to get some funding in to undertake the research so it's on pause while I work that out).

Birth Rites Collection

New Hall Art Collection

Valeria Napoleone (Collector of Work by Women)

There will be more! Will feed through as they come to me.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

In no particular order as it is depending on individual and collective circumstances:

Socio economics

Confidence — its hardwired that we should nurture not thrive. Hunter / gatherer syndrome! In built survival tactics to work collectively as gatherers whilst the art world is predicated on and by hunters. (Guilty Feminist Podcast on this ! Might be the Instincts on on 27 Aug — can't quite remember)

Art world structure — is changing but is predominantly men in senior positions (as Heads of College Departments, Gallery directors, CEOs, etc) — decision making and influencing roles.

Dominance of the commercial sector and it's increasing influence on museum shows — if mainly men showing in commercial galleries and being put forward or sold into museums then it continues the circle.

Parenthood — again this has changed significantly but in my experience it is still mainly women who take on the caring role particularly if they are the artist in the household. (less stable income— another circle that is hard to break)

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

YES! Join boards, have a voice — big or small, spoken, written, through making or how one approaches practice.

Ensure caring support is built into funding bids, for example commissions — can an extra room be included in accommodation if support is needed? Even if no then it's been raised — more people raise it more likely it is to happen.

Don't work for free unless there is positive identifiable gain — free work undermines the sector and particularly if it doesn't nurture / develop you in some way.

Use evidence (Paying Artists Campaign , East London Fawcett audit, Freelands Audit, every day sexism campaign)

Discreet audit of your local gallery programmes — what's the ratio men; women. Solo / group (often lots of women in group shows, and men get solos.) — Ask questions (ask 'What' or 'How' not 'Why' as 'why' puts people on the defensive and can create barriers. This may be contentious — there are lots of approaches to take!)

Support and suggest alternative structures. There is a financial argument to be had.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

See above about asking What and How rather than why.

Be constructive not critical in groups (not always easy.)

Encourage men to be allies — build a network of male allies. For example: who will question, and ideally not contribute to, panels or exhibitions which are unbalanced. Encourage them to come to discussion about the subject (to date 95% of attendees to our events and others I have attended with a women focussed discussion have been women, and yet women regularly go to talks by and about male artists. And the men in those audiences are often the first to ask questions!

Craftivism is a really good, tried and tested way of getting discussions going and can be far more inclusive than the more hierarchical panel discussion or lecture (e.g. 'experts speak, audience listens' format)

Develop Tools and strategies — soundbites, evidence, quotes etc .

DON'T JUDGE!

Find out what the preferred way of communicating is — chat over a coffee or a formal situation. Play to people's strengths rather than challenge perceived 'weakness' of 'fear.'

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

Because of my current curating interests selection is : Women artists > their practice > women focussed

subject / content in roughly that order. With lots of slippage within that!

Studio Visits, Instagram, Seeing shows, Word of mouth / conversations, referrals from other curators and artists whose work I respect, developing relationships with artist I've shown and keeping a track on what they are up to as much as possible.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

Monitor / audit their programmes. Question and reflect — (i.e. have shown 40 in a year but only 2 had solos, while 10 men did.)

Think about Being an advocate and not just trend setters.

Question, and ideally not contribute to, panels or exhibitions which are unbalanced

Review budgets and see how changes can be made in eta short, medium and long term — set goals and be transparent about why.

Don't be afraid. If no one else is doing is doing something it doesn't necessarily mean it is wrong or, just means you are the first to do it (this fulfilling the trend setter bit.)

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Recognise and Beware of bandwagons.

KEEP GOING

Women know about the issues, lots so men don't so keep the conversation live.
Use humour!

Support through activity — Tweet, Visit, share, join forces, leave feedback, ask questions. Don't wait for someone else to put things into practice — if there's a gap fill it constructively and creatively, Join forces with others.

Helen Nisbet (Artistic Director, Art Night)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

Perhaps the increased commitment to solidarity and care amongst peers and younger curators, it's not a given but I see it more often now.

Groups like The White Pub questioning the status quo, and Social Media allowing others to do so more freely too.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

Argh! Such a good question. It's so disheartening to see the ease with which men seem to rise the ranks. I think it's the classic situation of men applying for roles many similarly experienced women would not feel qualified for. Also, people taking men more seriously at interview, seeing their 'potential' but perhaps not being able to offer the same generosity to women. Perhaps even the way we talk about our work. I have been told in interviews that I 'look young' — pretty horrific and I'm sure no one would say that to a man.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

As in the art world? It took me a long time to figure out what it all was, what the structure was and how to 'get in', there are so many barriers — financial, race, class, sexuality, gender. One of the big problems, and I guess this relates to class, but its more nuanced than this, is if you have family or know people who exist within this world it is so much easier to access it. True of academia too and the two are very strongly linked. People still get jobs because of who they know. Some of this is necessary, but it preferences those with existing networks and the (social and financial) ability to party with the right people.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

Be kind. Be open. Find spaces for this conversation to take place in, don't expect people to come, respond to people, go outside of major cities, go outside of cities.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

It's a difficult part of my job and takes time. I do preference artists who have not benefited from the structural support discussed above. I try to do studio visits and 1-1 sessions outside of London. I try not to show people who seem to be 'on the circuit', but it's hard. It means paying attention, talking to people. Inevitably social media plays a part. But talking to people helps a lot "whose work are you into at the moment" especially in a new town or city. This could be improved — I want to improve this. I rarely have enough money to travel to see artists outside London, so most of my trips come from piggy-backing off other opportunities.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

Listening. Staying active. But it's not easy. Directors get a hard time, sometimes rightly so, but often the structures in place make the role almost impossible.

