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Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Transcript #66 Why Gender Progress is a Myth



Guest William N. Goetzmann with co-host Julia Halperin. Photo by Matthew Magelof

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Charlotte Burns: Hello and welcome to *In Other Words*, where we cover everything you ever wanted to know about the art world but didn't know who to ask. I'm your host, Charlotte Burns, and today we will be discussing "Women's Place in the Art World: Why Recent Advancements for Female Artists Are Largely an Illusion".

This is a major study that we published just recently in collaboration with [artnet News](#), looking at the representation of women artists in U.S. museums and the international art market. Today we'll take you through the report, its reception, and head towards some possible remedies for the persistent problems we've uncovered.

I'm joined today by my co-author on the report, [Julia Halperin](#), the executive editor of *artnet News*.

Julia Halperin: *There is a learning curve, and there's more appetite for easy stuff that has a mass audience.*

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, a director at [Jack Shainman Gallery](#).

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: *Bodies in the room doesn't change the structure and the impact of what we've always learned about our history, and what we've always learned to be important and valuable, and how to even see.*

And [Will Goetzmann](#), a professor of finance at the [Yale School of Management](#) and the author of "[Art and Gender: Market Bias or Selection Bias?](#)"

William Goetzmann: *The process of curation, of art history, of criticism, it has just ceded the ground to this art as investment.*

If you want to know more about the report itself, head on over to [artagencypartners.com](#) where you can download our special issue and subscribe to our *In Other Words* newsletter. But now, onto today's show.

So, first of all, we'll hit you in the face with some of the numbers, I guess. We spoke to 26 museums. We asked them for data from ten calendar years—from the beginning of 2008 to the end of 2018—about the acquisitions and exhibitions of work by women artists. We examined a cross section of museums, geographically and in terms of scale and budget so that we could deliberately have a broad sense of what was going on in the U.S.

We found that 11% of all work acquired by those institutions for their permanent collections was by female artists. Worse still, the data showed that there'd been no progress. Acquisitions actually peaked in 2009.

14% of all the exhibitions were of work by female artists. We ran those names through [artnet Price Database](#) and found that 2% of the global art auction spending was on work by women. And that was from 2008 through mid-2019. The market had doubled, but it's still only 2%. It's \$4bn.

Five artists comprise 41% of the market share for all female artists. There are several other bits of data that we'll go through as we go into the report. But they're the headline numbers.

What were your reactions to that data? Was that what we expected to find? Julia, what did you think when we were uncovering this?

Julia Halperin: I was quite surprised. I expected it to be low. I expected the figures for acquisitions and exhibitions to be far below 50%, but I think the thing that really surprised me was the fact that there had been no improvement. The reason that we did this in the first place in part was because we felt like there was change and we wanted to measure that change. And so, to actually get into the numbers and realize that there was no change to measure was pretty disheartening.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. I remember looking at the data with you and going, "So let's look at this trend. Wait, there's no trend. We can't track the beginning of a trend line."

We spoke to a consultant at one stage who said, "These numbers—data is difficult for people to swallow. You want to give them a story like, 'In 2060 we'll finally have parity.'" And we realized we couldn't write that story because there was no, "In X year we'll have parity," because there is no movement towards that in terms of the acquisitions.

Will and Joeonna, what were your takes on this?

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: I came into it thinking—in agreement with what Julia said—expecting it to be low, but being really shocked that there was really no movement at all. I think I come to it with an inherent distrust of myths of progress. But I do think it's really interesting to think about how our expectations were not met and how we really think about ourselves and the art market and the art world—beacons of progress and movement forward—and how that is just simply not the case. And how important it is to have numbers to really nail that in.

Charlotte Burns: The art world is not familiar really with numbers, and we realized part of this is a complete discomfort. The institutions haven't really been tracking progress in this way. Only one institution had the numbers readily to hand and that was [Dia \[Art Foundation\]](#). Everybody else had to work to get them.

People haven't really been tracking progress. That was the same thing we found last year when we looked at the representation of African American artists. It was a new exercise, and it was a difficult one for most museums.

And, actually, part of this is illiteracy. There is a way in which numbers are not part of the conversation in the art world. So, it's difficult to have that factual conversation.

Will, you deal in numbers all the time. You're much more familiar. Were these figures shocking to you?

William Goetzmann: Well, first of all, it's great that you collected the data because although there are anecdotes and there

are casual analyses, to have that comprehensive look is just really terrific because it helps us benchmark where we are now.

