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Survey on Gender Ratios in Curating Programs

Suhail Malik

Invited to speak to a number of postgraduate curating programs in Europe and the United States, we have been struck by the fact that the student cohorts are overwhelmingly female. Since this characteristic lopsided gender ratio is not shared by fine art or many other programs in art education (to such an extreme degree, at least) two questions quickly follow: (1) Is this anecdotally derived sense of imbalance supported by more sustained and intimate knowledge? and, (2) If so, why are such programs so skewed in numbers toward women (in the student base anyway)? In starker formulation: What is it about the curating of contemporary art today that decides such a gendering of its education?

Unwilling (not to mention incompetent) to generate a rock-solid sociological survey of the issues here—a form of “curatorial knowledge” other than the one said to be produced by curating itself—the most we could ask for at this preliminary stage of bringing the issue into focus was informed public speculation. The obvious people of whom to ask the first of the questions above were the directors of the curating programs at issue here. And it seemed to us that with their close and developing understanding of the expectations of their participating students, as well as the role their programs play in the rapidly changing field of institutional and independent curating, these individuals / organizations were also well-placed to take up the second question. Expert commentary is in our view not a bad way to kick-start a discussion that needs to go much further, regarding not only the specific issue of highly gendered expectations and recruitment of curating programs but also much of what that issue conveys and exposes of the sociology of the contemporary art system.

The questions posed are as straightforward as we could formulate them. They are:

1. Has there been a noticeable gender imbalance on your program?
2. What do you think determines the above ratio?
3. Do you understand there to be different professional expectations—in training, career path, and modes of operation—between men and women curators?

The questions were e-mailed to directors or senior faculty of the curating programs at CCA (San Francisco), CCS Bard (New York), de Appel (Amsterdam), Goldsmiths (London), Magasin (Grenoble), and the academies in Leipzig and Zurich. We received replies from the first four listed here, presented below in alphabetical order of the respondents' surnames, and one further response in the form of an interview from Dorothee Richter at Zurich that we did not incorporate into the format presented here. We also asked a number of alumni/ae from several of these programs for anonymous comments, but we did not gather enough responses to pursue this track of investigation at this point.

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A caveat in advance of the responses: the survey was met with some hesitation and important qualification from all respondents. The trepidation stemmed not so much from drawing attention to a straightforward political sociology of gender in the contemporary art system (in which curatorial

education has an admittedly very particular aspect), but more from the survey's reliance and even insistence on blunt categories of gender and representation (does the preponderance of young women in curating graduate programs really say anything at all about the expectations, power assumptions, and career structures of the contemporary art system? Are we not beyond these regressive formations, even considering the issue in such blunt ways?)

Furthermore, in moving from a quantitative account of gender ratios to speculation on power and institutional structures, the questions' formulations invite generalization and stereotyping that go against the nuanced and mobile understanding and knowledge to which contemporary art contributes. However, for all the insight and complexities elaborated in the content and subject matter of our discourses and the art we are involved with, the survey has the virtue of indexing how very traditional patterns continue to be so firmly entrenched in the sociology of the art system generally—and the figure and expectations of the curator more especially. An immediate example: while the gender imbalances in curating programs are well known in the curatorial and educational field they are to date not widely discussed in public and remain without widely accepted answers.

A further difficulty with which we purposely wanted to engage was the scope of these questions, which, of course is not limited to the narrow issue of who attends such programs but extends to the social configuration of the contemporary art system. As such the questions reflect a myriad of conditions including the requirement of acknowledged and reputable schooling for career advancement for some and not others; the varying expectations of different kinds of emerging curators on the need and provision of such programs; the gendering of roles; and the assumptions of the professional "solidity" or not of new curators in relation to critical, academic, and professional training. This last is probably the most contentious and awkward aspect of the survey, since it raises the issue of the continued institutional, if not personal, sexism in the contemporary art system. As noted, such sexism certainly goes against contemporary art as a cultural field that takes itself to be highly alert and responsive to specious, if not repressive, stabilizing pressures of all kinds (social, material, formal, etc.). But this content-based claim for contemporary art is not the same as its social practice, whether configured formally through its institutions or informally through networks, friendships, and (not only elite) cliques. Rather, it may be that despite their sincerely wrought advances, the theoretical-political demands of contemporary art's critical understanding serve to offset and exculpate the generally abysmal gender inequality in position, wealth, and what might be called exhibition-power in contemporary art.

We now invite further responses to our survey from those contributing to curating programs as students, teachers, and alumni/ae, and those in the institutional or independent art field. Please forward information, observations, and other comments to zolghadr@bard.edu for inclusion in a follow-up discussion piece.