I think coming together with others, paying attention to structural problems, finding ways to smash these, being open, opening up to others, admitting fault and facing up to mistakes.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Totally. I think about this every day. For me it's about working with kindness and with care, saying something out loud when something is not right, challenging bad behaviour, supporting and sticking up for people who have less of a voice, paying attention to who is getting jobs, who is getting exhibitions — why? Challenging organisations that seem to be lazy or obstructive on this. I'm not sure

— we need to work together more — so thank you for organising this!!

Marcelle Joseph (Director Marcelle Joseph Projects)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

I became aware recently of an annual peer exchange programme organised by artist Alicia Tsigarides with funding from Artquest. She put together a group of 8-9 like-minded female or non-binary artists who explored femininity in their work to meet once a month over a 12-month period for crits, research presentations, exhibition visits, guest speaker events and the like. This annual programme culminated in a publication and a public programme event at Camden Arts Centre. This programme enabled the organising artist to begin to explore femininity in her own work as her male tutors at the RCA dismissed any topic relating to this theme as 'silly' or not deserving of artistic meaning.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

I have found that women are less likely to go out to openings several nights a week relative to their male counterparts. I cannot stress the importance of networking in the art world. You just never know who you are going to meet at an opening.

Women with childcare responsibilities are hindered in all sorts of ways due to the cost of childcare and their lessened ability to go to any events outside their home and studio. Participation in residencies is next to impossible unless they have partners who can take over any childcare responsibilities in their absence.

Additionally, women typically are not as comfortable promoting themselves and their work

compared to men. Self-promotion should be taught at art schools. An active social media presence and a decent website are important to maintaining your profile in the art world as well as staying up-to-date with art world happenings. Think of your art practice as a brand.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

The underlying structure is the patriarchy and to challenge this, the next generation of children will need to be socialised and taught at home and at school the values of gender, race and class parity.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

In this current wave of right-wing populism and nationalism, safe spaces may need to be created for these conversations to happen.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

My curatorial specialisation tends to be the work of early career female and genderqueer artists as I am interested in identity politics, feminism, queerness and the body but only in the sense of the body-not-separated-from-the-mind. Saying this, I do not actively discriminate against the work of straight white male artists but I am not interested in the patriarchal male gaze (i.e., the woman as object of that gaze).

To get the lay of the contemporary art landscape, I visit gallery, project space and institutional exhibitions as well as degree shows, arrange studio visits, and attend art fairs, panel discussions, artist's talks and other events.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world? There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Curators and gallery directors need to promote gender and race equality in their own practices and businesses even if it means quotas must be set. Art historically, this may be more difficult but

amazing female artists and artists of colour from the past are being rediscovered every day and even championed in the art market (e.g., Rose Wylie, Carmen Herrera, Mary Weatherford, Artemisia Gentileschi).

Ben Borthwick (Independent Curator)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

Different contexts are able to respond in different ways to the decision to act against the gender imbalance of opportunity in the visual arts. What I can do is outline my thinking and decision making process when I prioritised this issue in the 2016 programme at Plymouth Arts Centre. When I started in December 2014 I was conscious that the year long programme I inherited and the exhibitions in the city were predominantly men. Without having consciously planned it, most of the artists I was interested in presenting were women so it was an easy decision to formalise that into a position that the 2016 would be dedicated to artists and curators who are women. What this enabled was to articulate a legible political position about gender inequality in the visual arts and to demonstrate this position through the programme. It also helped formalise thinking and generate discussion about strategic interventions that could be made to create a sustained, and sustainable, commitment to transforming the context for artists who are women at a local, regional and national level.

In order to embed this support for developing the practice of women in a more strategic and sustained way than just doing a series of exhibitions by individuals, I developed funding proposals for a programme of residencies that were linked gender inequality. At the time I was living in Wales and this was a key issue facing artists, namely the stop-start possibilities for career development within the microcosm of Wales, and a corresponding lack of awareness of these

developments of Welsh artists outside of Wales. This means there are barriers to gaining regular experience exhibiting and producing because the network of organisations in Wales cannot sustain regular and continuous opportunities for the same artists: once you have shown at 3 venues (half of Wales's RFO network that has a meaningful engagement with contemporary art) that is pretty much it for the next few years before it is your 'turn' again. By bringing Welsh artists who are women on residencies in Plymouth, not only would they have the opportunity to expand their networks with artists based in the city, but also gain experience through their first exhibition with a publicly funded organisation in England at an early stage in their careers. The idea was that by gaining a foothold outside of Wales, if for any reason the artist took a break from practice (whether for childcare, full time work, or any other reason) then re-entry into practice would be on the basis of a more solid and established foundation. One of the reasons women, particularly women in Wales and other funding regions with relatively small networks, can find it more difficult to progress their careers is because normative social convention is that women are primary carers for children. Society is organised on this assumption and it can be very difficult to break these norms for legal, social, and psychological reasons (while also acknowledging and respecting the fact many women want to focus on childcare as well as career). This often coincides with a point at which a cohort of artists who have all graduated around the same time and been developing their practices through their twenties and thirties in parallel with each other, to a point where things are becoming more clear for themselves and they are gaining more external recognition. Male artists are much less likely to take leaves of absence from their practice which means they are more likely to be able to capitalise on the opportunities that are available. Meanwhile, this situation counts against female peers who are simultaneously reaching a solid basis in their practices yet become less visible at this critical point of career development.