When I looked at this I was surprised because in my work, what I found is that there has been a long-term trend towards parity in graduates of getting MFAs—gender parity. And that at least for the [Yale art school](#) was achieved in in the early 1980s. So, you'd think from the early 1980s forward there should be some parity in terms of the shows that men and women have and so on.

Again, this painful consistency in the ratio... I have a hard time reconciling that with an awareness since the 1980s that there's a disparity.

Charlotte Burns: What we're talking about here is the perception gap. The idea that things have changed more than they have. Especially in the art world, there is a sense that we're sort of a progressive liberal bastion—and actually, we're lagging behind other industries when it comes to key issues of representation.

Julia Halperin: It's funny, I had sort of another reality check about the perception versus reality thing after the report came out and I was talking to my mom, who was recounting a conversation she had with a friend who had just been to [Crystal Bridges](#). She was saying, "Oh, well I think Crystal Bridges is doing really well actually. My friend was telling me that they had a bunch of amazing works by women in their permanent collection." And then I pulled up our spreadsheet and I was like, "Actually, Crystal Bridges is one of the lowest totals in terms of acquisitions of the museums we examined."

It made me realize that part of it is that we're so used to not seeing work by women incorporated in a really natural way that when we do see one or two, it sort of sways our perception more than the reality of the actual numbers.

So, if you see a huge work by [Louise Bourgeois](#) in a sculpture gallery where you're normally used to seeing only men from the same period, it's going to stick in your mind longer. Even though the numbers are still really stilted.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Like if you hear a whisper for the first time, it sounds like a scream.

Julia Halperin: Right.

Charlotte Burns: This is something that [Hamza Walker](#), the L.A.-based curator talked about last year. I think it's really relevant here, this idea of totemic events. If you see work by a woman incorporated into a museum collection, if you see work by African American artists incorporated, it feels radical and new and therefore it kind of stands out as an outsized normalcy.

I was talking to a curator at the [Whitney Museum](#), which didn't take part in our survey. We asked them to, but they felt they didn't have time. They were pointing to the opening of their exhibition and talking about how things had changed and saying they had a room of Ab-Ex artists and they'd had a big work by [Lee Krasner](#) in the middle of that room. And that was a conscious decision to put that work there and signify that this was a central, powerful wall that you could give that space to. And that was a deliberate statement they made.

My question was, "Why just one?" That's great. But there should be more work by more of those women. And great to give one woman that work, but actually that sort of gesture—whilst appreciated—remains gestural until it's more embedded.

William Goetzmann: I think that some of this is due to market forces. Over the last 20 years or so there's just been an increasing focus on superstar artists. That, I think, is because of the question of whether or not you can resell. Is there going to be a market? If I buy a work of art, is there going to be a market when I want to sell it? This notion that you may want to turn it over, that you treat the art like any other investment.

What's happened in many different areas of collectibles is a focus on the few key artists or objects that everybody else wants. That's really worked to the detriment of gender equality in art because although there are a few female superstars, the barrier is still there for reaching out and recognizing artists whose work is very high quality but who just haven't hit certain benchmarks at auction, the million-dollar benchmark and so on. That's a kind of a glass ceiling issue that is driven by economics and not by consideration of the aesthetics.

Charlotte Burns: I want to take us actually into the market here from that point, Will, but before we do: a quick detour to this idea of representation and superstar effects. One of the things that artists said to us was that they don't get the same opportunities. [Cathy Opie](#) talked to us about the fact that she's had curators come to her studio—and she said never in her career has she had a curator say, "I'd love to show this new body of work you're doing." And she pointed to her male peers and said they get museum shows of new work all the time.

That feeds into this perception gap. The idea that the male artists are continuing to be dynamic, making new work, innovating, forging forwards. It also creates more of a market event if you as a gallery can send out to your collectors that this artist has another museum show, it's a new body of work, that creates more of an event to hang sales onto. A publication, a dinner, all those kinds of things that help build support and galvanize belief in the artist: women say that

they're lacking those opportunities.

Cathy was saying she just gets retrospectives, and that's great. She's glad to have them, but it's kind of a flattening of the narrative. It kind of puts a full stop to the production and makes it a done deal rather than as a ceaseless search forwards to creativity.

Into the market—we said the figures earlier—just 2% of the market at auction was work by women artists. The superstar effect, Will: we found that 41% of the entire market for women was comprised of sales of work by just five female artists. Julia, do you want to talk us through that a little bit?