Survey

1. Has there been a noticeable gender imbalance on your program?

Johanna Burton (Director, Graduate Program, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College): Of course. Curatorial courses—to say nothing of other graduate programs in the humanities—are famously unbalanced. During my years as a graduate student in art history, the ratio was invariably 5 (women) to 1 (man) in terms of student numbers. It goes without saying that the ratio of students going on to secure jobs does not correspond; in my experience, that is to say, the number of men hired to professorships or curatorial posts has been exceedingly high, especially considering the female-heavy pools from which candidates are drawn.

I'm not so interested in weighing in on the competencies of male candidates relative to their female counterparts in the market, since this is—and must be—a case-by-case matter. That said, and assuming—as I do—that men are not inherently better equipped than women, it is of note that female students outnumber male students by at least 500 percent in most instances, yet they often represent 50 percent or less of any given professional context.

Nathalie Hartjes (Coordinator, Curatorial Programme & Gallerist Programme, de Appel Arts Centre): Absolutely. From the very beginning we [at de Appel] have had more female than male participants. The program yearly accepts six individuals. Since its inception there have been only two years in which there was an equal male-female ratio of 3:3.

Leigh Markopoulos (Chair, Curatorial Practice MA Program, California College of the Arts): Yes, in favor of women. For the [CCA] class of 2010, for example, which comprised 12 women, only women applied (and we received a huge number of applications). Our most favorable ratio was for the class of 2011; that cohort comprised five women and three men. In the class we just graduated, we had 14 students, two of whom were male; this is the more usual ratio.

Helena Reckitt (MFA Curating, Goldsmiths, University of London): The Goldsmiths MFA curating course is strongly female-dominated. Since I started teaching here in January 2011, the ratio of female to male students has been approximately 4:1.

2. What do you think determines the above ratio?

Burton, CCS Bard: The persistence of deeply held, if outmoded and even somewhat unconscious, beliefs that link the arts and extended discourses around the arts to those aspects of culture deemed nonessential. While curatorial practice has, in the last two decades, assumed a much more visible role, and with that a kind of tangible intellectual prowess, assumptions around the nature of certain modes of production still hold. The ratio under discussion is hardly unique to curatorial courses, as I begin to discuss above. The liberal arts, for all their visibility, are assumed to labor outside of immediate urgency (that ascribed to the sciences, for instance), and so are still coded as luxurious pursuits. Female students and practitioners (myself included) do not, for the most part, identify with such reductive bourgeois associations. Indeed, what I describe here does not explain the presence of so many female students—on the contrary, it explains the absence of more male students. That men often assume the most powerful institutional roles in cultural institutions simply affirms that within any eco-system (however it signifies more broadly) familiar gendered rules apply.

Hartjes, de Appel: I find that difficult to state, as it is a guess based on the motivations of the individuals who do apply, and not those who don't. The inequality is already visible in the applications: we get far more women applying than men. De Appel's program relies very much on collaboration and exchange. I find it weird to say that is a feminine interest, but it could play a part. The idea of working with a group so intensely might not appeal to a competitive attitude usually identified as "male"; however, it must be said that this by no means implies that our women participants are pushovers!

Also, it seems that overall, female applicants put more care and thought into their applications, which translates to the selection process. Men tend to be a bit more nonchalant or sloppy (this is a broad generalization, of course!), and sometimes a bit overbearing or pushy. During the interview process it does seem that men are more affected by their nerves than their female counterparts.

Markopolous, CCA: Female students seem to want to be as prepared as possible before they embark on their careers; they are as ambitious as their male counterparts, but they feel the need for intellectual

legitimization through study. Men seem to be more confident about gaining experience in the field, and on the job.

Reckitt, Goldsmiths: Rather than making the group work on one exhibition together, our course encourages students to develop their own independent curatorial research and projects. For female students in particular, taking time out to clarify and deepen their curatorial interests seems really valuable. It helps them to avoid getting stuck in a traditionally female “supportive” role, or to be overly responsive to institutional demands. It enables them to define what kind of curator they are, and what kind of curator they want to be.

The discursive nature of the program fosters a spirit of curiosity and self-reflexivity. Students learn from one another as much as—if not more than—from their teachers. This creates a peer group that, as a graduate of the course recently told me, offers “a global support network and personal advisory board for my work.”

Marketing—yourself and your ideas—is an essential component of being a curator today. This skill, important for curators working in institutions where they have to convince colleagues of their ideas and raise funds for their projects, is even more necessary for independent curators, whose very livelihoods depend on their promoting themselves and their ideas—what the writer Barbara Ehrenreich calls “the brand called you.” Putting their full affective powers to use, independent curators need to accumulate what Isabelle Graw calls “contact capital.” This kind of self-promotion can be especially difficult for women, who have internalized social mores about taking a facilitating role in relation to the artist, whom they are conditioned to identify and advocate for.

Students often form curatorial groups or collaborations during and after the course. Working as part of a collective effort provides a valuable sense of kinship and context for curatorial work: the feeling that you are working as part of something rather than in isolation. It also, I suspect, helps to stave off the disappointments of rejection that are an inevitable part of being a curator. If your projects are turned down, it’s not you and your ideas that are dismissed, but those of the group.