A parallel motivation for the residency and exhibition programme was to build dialogue and exchange between scenes (in this case Cardiff and Plymouth). This cut across social, practice, and exhibiting networks which was reinforced by the strategy for the exhibition in Plymouth to be in partnership with a Welsh venue through which further exchange could take place outside of this programme. I had limited success with a larger

programme being declined but did one exhibition on this basis, after which I was able to follow these principles in an informal way.

The longer term outcome of this approach was to have about 90% women in the programme dedicated to artists who are women (accounting for a group show curated by a female external curator who included some men in the exhibition), and a collaboration between a woman and a man. Subsequently the gender balance remained presenting a majority of women at 66%.

Finally, the quality of the programme of artists at different stages of their careers was a salutary rebuttal of the regular critiques that this was only ever going to be a tokenistic gesture. Working with artists who are women is in no way a compromise — on the contrary, being able to do exhibitions with artists as part of a programme underpinned by a progressive set of motives infused the organisation and its activities with an energy and sense of purpose that the arbitrariness of 'excellence' cannot possibly capture.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

The commercial sector has certain pressures such as the earning power of men is greater than that of women and it is well established that wealthy men tend to buy work by male artists, or certainly not work that takes a feminist perspective. What I tried to do with PACs programme finds some kind of parallel in how collectors like Valeria Napoleone are taking a very public position to support female artists and galleries run by women. The limitations of this is that the commercial market only represents a tiny number of the practicing artists in the UK, which becomes even more minuscule once you get out of London. Therefore publicly funded organisations have the scope to make a much bigger impact than the market.

Above I allude to the question of childcare norms and the entirely understandable decisions many women make to prioritise childcare, especially in the early years. Sometimes this may be a simple preference, sometimes it may be a decision taken unwillingly because of the ongoing gender and industry pay gap which means a family's earning potential is greater if the partner continues to work. And if there isn't a partner then the levels of support available are so woeful that it is impossible to maintain childcare and practice simultaneously.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

If networks of NPOs self-organised to bring prominence to this issue it would make a strong case that the sector is leading change instead of only responding to ACE policy and directives at the level of individual organisations. Integrating different segments of the contemporary art infrastructure around this issue would reinforce it even more strongly (e.g., working in partnership with commercial galleries, support organisations, etc).

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

By being more vocal and demonstrating that this is a widespread debate not a rogue position occupied by a few crackpots or dangerous radicals. Normalise the idea that there is bias and women do not get the same opportunities as men.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

I set myself a challenge of doing 50 studio visits a year. Sometimes I manage 30, sometimes 50 or more, but there is a problem if studio visits get cut at the expense of other pressures. This is absolutely crucial form of learning for me and engagement and support for artists and for myself. I therefore have a wide pool of artists with who I have met repeatedly, and whose work I have usually researched in depth over a period of years. In a team situation where there are other curators I always try to enable the junior staff to make decisions about what they want to see in the programme. While I can see a function for occasional open calls, my general view is that this is an overused format and curators should be doing more research instead of passively seeing what comes through the application process.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

It is really quite simple — change the programme and set an achievable target that is, at the very least, equal in terms of gender, and stronger

representation of people of colour and queer issues, disability, and others.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

In the 1980s there was a big drive to widen access to resources and facilities to artists who were women, from different ethnicities, sexualities, and more. The 'politics of representation', multicultural and 'identity politics' debates were effective in creating exhibition opportunities for many artists and resulted in a major expansion of the cultural sphere. But this was short-lived and from the 90s (especially during the regressive YBA era) until 2008's financial crash many of these complexities were simplified again with a whitening of the art world which was utterly depressing. Furthermore there was very little change to the entirety of the system with almost no curators, and very few other cultural professionals who were from non-white backgrounds. The shifts in the last few years seem to be more structural and I am hopeful that the proliferation of public galleries and other factors means these changes will become embedded and permanent.

Steffan Jones-Hughes
(Director — Oriel Davies
Gallery)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

I think artists are looking for alternative learning approaches. These could be studying an academic degree but maintaining creative practice, alternative free art schools, entrepreneurial artist led activity, developing an audience for work online... either way galleries need to be open to non-traditional routes into the arts. With the explosion of fees

and student numbers the art school is becoming a playground for the rich.

What is it that holds women back?

Honestly? Anxiety and confidence. This is why I have always been keen to support and encourage artists and to develop professional relationships over a long period of time and to offer opportunities but to wait until they are ready. This goes for women but could also be said of all artists.

Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

See above and add to it in some cases motherhood and caring roles. There are partners out there who work to balance these traditional roles and responsibilities but I'm often astounded when female colleagues appear to have their work diminished by their (usually) male partners. There often seems to be a hierarchy based on earning potential in these relationships and this often leads to the woman's career being split between family commitments and work commitments. This is a generalised statement and of course there are always exceptions to the rules. There are male artists who may also be in the carer role, or who take up an alternative career path in order to support their partner.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

I think I've hinted at this above.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

I have seen women artists being criticised for their choice of subject matter by other women and I feel this is quite an odd situation. Anyone who's prepared to make a statement does so with the risk of being shot down. For every point of view there is a counterpoint. We need to respect different perspectives if we are going to encourage change. I'm a male artist, working in an organisational role. I want to hear the voices of others, whose experiences are different, so that I can understand what issues we face.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work

with? How do you know what artists are doing?

As an artist as well as a director I have a wide circle of artist acquaintances. I am particularly interested in seeing mid to late career artists who have not received the support that they deserve. These artists are often under-represented in collections and I note that many of these are women. Equally I am interested in emerging artists, particularly those from diverse backgrounds (class / race / gender). I find women artists are often the ones I find most interesting.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

Directors have a tough time. We are trying to ensure that we service all our audiences and supporters. I think more artists running organisations with support, skills and sufficient funding, would allow us to develop more opportunities.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Now that I'm not sure. Situations evolve over time or are created through revolution or adversity. It is great that we have so many powerful women now in the art world, but we should always strive for equality. A good artist is a good artist. We should have the confidence to take risks with artists.

Rung +
East Bristol Contemporary

East Bristol Contemporary (EBC) :

We are open to engaging with these issues but we are also aware of our position, as a space directed by two males. We're aware that our input lacks the

lived experience of female artists and producers, and initially were hesitant to contribute. But after Lexi from ULTRAS said that this was the typical response of male-led spaces she has approached, we thought we would give it a go. We have also invited RUNG who we work very closely with at ebc (as our sister publication) to comment on the questions and our responses, so that this becomes a conversation.

We have always endeavoured to ensure our programme represents the genuine diversity within the UK and Bristol itself — hopefully giving opportunities to those who may not have had them elsewhere.

It's important to model things on our audience, and to not favour one group over another. A young person, or any other visitor should be able to be interested in, maybe even identify with the artists in our shows, where their work comes from and the cultures they might be involved with.

We keep ourselves in check by ensuring we work with roughly 50% female artists. But we aren't tokenistic about this approach; not every show is 50 / 50. Some are exclusively female and hopefully we show a broad range of work reflecting the diversity within Bristol and the UK.

At ebc we have established a Night School in order to provide an accessible and inclusive alternative arts education strand in Bristol. We have students / artists of all ages and stages, orientations and ethnicities (most are female) enrolled onto the school, recent graduates, post MA, long term artists, post 16, and those that are just interested in doing something different on a Wednesday night.

As a response to the diversity of the students we feel it's really vital that the artists we programme for our talks and workshops to reflect this, and hope that we achieve this.

The minority of male students at the Night School is noticeable, this probably reflects badly on a generalised male approach to education, and could possibly be to do with men preferring to go it alone or not being so comfortable in a 'learning' environment — perhaps wanting to be on the other side of the teaching (to be teacher rather than taught, which is sad), or not viewing education or educational communities in the same way. Perhaps with many women taking the lead / advantage of these alternative arts education element, which is increasingly bubbling up in the UK, we will see some changes? How could this perhaps affect things later down the line?

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

RUNG:

NOHATcollective — art event organisers based in Bedford, UK. 'We are not going to wait to be invited in, we will take and make space for female artists. We want to show the work and ideas of women artist to as wide an audience as possible.' NOHAT work as a collective that support female artists, they recently came on to our radar as Yoke Collective (female led) worked with them at a performance event NOHAT-PAF.

The White Pube — challenging the male dominated art critique world

Many artist-led projects seem to be inhabited by women

Frustrated by the fact I don't know more about this, finding it hard to recall many approaches or groups which tackle this. But perhaps this is part of the problem?

EBC:

We feel Wysing has modelled things well by restructuring their residency programme — for artists with different needs, such as those with families. There are also other organisations now doing similar for female artist mothers.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

RUNG:

I have always thought that just living as an independent woman with goals and ideals of equality was enough, but then I realised this was almost a passive approach. There are plenty of reason why women might not progress the same way men do; child care, lack of confidence, lack on confidence in them projected from society, less opportunities, weighed down by wrong / negative opinions of feminism or what it means to be a feminist (there is not one definition either). From experience in art school there is a massive percentage of female students, and art structure in galleries are often female led but the top level and artists are mainly men, how does happen, at what level do people stop progressing? Sorry we are asking questions within your questions.

Equality is still an ideal rather than reality which is why women / society still need an active approach towards equality.

EBC :

There are more female students than male students at art school, yet there seems to be a 50 / 50 male / female split in emerging artists showing their work at artist led spaces. Clearly there's a drop off happening here - so there are real barriers. Perhaps this is because female artists are not fitting into communities after college for various reasons. We could guess at the factors that are at play here, but again are conscious that this may detract from the voices of women who have actual experience and should be listened to.

Strong messages are given to young and impressionable students at art school and faculties do have a responsibility to employ staff that are questioning this stuff- though it's difficult to change staff and establishment quickly. Underfunding makes it hard to change- but it still has to happen, and that sounds like an excuse.