Julia Halperin: Sure. You can see the superstar effect really, really strongly in that figure, especially when you compare it to the companion figure for work by men, which was around 8%. You can see that sales are distributed a bit more equitably across that group. Granted, it's a lot larger of a group because there are a lot more men who have traded at auction than women. But you can see that the dynamic is this incredible sort of hurting around these top names for women. And then a vast swath that make a tiny fraction of that.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, and I think a figure you uncovered was that works by [Pablo Picasso](#) sold for more at auction over the past ten years—almost a billion dollars more—than every single female artist in our database.

Julia Halperin: That was really a bummer. And that's about 6,000 women.

William Goetzmann: This definitely resonates with the kind of research that I've been doing with my coauthors [Laurie Cameron](#) and [Milad Nozari](#). We took a very specific group of artists: all of the artists that got MFAs from the Yale School of Art from 1892 forward. That was a group where you know they signaled they wanted to be professional artists. What we did is we looked at the superstar effect between the men and the women. We had about 4,000 artists in the sample. Something like 20% of them were women.

There, we were able to look at the drop-off after the first five, after the first ten—and how intense the superstar effect is.

We found, just as you've described, that the superstar effect is much stronger for women than it is for the men in the samples. There's statistical evidence to back that notion up of just a couple of representative artists that have made it into the canon.

Charlotte Burns: One of the things that came up in the [post-data interviews](#) is that curators were saying to us that they found it difficult to galvanize support for work of artists that they wanted to bring into the collection, female artists. One curator gave us an example that their institution had staged a groundbreaking exhibition of work by an overlooked elderly female artist, and to great acclaim. The exhibition had been a success by all measures.

When she was presenting that work to the acquisitions committee to buy, they balked because they felt that despite all these other indicators of success that they themselves had created, they didn't believe in the work enough to buy it because they felt that it didn't have the auction comparables. The work was actually in the market, and apparently that's quite unusual because often you're dealing directly with the heirs or the artists, which can be more delicate. This work was with a gallery—so it was officially in the market.

The acquisitions committee felt that it wasn't something that they could stand behind. They didn't understand the validity of that price. And so, in the end, she says they actually chose to buy a work by a young white male artist who was having a moment in the market. There was a sense that, "We need to move quickly on this if we want to get it into the collection. We don't need to move so quickly on this woman who's been around for like nine decades so what's another couple of years going to do?"

We thought, "Is that just one institution?" And we spoke to a lot of curators and they said, yeah, this is an experience they've had. That trying to convince people of the value of that work is difficult.

But, Joeonna, that relationship between curators, collectors, artists—you're at the intersection of those in your position at the gallery. Can you talk a little bit more about those relationships? Who's taking the lead?

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Yeah, I mean, I think the one thing we talked about recently is that there have been an increase in instances where collectors have approached me about women artists and started the conversation, then bringing in the curator that they were hoping to support for an acquisition. And usually it's the other way around.

I think that's an interesting shift. I do think it has to do with specific artists, and also the superstar effect and the desperation to get access to certain works.

But it's a little disheartening, especially if it's artists that I've been having conversations with all of the curators about for years. To wait for what feels like it might be a little bit of a moment—although the data perhaps shows otherwise—but it

feels like that is starting to push these works into institutional collections at a rate that previously wasn't possible.

Julia Halperin: It makes me wonder, too, if that's a particular example where the perception gap actually works in favor of women artists. Because especially young male white artists have benefited from this sense of scarcity and urgency for so long. This idea that if you don't get it now the prices are going to shoot up and you're going to be priced out. I wonder if the fact that there is a perception that the market is changing more quickly than it is for work by women, or at least not in general but maybe a few particular cases here and there, that that creates this same sense of urgency that maybe pushes people to move more quickly than they would have in the past.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Mm-hmm. Yes. I'm no economist, but I think that they would say that perception has a lot to do with the way that markets move. But I don't know how that works out with the data that we have in front of us.

Charlotte Burns: It also speaks a little bit, I think, to institutional timidity. What you're talking about is that curators are waiting for collectors to put their money behind it before they have faith in those artists. And that's not really the way it's meant to work.

This idea of being priced out: what you're talking about is that you're talking to curators for a period of time about these artists and they're not necessarily buying in, and that is the moment where they could have better value for those works. This idea of, "Oh gosh, we're going to be priced out." That doesn't seem to be a motivating factor to buy works when they haven't been valued by people already in the market.