Considering the gender balance in curatorial education, a former teacher in the program argued that emerging male curators don’t seem to need the validation of a curating degree to the extent that women do. No doubt the underlying male-domination of our culture contributes to women’s comparatively lower sense of confidence and entitlement.

Traditionally, women working in the art field tend to get stuck in “assistant” positions (curatorial assistant, assistant curator, etc.) and do not progress through the ranks with the same ease as men. Many of our students enroll at this stage of their careers. They have gained several years’ experience but feel confined to a supporting, administrative role, which is, of course, classically female. Pleasingly, this situation seems to be changing. In London, women direct many key contemporary spaces, from the Whitechapel to the Serpentine Galleries, Camden Arts Centre to the Barbican. Tate Britain has its first female director, and Tate as a whole has a number of influential female curators. Some of these women are even feminists! And they prioritize the work of female artists in their programming. (In New York, MoMA’s reorientation toward women artists in the collection, under the feminist guidance of curator Connie Butler, is interesting in this respect.) Outside of London, things are a bit different [in the UK]. And most of the big collecting institutions are still run by men. But this recent change in personnel does suggest that the hard work of women who have risen through the ranks to the top of art institutions is starting to pay off.

3. Do you understand there to be different professional expectations—in training, career path, and modes

of operation—between men and women curators?

Burton, CCS: I'm not sure whose expectations precisely you ask us to weigh in on here. Questions one and two address larger operations in and around the curatorial field. Question three does something else. What any given student, curator, artist, or director might "expect" professionally or otherwise bears very directly on their context and background, to say nothing of their personality, class background, and experiences of "expecting" over decades of life. Essentializing expectations is tantamount to biological or social determinism and, I fear, will lead to answers that put forward how much more "confident" are male students than female students, etc. Part of our jobs as curators and educators is to teach students how to expect differently: how to demand, in fact, different behaviors, operations, and—yes—ratios.

Hartje, de Appel: Possibly. I would judge that women might be more careful to "prepare" themselves and gather "proof" to establish themselves. It might be more of a thing for men to just go for it, and not be bothered by certain expectations. But then again, I think de Appel is actually a bad example for this motivation, as de Appel cannot offer any academic accreditation, only its reputation and the connection to our network of alumni/ae.

Markopolous, CCA: Despite [the response to Question 2 above], I do not understand there to be different professional expectations as regards to training. However, I do feel that modes of operation and career paths are unequal, as reflected in the gender imbalance at the top of the independent-curator ladder. There seem to be many more men in the top museum director and curatorial positions, and most certainly many more men active as successfully independent curators. In addition, it seems clear that most press coverage is generated by the most engaging, controversial, or flamboyant curators and directors, and that these happen to be, for the most part, men. (Which is not to say that these curatorial celebrities are not in any way good, or even great, curators.)

We see this also in the different approaches to teaching and classroom behavior adopted by male and female guest faculty, and in the difference in the respective practices and career trajectories that they present. Many male guest lecturers are comfortable improvising their seminars, and allowing their class to take a more organic and wide-ranging form, rather than adhering to any proscribed curriculum or advertised content. Most female guest lecturers tend to be very concerned about ensuring that value has been delivered and that a structure (as regards both content and timing) is in place for the sessions. The students identify these and other differences themselves but rarely complain about them, accepting them rather as a kind of fact of nature. For example, on one occasion, a woman curator tried something extremely experimental for a public lecture and was resolutely criticized by students and audience alike, which seems strange in light of the fact that male curators more often try something experimental (a *séance*, for example, or a fictional account) and that this is expected, and, if not always appreciated, then at least tolerated.

Reckitt, Goldsmiths: The very idea of the independent curator was defined by men with big personalities and concomitant "big ideas" like Harald Szeemann, Seth Siegelaub, Kasper König, or Germano Celant. Especially where contemporary art is concerned, the field has been much more receptive to maverick male curators, to those who come from non-art or non-art historical backgrounds but who have something of the impresario about them. Very few female curators have risen to prominent positions without solid professional or academic credentials. In the case of maverick, mostly male figures, their lack of traditional training seems not to work against them. Quite the opposite: it enables them to accrue some of the charisma and star power of the artist.

Despite the evidence of women in key curatorial and directorial positions, women working in public institutions still often get stuck at the level of assisting. In the commercial art world, young women are

hired for front desk positions on the basis of stereotypically female traits of diplomacy, hospitality, and charm (although these “gallery girls” are increasingly men). This is surely why the confidence offered by a master’s degree in curating, coupled with the collegial spirit it can engender, is so much more appealing to emerging women curators than it is to their male peers.

Suhail Malik writes and teaches in the Department of Art, Goldsmiths, London. He is currently visiting faculty at CCS Bard.

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