RUNG :

I wish I had more experiences with inspiring female staff whilst at art school, I think Universities could do more to programme young female artists / visiting lecturers etc — getting them into sessions, to talk about ideas — perhaps this is happening at other art schools?

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

RUNG :

Unfortunately, I think that time has a large part to play in this.

I am part of this, when I see an artist name which is not strictly gendered then I often presume they are male, I don't know why I do this? I was given a name because my parents believed girls with 'boys' names do better in life. So, this idea of men succeeding over women is deeply rooted in society.

How do we encourage people, who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned, to participate in this conversation?

EBC :

I think this has wider societal roots, i.e. the erosion of left solidarity through years of hyper visibility online and at times really vicious identity politics. pp don't know what is ok to think / feel, and it is easier to stay quiet - rather than voice opinions, be challenged on them, and maybe change them. So, RE encouraging people to participate, i don't know. but maybe men need to talk to other men about it? and talk to women about it?

RUNG :

I agree there is a real fear with public criticising, when raising issues to men especially you can feel very ignored and unconsidered, sometimes even begin to question yourself whether your complaint is even valid? This questioning yourself / not believing in yourself due to male dominance is I guess deeply rooted within society. It's something I have felt, and I have questioned myself.

There needs to be clear, accessible support available. Easy to find.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

RUNG :

Our policy for selecting artists' works through running open calls and primarily advertising these online (Instagram, twitter, Facebook..) — thinking about who sees these things, our engagement on Instagram is 61% women and 39% men — we wonder if because we are women are we subconsciously attracting a female audience, or are women more engaged on Instagram? — going to google this now !

From our open calls we select artists — and have not considered gender as a selection criteria, when looking over our artists for issue 02 of rung we are working with more female artists, all of our curators are female except one.

In issue 01 of rung our curator split was more balanced between male / female, even though our criteria for selection has been the same for both issues

We do not want to say that we have been blind to gender in the selection process but it is something we have not looked at and have not selected artists based upon a quota that we have set.

EBC :

Approaching artists that we find interesting. BUT perhaps this contributes to an underlying structure

— i.e. if other spaces are showing majority male artists this shortens our scope RE female artists to choose from.

RUNG:

Agree and second this, does sometimes feel like you are blinkered, in the same way that Instagram being our biggest social network then of course we are going to work with more female artists.

EBC:

In the past we have put out a call for BME artists working in the South West so as to give those people a chance to have their work seen / heard. Maybe we / other spaces should do this for female artists? (do pp do this already? or is that done de facto when females run spaces?)

Part of our policy is working with women who take the lead on programming and curating exhibitions for us. In particular involving female artists in selecting and curating some of our open call exhibitions. We have also felt it important to work with recent female graduates who feed into our programme. We are aware that two men running the gallery can affect the way we work with artists in all sorts of ways. There may well be differences in attitudes, tastes, and outlooks that would be different if one of us was female, micro barriers that are very subtle; that could be as simple as one person feeling unintentionally intimidated by another. So our response to this is working in partnerships with women.

Our original publication (the forerunner to opening ebc) is now in the hands of two women who have previously worked with us in supportive roles at the gallery. We feel it's important to be a mutually supportive organisation and are conscious that there should be something for them that's all theirs — with real autonomy.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

EBC:

advocating for female artists.

RUNG:

More female led shows and more publicity for these — talking publicly about the changes being made (if / when!), talks and workshops at galleries promoting change

www.instagram.com/p/BuOwTVaLSHX this post is beyond infuriating to read as a woman. I think it shows the changes which are trying to be made by curator / directors but Michael's response to it shows a totally lack of understanding of any struggles surrounding the issue. The entire concept of sharing an opinion like this 'as a joke' totally highlights the lack of compassion and understanding many non-minorities have of positive discrimination.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

EBC:

Unionise? bloody revolution?

RUNG:

Hire more women in high up places who hold these values close, propose and initiate more female led initiatives, run workshops, female led callouts, talk about it.

**Anonymous
(Curator)**

Please excuse any generalisations.

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

I think that there are a pockets of voices and actions out there that are challenging marginalisation / inequality / disparities across various areas — calling for action and fair representation and opportunity whether about gender, sexuality, cultural backgrounds etc. These voices intermingle and overlap but all call for the same thing and that is to have fair opportunity, be heard and be equal. In the media there are obvious collectives such as Pussy Riot fighting hard / shouting with regard to feminism, LGBTQ rights and

challenging political status etc. There are other groups where an all-female professional approach is formed to provide support and nurture potential and opportunity such as AWITA (Assoc. of women in the arts). I think that there is a lot of talking, debating and potential policy work alongside pockets of activism but it feels like a slow burn and that the roots of inequality are entrenched without many even realising that they are there. In the arts I think that there are a number of quite influential and senior male arts professionals who appear to be directly targeting women artists with an ambition to give voice to them. Strangely there is something that worries me about this — I worry about careerism and ego, I worry about control and manipulation, I worry about trends.