You were just pointing here, Joeonna, to [the chart that we produced](#), which shows you that whilst the acquisitions at museums peaked in 2009, the market, of course, has doubled over that period of time. So, the perception is that the market has grown. It's just not grown as much as people think. It's 2%.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Right.

Charlotte Burns: Although having said that, we then dove into the data of some of the leading private galleries. We asked them to give us figures on their representation of female artists and the revenues that those artists represented in their gallery, like is it true that women just bring in less money?

We interviewed [Zwirner](#), [Lisson](#), [Pace](#) and [Hauser](#) about this. They're private businesses. We can't verify the data. But what's interesting is that they all independently gave us answers that are in the same ballpark.

Hauser & Wirth is roughly parity: 34% of their artists are female. They account for 33% of the gallery's sales, they said. At Zwirner, the gallery's roster is 29% female, but those women account for 39% of the gallery's sales. At Pace and Lisson, it's around a fifth of the artists that they represent are female and around a third of their sales.

These were interesting figures because they were showing that at the top end, those women are actually outperforming.

Then when we spoke to galleries further down that food chain, they weren't reporting the same thing. So, it kind of led us to believe that the galleries we were talking to at the top end, they're representing the artists in that 11% or in that 2%. They're representing those artists at the top. And maybe it's not the same all the way down the chain. Other galleries we spoke to said that they had focused their careers on bringing parity, and therefore they knew that they would not make as much money in their program.

William Goetzmann: I think this really is a result of the financialization of art. Everything that you've been talking about, with respect to the economic considerations—the comparables that are required to justify an acquisition—that just shows you that the process of curation, of art history, of criticism, it has just ceded the ground to art as investment.

I've been fascinated with the notion of art as investment, but I really believe it's been seriously distorting and that the artists themselves are trying to understand how to play to this.

There are a few things that we can do to try and make things better. It's easy to shame people and say "money talks", and that's terrible. But I think that if we begin to build a foundation of information and a network that will help the investors, if you will, feel comfortable about the work by emerging female artists, that could move things forward.

Foundations that have some money can take a stand and finance catalogue raisonnés of work by women and academic studies and so forth.

You look at a few examples about how proper promotion of somebody's oeuvre has worked out: [Agnes Martin](#) really has been recognized as a result not just of kind of superficial promotion, but I think analysis of the work, comparing it to what else was being done at the time.

So if we could build the intellectual framework around this—as well as understanding how much work is out there, which

work is authentic, how you can be comfortable with attribution—then I think you’re going to have a market where somebody can justify a purchase, not just saying, “Hey, this is wonderful work,” but by saying, “We know that there is only so much available,” and so forth.

Charlotte Burns: It’s interesting you bring up Agnes Martin, because I was talking to a dealer about Agnes Martin. She’s obviously one of the artists at the top of the market. But within that, actually in her markets, people have been waiting for it to go even further and it hasn’t quite.

I was talking to a dealer about this and someone in an institution, and they were saying that the thing with Agnes Martin is that for an institution, the works are so expensive—comparatively to what? But the work’s considered to be fairly expensive for an institution. If you already have one, maybe there’s a sense that you are telling the Agnes Martin story. It’d be great to have several from different periods, but you can simplify that narrative.

William Goetzmann: I would compare Agnes Martin to [Sean Scully](#). And what you’re telling me is, “Hey, if you’ve seen one Agnes Martin, you’ve seen them all.”

Charlotte Burns: Which I don’t personally believe, by the way.

William Goetzmann: You can say that about Sean Scully. But he seems to have no problem with quantity produced, quantity on the market. And I think he’s regarded as a blue-chip artist.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Well, I think also we’re talking about perception of value, right? You kind of caught yourself as you were saying that it’s at a certain price point, but in relation to what? And I think that that brings us back to the inherent problems that we’re having in figuring out ways to widen the perception of value and quality. There are no clear metrics. And the metrics that we have, I think, are skewed to kind of uphold a certain narrative, a certain aesthetic narrative, a certain art history that is really white and male. And that trickles down to every single part of this conversation.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. That brings us onto the idea of bias, which drives much of this. And there’s lots of different explanations for why things are the way they are. But a simpler explanation is bias, including our own.

So, we came up with this idea of doing this study: there was a lot of media last year around this idea that it was a great time to be an African American artist. I remember reading a lot of those headlines and thinking, “Huh, that seems counterintuitive. I wonder how I could write about that.” And I was thinking, “Oh, I could write about it the way I’ve always written about it, which is to interview a bunch of people. We’ll talk about progress and we’ll kind of land in the middle. There’s been a lot, but not enough. Great. Everyone feels fine and there’s no urgency to it.”