Worth looking at #RadicalChildcare borne from a vision by Amy Martin of FAMALAM in Birmingham too.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

Well, unfortunately I still think it runs true that women aren't allowed (or don't allow themselves) the dedicated, single-minded focus that men have (of course this is a generalisation as there are some in all sectors who are like this, but often berated for it and quite often by other women unfortunately). Women are considered more empathetic and perhaps more aware of the impact their actions might have upon others, thereby perhaps sacrificing / compromising more. In the museum and gallery sector it is still the case that more women than men work within them but that men are usually in more senior roles. The CEO's and Directors, Chair of Boards able to steer their vision through others I think many women naturally want to involve other people in thinking and planning. I would say confidence is key. Women want to often feel armed and that they have all the facts / knowledge / experience etc before putting themselves forward. Men will often put themselves forward whether it is appropriate for them to do so or not. I have interviewed or shortlisted many candidates for all sorts of roles and I have noticed this a lot. Women often have to be the ones to plan and work around childcare, juggling and managing the pressures and strains of this. Costs of childcare in the UK are extortionate and there is not a good societal infrastructure to support working mothers. The arts is not a well-paid sector and it is likely that the male counterpart who works outside of this will

be paid better, may work away etc. However, as a working mother with a young child undertaking most of the childcare responsibilities I see this across all sectors. I am lucky in that I can work reasonably flexibly but it does impact on my energy levels and ability to work away etc.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

Yes I believe there is and things have been indoctrinated despite all the policies, discussions etc. It comes from our experiences from our roots upwards. It comes from capitalism and societal value choices.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

I think this is very tricky to answer actually and especially now with so much uncertainty surrounding us. Although not the same thing 'whistleblowing' is a legal right when the details that come to light are in the public interest but still, whistleblowers often become outcast or have to be hidden from view. I can only think that collective support, advocacy and strong ambassadorial voices (from both male and female voices) would be a positive approach giving the permission to those people to speak freely in any form.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

We have an exhibition policy that outlines an approach on various levels such as supporting practice within Wales, supporting both emerging and more established artistic careers while ensuring clear audience focus and engagement. All this is framed within our equal opportunities policy. Artists are selected both through invitation and open call (paid and unpaid). Opportunities are circulated widely and inclusively. Artists approach us as well although we do not programme generally through unsolicited proposals but are keen to be made aware of those practices we don't know about. Work by artists are seen through exhibitions / projects, open studios or through word of mouth and potentially followed up with focused studio visits.

Interestingly, our representation of female arts practices is higher than men.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

Listen to the grass roots and not make assumptions about what is wanted. Challenge the inequalities that are faced. Put careerism and self-promotion second to make way for opportunity for arts practice to thrive and to be fully inclusive.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Well, this is huge really. For things to become habit you have to do something for a concerted period of time. I think it's a continually drip-feed approach. Steady but constant. Challenging both the grass roots and the ears of the corn simultaneously. Working with rather than against, positive action.

This is a huge area of focus (but an important one). It ties in with ACW's new corporate plan about equality and opportunity (although largely focuses on the reach to audiences / participants with this regard). I hope that some of my comments are useful in feeding into the discussion. I look forward to hearing the greater discussion as it unfolds.

q39

(in conversation with Anthony Shapland, Cinzia Mutigli + Chris Brown)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

Helen Nisbet, for her ongoing work as a freelancer — she highlights how slow bigger organisations are at acting by curating projects across Britain that challenge some of the institutional structures that pin things down. Melina Birkenwald from URRRA, a residency scheme in Argentina that

supports childcare and family stays as part of what it offers to artists. Transition Gallery for its willingness to change and change again.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

There are so many external factors that still play a significant and active role in preventing female artists progressing in the same way that their male counterparts do. Some of these are tied up with expectation — the expectation of the artworld about how and when careers progress, the expectation of gendered role distribution within arts support structures and (in a hetero centric context) the historic expectations of familial responsibility. Many of these structures are institutionally / societally so entrenched that sometimes organisations curators and public / private funders and curators exhibit a bias without fully acknowledging that they are a part of it. These structures shape an art world where roles are presented back to artists at an early stage in their career that presents a distorted mirrored view of where those artists can see themselves.

In the specific context of q39. the ratio of male / female artists in degree level studies locally (70% F / 30% M) directly flips in the number of submissions that we (q39) have (30% F / 70% M) from artists for the exhibition programme and our question has always been why this is a case? We cannot ignore the fact that this is possibly connected with the way we are perceived as an organisation or how clear the invitation is made and can change that. But we also feel that this role expectation happens early on in education and perhaps takes a generation to play out. We have always, in the 20 years of q39, sought to rebalance this, presenting a programme that reflects the gender balance of the population. On a structural side of things we have also seen that the number of applications for gallery support roles and education roles is always higher from women, where the applications for tech jobs is higher from men. Admittedly we are a tiny artist led organisation but these ratios give us a good idea of what is happening elsewhere.

In Wales, the number of Director / Curator jobs across Portfolio organisations is fairly evenly matched (male / female), and better than the UK distribution which is encouraging. But while this is the case the balance within programming is still not there — which would point to institutional

assumptions / structural barriers in place. Also, we are not unaware of the alarming number of women who have had to leave Wales to be successful — Jessica Warboys, Alia Syed, Laura Ford, Bethan Huws, Phoebe Davies — not sure what that means but it might be significant that role models are not always highlighted strongly enough.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

Yes, and it should be challenged. Any organisation that does not regularly check-in that its curatorial demographic and structure and programming is working to address areas of inequality is contributing to that structural passivity.