I started thinking that the way I have been writing and commissioning and editing articles for a decade is probably incredibly flawed. And so, was there a different way of doing this?

That’s how Julia and I started having a conversation. Could we have [a data study](#), and could we ourselves collaborate to do that? Is there a way that we could make that that happen?

That idea of the media perception—the way that media plays into this, including us, is a really important part of this conversation.

Julia Halperin: Yeah, I think it is. It’s something we didn’t get into so much in the actual report itself, which is something that the artist [Adrian Piper](#) pointed out to me and our team in [an op-ed](#) that we have published on *artnet News*. She read through our report very carefully and pointed out that we talk a lot about one of the structural problems being a lack of information available about particular artists, and that that’s one of the reasons that curators say they’re not doing as many shows or acquisitions, because they don’t have the sort of—

Charlotte Burns: Resources.

Julia Halperin: —resources and research underpinning those decisions. And she said that you only mentioned once in passing the role of the media in perpetuating that bias.

She pointed out that in our introduction to the market story, we mention that [Jenny Saville’s record](#) for a work by a living artist was overshadowed by [Banksy’s shredded painting](#) stunt.

She went back through all of our newsletters since that day, to point out that we mentioned Banksy in a headline 24 times, and we mentioned Jenny Saville no times.

It’s a really good point. And it points to a similar dynamic to the one that I think museums are dealing with. We are supported by advertising. We feel the need to provide information that our audience wants so that we get clicks. And that is the economic model that we’re working off of, in the same way that I think museums feel compelled to get turns of the

turnstile, and get tickets sold to get people in the door.

I think in both cases there is a lack of imagination for what people want, and sort of a fear and a scramble to give people what we know works as opposed to maybe suffering a brief dip in order to do something more productive long-term.

Charlotte Burns: We write in our article about this, the fact that the public's out ahead. We give [as an example](#) the Dia Art Foundation, which has raised \$78m dollars based on a distinct program, a program that is really focusing on overlooked artists. This is an institution that was in financial struggle and has now managed to come out of that through focusing on overlooked artists, many of whom are women. And its director is female: [Jessica Morgan](#).

We also talked about [the Guggenheim](#) staging an exhibition of a relatively unknown spiritual painter from the turn of the century, [Hilma af Klint](#), was somewhat of a risk—not an entire risk, the work was somewhat known. There'd been a few exhibitions before, but this wasn't an artist that you would expect to be a blockbuster.

The director [Richard Armstrong](#) spoke about the fact that he braced the board for the low turnout, the fact that people would probably be annoyed that they thought they'd gone to a [Gustav Klimt](#) show and actually it wasn't. Actually, it drove 34% increase in the museum's membership. There was record attendance.

And so, we kind of came to the conclusion that the public was out ahead. Is that true for you, Julia, when you look at the clicks?

Julia Halperin: Yeah. I was going to say, I don't want to oversimplify the narrative, because it's still true that Banksy stories get more traffic than this study we did.

There is a learning curve, and there's more appetite for easy stuff that has a mass audience. I think that our task then is to figure out how to cover this stuff and dive more deeply into the work of other artists who aren't famous in a way that will bring people to the site.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: I think those two things are such opposite sides of the spectrum though, too. And I think in the piece that you guys did about motherhood, there was a comparison to other sectors, where those kinds of risks were actually really rewarded. Thinking about what the public actually wants and instead of just perpetuating what they have been clicking on the most, take a chance, maybe suffer a small dip, but discover that actually people want to read about this other artist, or this artist over here, an artist who hasn't been discussed before. Because these numbers are not reflective of anybody's audience. They just aren't.

Charlotte Burns: I think this takes us a little bit into reception and reaction. This idea of what people want—it's also what people want to talk about. We found this year, during this data study, it was quite hard to get some of the people who were running major institutions to talk to us, to really focus on this.

That lack of focus is something we saw in the data. It's a very erratic data set. That's why there is no trend. Apart from the handful of institutions that have committed themselves to focusing on it, where you can see a consistency in the numbers, overwhelmingly, the pattern is sporadic.

And, actually, when we look at our response, this report has had a lot of reaction. It's been picked up by a lot of media. We've had lots and lots of personal messages from people, especially curators. Essentially, people wanted some information they can take to argue a case more clearly.

But Julia and I were discussing this, and one of the pieces of feedback we had from someone reading it on the first day, was, "Did you get any guys to comment?" And we did. But going through the report, we realized that the responses are overwhelmingly female. And that's a function of who made the time to talk and who people put forward to talk. I don't think I've ever written an article in which so many of the voices were female.

Julia Halperin: Yeah. I think it was a combination of who people put forward to talk and who made the time, and also who said interesting stuff that we wanted to quote. It's not an accident that women that we spoke to were generally more engaged with the subject and better versed on it.

I don't want to generalize across the board, but certainly speaking about our conversations with institutions, I definitely found the men we spoke to who were representing institutions to be much more defensive, and to question the composition of our data much more clearly, and say, "Well, did you think about this? Did you consider this? This doesn't represent X thing." Whereas, we got a lot less of that from female museum leaders that we spoke to. I think it's probably because they've already thought about it.

Charlotte Burns: We actually gave ourselves a longer lead time for this article this year and the research, because what we learned last year is that the status quo is the status quo, and it's quite difficult for people to understand that their perception of reality may not be the reality, especially people at the top. They're at the top because their view of reality has been

deemed to be so insightful, and often is.

In the art world, that idea of your eye, your insights, your experience, that's really what is prized. In other industries that are more conversant in the vernacular of data, it might be less seen as a challenge.

Julia Halperin: I also think that they genuinely, in a lot of cases, feel like they're trying. In the same way that I think we all feel like we're trying. But it's hard when faced with numbers to say, "You are trying, but you're not trying hard enough, and it's not having a big enough impact." That is unsettling for people when that means, okay, maybe I need to make bigger structural changes than that make me uncomfortable.

Charlotte Burns: And what could those changes look like?

William Goetzmann: Well, you've got a set of institutions that have been operating for a long time. And it's never easy to change an institutional structure.

So, there is a combination of push and pull. The push is to continually challenge the people in these institutions to think about and act on fairness.

The pull side is, as I've mentioned earlier, if everything is ultimately being pulled by the collectors and the gifts that they ultimately give to the institutions, then I think we have to create a demand among that group.

Traditionally, it has been kind of one major banker or a financier or industry leader that has begun to collect a certain genre, and everybody has to copy them. I think we need to have that happen in order to change things.

I hope that there's some way to make it really cool to be engaged in this process of discovering great new work. And we just need a few people at the very top that can start pouring the tens of millions of dollars into this to suddenly have a bunch of people jump on board.

It's sad that the world of art is like that, but I think that is something that we could take advantage of. I don't think it's a broad, across the board effort. I think some very selective focused discussions or decisions could really turn the tide.

Charlotte Burns: Do you agree, Joeonna?

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: With some with some of those points. I mean, I would say public shaming. I'm just kidding, sort of.

[Laughter]

William Goetzmann: Well, we're trying that all the time.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: I hope so. But I do question whether—and while I understand how the power structures work, and I think that there need to be more women in leadership positions and other positions—but I wonder if there's ever been a time when there was a real systemic rupture that came from the top. Because I can't really think of any. I do think that, when pushed, that does happen. But I think that that is always beginning at the bottom.

I think, instead of looking upwards all the time, we need to be looking outwards a little bit more. What that means practically, I don't entirely know as much more than continuing to push each other and hold each other accountable, and make sure that we're really cognizant of what is actually happening here. And that none of us in this ecosystem of the art world are doing enough.

Charlotte Burns: It's interesting, too, to think about that idea of the status quo, to change this from the top. This idea of reformation, rather than revolution, is something that came up in the data studies too. The institutions that are largely defined by what they already own, therefore defined by the past: that's their mission, that's their identity. For a lot of institutions, it's a fundamental shift in thinking to see diversity as anything more than a kind of sprinkling on the recipe you already have, rather than a fundamental addition. Make a different cake, rather than just add a different cherry on the top.

Julia Halperin: I also think, speaking to your point about fundamental change happening from the top or not happening from the top: one of the things that we late in the reporting process decided to look at was the composition of boards. Because it came up through conversations that one of the bottlenecks was acquisition committees, which are governed by the museum's board.

I was sort of expecting to find that boards were male dominated, when in fact that wasn't true. It was almost equal. It was 47% women on the boards, in aggregate of all the museums that we looked at. For me that was a real jolt exactly as you said. It's not just about having women in leadership positions. That's not a cure all.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Bodies in the room doesn't change the structure and the impact of what we've always learned about art history, and what we've always learned to be important and valuable, and how to even see. So that is something that is going to take a lot more time to unpack. I think that a lot of this data, and your timeline and what we're seeing is that I don't think we have that kind of time.