Perhaps checking in is not all that's required here? Questioning as well as research awareness? The political and economic landscape we're working in currently is at a crucial point and people are looking very seriously and rigorously at what positive alternatives to existing ways of working and organising could look like — meanwhile there is an absence of any mainstream leadership in this respect. What are art organisations' and artists' roles in this? I think our willingness to take risks, innovate, lead rather than follow is an important part of how we remain at all useful and relevant beyond the gallery walls.

Noticing the gaps and using the programme to address them is an action that can begin to change this. The structures that have shaped organisations, as well as the programmes that generate dialogue should be seen as porous and strategic.

All organisations should also regularly check in with its audiences — who comes and why? That is to say, it is an organisation's duty to mirror society and to notice who it's not reflecting and act on that information. All of the industries that contribute to the underlying structures of the artworld should be challenging how they show work and who they show.

This is of course depending on its location and remit — we can't assume that every gallery exists for the same reason, galleries aren't just one massive franchise of provision where each space has the same aims, resources and catchment. Regional factors should be acknowledged, though 'regional' should never be synonymous with 'mediocre' (as it often has been used) in thinking or presentation.

We also need to start dismantling an outmoded measure of 'success' which has the lone — too often male — role at its centre. This is often something that comes up in mentoring and one-to-one sessions at g39, a sense of inadequacy or failure. The models of a 'successful' artist that we are educated on are built on the idea of a sole practitioner at the top of a ladder of progression. To get the top of that career structure they will usually have showed with smaller galleries before validation (curatorially and critically) from peers to move them to the next level. At that level a curator, having seen the validation of other curators will boost the career of the artist. In turn this gathers the attention of collectors, who boost the artist further. Galleries / curators go from regional to international and onto further critical platforms. Their work will be collected and preserved as part of the 'canon'.

This is what we understand to be a successful artist and when we (the 99%) fall short of this model we 'failed'. If my ambition is to have a film screened in Harlech cinema, then once I have achieved that I have been 'successful'? Bad example but I think the pattern of behaviour around success and failure needs to be unpicked — across the board.

I'm not sure what to do with this but it seems that success (or otherwise) should be measured against ambition and also another 'shape' for progression should be promoted — a more amorphous shape. Something organic not manufactured through a system, something human. Women, perhaps for the reasons set out here and previously, fall foul of the problems of this idea of success more than men. However, it could be powerfully beneficial to the confidence of all people who hope to be artists to have a different idea presented (this is one way in which feminism isn't just for women!). People have family pressures, cultural pressures, people become ill, people have children, people have financial issues, emotional problems. All of these things as well as others have an interrupting impact on the idea of a linear progression from early career to established artist showing internationally. If these interruptions were seen as inevitable and people were given more opportunity to re-enter their artistic career at any point, then maybe more (especially women) would continue. This means evaluating and re-evaluating how we support artists through our programmes.

How do we encourage people who fear they will

be publicly criticized and condemned to participate in this conversation?

Gender equality is part of a wider debate about equality and is one that everyone should be part of — on a personal, professional and political level.

The contemporary tendency of making debate or discussion absolute, of generating entrenched positions that are inviolate and absolute is strangling discussion — and we need it more than ever. We have to give people the room to change their minds, to move their position and to start to acknowledge that listening to each argument / debate and changing an opinion is an intelligent approach. Stuff is complex and adversarial platforms of dialogue seem to stop discussion (and as a result, action). Our policy at g39 is to act on what we see is the right thing to do (rather than labelling / virtue signalling / ghettoising that we are doing it). We know that there is work to do, and that we need to properly understand where we have been making assumptions — we need to listen, and we need to be conscious of our own bias.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

We are a bit different in our approach (which has grown with us) in that we often have an ongoing open call for people to send work. Alongside these we invite artists on occasion. From this we try and aim for 60% Wales / Welsh artists mixed with 40% further afield, to act as a conduit of dialogue in Wales. This might seem strange to a lot of organisations, but it was / is to address a lack of cohesion and visibility of artists in Wales, especially true at the time we started in 1997, when contemporary artists were always from elsewhere.

We look at what people have done, but more importantly at what their trajectory is, what they might do next. These all exist on a big spider diagram over a long period. The curatorial threads start when you find connections between people and evolve over time. We look at their work first, writing second, qualifications / cv last. They are showing first and foremost as artists, alongside the complex and overlaid sets of identities that we also carry with us, but they are in the programme for the quality of what they do. We check statistical figures year on year to ensure that we are providing a balanced reflection of the visual arts sector and are proud to have kept a good track record of doing so over our twenty years as an organisation.

What do you think directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

They should be held accountable for implementing this: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

We need (collectively) to recognise that an open door is not the same as an invitation and that there are repeated barriers for different groups to access the support they need, and that people are more complex than is often (strictly) assumed by the categorisation systems that we are still using. In our experience most people are a sort of Venn diagram of overlapping influences, struggles, beliefs.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

Although quotas are sometimes a bit odd, we should be holding galleries to account, as above. Galleries, public funding bodies, collectors, private trusts and foundations. I still struggle with balancing the equalities act with positive discrimination (the two positions seem to negate each other) but a degree of rebalancing definitely needs to be taking place in order to bring us anywhere near equality. Also, by thinking differently about things like 'success' and innovating ways of working and organising that disrupt existing structures. Advocating best practice. Challenging and influencing decision maker in positions of political power.