Charlotte Burns: Exactly. This is something that came up, that museum directors would say to us, "This just takes more time. Look to the future. Look to next year." And our response was, "From a data point of view, that will be a miraculous shift if we look to next year." Because there's no indicators in the data, as a set, that this is actually happening.

The data will only tell us what's happened. It's not going to tell us what's going to happen next year. But we can use it as a barometer of where things are going. And if the numbers drastically jump next year, it really would be miraculous.

Also, the data just reinforces that there are biases that exist. If we look at the breakdown of artists, just 190 of the 5,832 artists in our dataset—so 3.3%—of those artists whose work was acquired by institutions, were African American.

So, you see a breakdown along the lines of race, of gender that are being reinforced. And having more women in museums, and there are more women in museums—I think there are more women in museums now than men—they're just earning less money. I think it's 70 something cents on the dollar, on average. According to a recent study, there were more women on boards. There's 47% parity. There is parity coming out of art school. So, we have physical equity to some extent.

We're not seeing those changes coming through in terms of the governance, in terms of what's valued, in terms of what we're looking for.

Having women in the room does make a difference when you look at the museums. The female-led museums often are making the greatest strides. But, that's a couple of women who are really focused on it. You're not seeing that play out in a broader sense. And I don't know if that's because those women are being given more autonomy in those institutions in the board setting, whether those women are specifically focused on this, and therefore it's their individual concerns rather than a systemic indicator. There just aren't enough women in leadership positions, actually, for us to see it as more than that. I don't know if you want to add anything to that, Julia.

Julia Halperin: No, I think that's true. I mean, I also think that my impulse is to say that that massive group of board members—they're also generally wealthy people who represent the power structure. And so, it doesn't shock me that they might be more involved in perpetuating the same power structure that we've seen than a few directors who have made progressive scholarship their mission and life's work.

Charlotte Burns: I think that also comes back to what Will was saying about the financialization of the market. Last year after the data study that we did looking at the representation of African American artists, the topic came up on some [public panels](#) we did. And often we would get collectors standing up at the end and saying, "We've corrected so far now, when are we going to go back, a little bit?" This would be after an hour-long panel giving the actual facts—which were that the pendulum has barely begun to swing, let alone gone too far—and it got me thinking about how much of that is rooted in the sense of value, the actual monetary value of collections that people already own. Is there a perceived loss of value? It's challenging, the fact that your own collection might be made more robust by adding into it, that maybe there were things in histories you didn't see.

William Goetzmann: We should always think about those as opportunities, the fact that there are incredibly talented artists that have just been overlooked. That's another way to appeal to the market.

I will tell you this issue that we're talking about is not isolated to the world of art. In the field I'm in, economics, the statistical analysis just mirrors your report so closely in terms of no movement in terms of the fraction of women in our profession seemingly despite awareness that goes back 20 years that there's a problem with balance. The steps that we've tried to take, unfortunately they don't seem to be making a big difference, but there are ways to test yourself for implicit biases.

Charlotte Burns: How do you do that?

William Goetzmann: You go to the web and you search on [Project Implicit](#). This, and a few other websites like this are designed by psychologists. You answer a series of questions over ten, 15 minutes and then it comes back and tells you the degree of your gender bias. I tell you, it's a pretty big shock when you find out that even though you think you're not biased, you are.

I think it would be good thing for journalists to do, and people that are market participants. At least that awareness could be helpful. That's one of the things that universities have had tried to do as the promotion process seems to be biased against women. The hiring process, the accepting of their papers in journals, the citations of their work. In the same way that female artists don't get as many articles written about them or mentions in the press, that's the same thing that happens to female economists who just don't seem to get the recognition of their efforts.

Charlotte Burns: This is the idea of how many crabs escape the bucket, which is something that [Mickalene Thomas](#), the artist, said when we were interviewing her for this. This idea that we've been cheering the fact that one or two crabs have escaped the bucket, but we should be protesting the fact that only a couple of women made it out, and those women still aren't having the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

What you're talking about, Will, is this idea of reconsidering value in the market sense and the idea that we can drive change from the top. Another thing that came up in our data is this idea that it's a generational shift. Some people are looking, as always, to the next generation for hope and for change. And there's a sense that women of a younger generation are demanding more than the previous generation.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: I'm not sure. I feel like the previous generation did really major pushes. I think maybe we take that for granted a little bit actually.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, in what way?