Charlie Levine
(Independent Curator)

What kind of approaches / models / groups are you aware of that are changing the status quo?

Publications such as Galdem, Rooted, A-Z

Magazines are really making big changes in the representation of women and promoting better / more visible diversity, along with podcasts such as The Guilty Feminist, organisations like All Bright and people like Jameela Jamil. The 2018 centenary celebrations of the Representation of the Peoples Act really helped bring the conversation to a popular / wide audience. Popular movies and TV shows are starting to encourage the conversation — Oceans 8, Killing Eve etc are challenging the norm. The conversations are then continued on social media, on the red carpet and in the press. I think popular culture is promoting the conversation to more people and this has been reflected in the arts, architecture, design worlds, as well. It's an important time for women to be heard and seen, especially through the media, and I think that's where it starts. Once we read about it and hear other women talking about the issues that surround people who identify as female, the more power is given to others and the more momentum is created to encourage positive changes — the confidence of the few helps the many have a voice. I am happy to see there's also been a shift in senior management roles in the creative industries with women of all backgrounds being promoted. It's happening slowly, and there is still a huge amount to do.

What is it that holds women back? Why do women not progress in the same way as men do?

History, tradition, people hiring like for like and the majority of senior positions still being held by white cis males, are all holding women back. The fact that change takes time, that women are still massively objectified and silenced in the media and in board rooms and thus in every other room. That people who identify as female still do not have equality, that women's bodies are still not 100% their own, that women are viewed / used as pawns in politics and the media. That women lack self confidence is still an issue. That women don't believe in the power of their voices (individually and in a group), that women have been told since birth that they are second rate citizens, that society has not caught up with equality, that women are taught their emotions are a negative, and that women are told they're not strong enough and that female bodies are imperfect, are all holding women back. Some of this might be seen as generalisation but all are valid I think.

Could the notion of an 'underlying structure' be challenged? What is it and how are we all part of it?

The notion of an 'underlying structure' needs to be challenged, and we need to constantly change, question and adapt, especially in the West Midlands. There are a lot of strong women in the cultural sector in Birmingham but they don't necessarily get the recognition they deserve. Birmingham is a very diverse city, which is not represented in our arts organisations — something all UK arts organisations need to address.

How do we encourage people who fear they will be publicly criticised and condemned to participate in this conversation?

This happened to me while I was working in Birmingham and I think the bullying of people online definitely silences a lot of voices, something I have been speaking to arts management professional Charlotte Knowles about recently. I would say it is going to be very difficult to encourage people to speak out more, and it needs to start in schools and Universities, and then into the art world. Having experience of it, I know the struggle of the fear of your own opinion. It should not be a case of 'they who shout the loudest' (something I was told once by a leading woman in Brum art scene) but rather through empathy, a willingness to listen and respecting each other's opinions. Conversation and debate is healthy and should be encouraged, especially in art criticism, but attacking someone for sharing a thought about this field, should not be. Collaboration and co-discussion is important to a thriving and diverse art scene.

What is your policy on selecting artists to work with? How do you know what artists are doing?

I am a feminist and an advocate of working with diverse people. I don't always succeed as much as I would like to, which is something I am working on. I regret not being more diverse in my curatorial past, however, I am consciously changing and wanting to creatively tackle more prominent social issues and give under represented voices a platform.

What do you think (male) directors should be doing to support the changes that need to happen in the art world?

I am in an unusual position — as a woman I am a minority, however, I am working from the point of being white and educated to HE level, so I am privileged within this minority. It is important that I proactively create opportunities and platforms for those who do not so readily / easily have the same opportunities as I do, and to help showcase their talents / creative thoughts / outputs — and sometimes this has to be at the expense of my experience / opportunity. We all have to share more; we need to be open about partnerships, collaborations and opportunities and know when we are not the right person for the job, or see where there is a need for better diversity and open that opportunity up. I think Directors need to be doing this. It is about diversifying work forces, it's about giving opportunities to those who couldn't go to top performing universities in London, but work hard and are equally as skilled. It's the thought that once representative people are in positions of power the next generation can see themselves in those roles and aspire. The cultural sector is in a precarious position, there's no money, organisations are closing down, and engagement is an ever-growing priority / need. We need better support networks in place and better, more inclusive, routes into the creative industries. We need to diversify work forces and promote artworks produced by under represented artists. We need to ask Directors to stop making small changes and make big ones instead, it is the time of big change (Brexit / Trump) and we need to make positive ones in the Creative Industries.

There is plenty of awareness around this topic, it isn't anything new, so how do we ensure the debate doesn't just remain a debate, but gets put into practice?

We have to demand people in positions of power, people with the money, people in senior positions to be aware and improve their behaviour. I went to a meeting with a University Dean a few months ago and when I arrived, he opens his door and says 'well, this is already getting off to a bad start, I was expecting a man.' Needless to say I cut the meeting short after 20 minutes and left, as this is unacceptable presumptive behaviour. We need to be open about things like this, we need to have confidence in our voices and not be afraid of 'making a fuss'. We have to make large organisations take responsibility for initiating real change, we need to demand that positive change happens and be leaders in that change.