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: I think there is an expectation that things are better. And there has been movement from previous generations, but I actually think that they did a lot of work that allows for us to feel differently in this space.

Julia Halperin: I agree.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: I don't think it's necessarily less of a fight. It's more of a feeling, an entitlement to a space, and that's a different kind of fight. That's its own resistance in and of itself.

I think with artists... I can think about, anecdotally, two different artists working simultaneously, but of different generations. [Carrie Mae Weems](#), who a lot of her work is about confronting institutional spaces and being excluded from that canon and that history; and [Toyin Ojih Odutola](#), who is depicting bodies that are taking for granted that space, not taking for granted institutional space, but they're occupying a space without a kind of interest in an outward gaze. It's a different kind of resistance, but it's really part of the same conversation.

Charlotte Burns: It's a continuation of a conversation.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Yeah.

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm.

Julia Halperin: I keep coming back to this idea of how we define value and thinking about how the illusive change we talk about happens down to the cellular level, this idea of what we think is important. When you're talking about whose references are important art historical references that are part of a lineage, or whose experiences are universal—part of me wonders if the work that previous generations have done to put that work in front of our faces as we've matured, if maybe that sort of gets into the bloodstream a little bit. We're more likely to view those things as universal or to view alternate histories as equally important as the one in the book that we read when we were in school. That's my hope. But I don't know. I also then look at the figures and get discouraged again.

Charlotte Burns: For me the biggest takeaway is, and we broke down the data in lots of different ways—geographically, scale and size, budget of institutions, type of institutions, encyclopedic, modern and contemporary—and actually, the single truth for me through the whole data set was people—and this was true last year—people who want to make change can make it. It's actually quite empowering in that sense, that you can look at certain institutions, you can look at certain galleries and you can see that people who are concentrating, persistently, consistently, will make change. And it may take a while, but it will be there, and it will be there in the perception. It will be there in the reality of the numbers. I think the one thing I would urge of myself and anybody who's interested really in creating change in the representation and who gets a voice, who gets to be seen as important, who gets to take up space, is to concentrate on that.

Like Will says, we need to question our own biases. This is something that Julia and I found really difficult in doing this piece, was that we have our biases too and we were spending months, eight months looking at this data, interviewing people about this data, speaking to people about how power is taken away or given away—and we found ourselves at the very end discussing whether we were giving it away too. Whether we had faith in our own work, whether we needed validation from other people to tell us that this was an important story. How would we judge our own success or failure? You can study this stuff and it's still an emotional challenge. Yeah, I would say that that was difficult, but it's good to pay attention.

That's what we saw: paying attention is really the thing, that more than anything else is the driver.

William Goetzmann: I have a question for you. I was wondering whether you thought that the Whitney Museum has been a force for promoting art by women? I guess the reason I'm thinking about it is because [Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney](#) was the founder and she was a collector, she was an artist.

Charlotte Burns: Well, the Whitney didn't take part in the data study.

Another institution we could talk to that was founded by women is [Peggy Guggenheim](#), who founded the Guggenheim, obviously. 40% of their acquisitions were work by women, and when we spoke to them about it, they said yes, they were founded by a woman. This idea of being radical was what they try and achieve.

But it's sort of a combination of awareness and concentration. They had looked at their data, their collection up until around 1980, and realized that there were huge, enormous holes in it, so they started to try and think more consciously about creating change. The chief curator there, [Nancy Spector](#), says that it's at the stage where it's quite natural now.

When we called her to interview her for this article, she was saying, "Oh it's interesting that you mentioned this because we just realized that our next two years' worth of exhibitions are focused on women, apart from one show. That wasn't conscious, that wasn't something that we set out to do. But thinking about this issue more consciously has led us to focus more on it, and now, the best art rising up is the work by women." And it wasn't a political statement, it wasn't something they were actively redressing, it was just something that they had within the gallery staff made a topic of conversation to the point that it became just another topic of conversation. And I think that's quite hopeful.

There's a lot more that we could talk about and if anybody's listening and they'd like to get involved, please do email us: this is a conversation we'd like to keep going. Thank you very much to my guests today. To Julia Halperin, to Will Goetzmann and to Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels.

Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels: Thank you.

William Goetzmann: Thank you.

Julia Halperin: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: Thank you very much.