

The State of the Art World: An Autoethnographic Review of Women Artist

Representation

Madyson Carpenter

Point Loma Nazarene University

Approved by _____

[Lael Corbin]

[Lindsey Lupo]

[Karah Lain]

Abstract

This essay focuses on my experience as an emerging woman artist, and examines the culture of inequality that prevails in the art industry today. Using the method of woven, narrative autoethnography, I aim to bring qualitative and quantitative data together to illustrate a more full account of women's representation in art.

Beginning with Background

To be frank, this research was born because I am a woman and an artist, emerging into the art industry as a fresh face, and I wanted to know what I was up against. For a long time, I have viewed the art world (made up of artists, museum administrators, designers, and numerous other professionals) as a progressive, ahead-of-the-curve environment; so much social commentary comes from art, I could not help but naively (and perhaps arrogantly) believe that there is room for any and all voices and contexts. I would think of artists like Judy Chicago, the Guerrilla Girls, and Lorna Simpson, and assume that I would not have to fight as hard to be recognized for my art as they did; such artists laid the groundwork for women's equality in art, and I could not help but assume that they were successful.

I grew up in a home led by my mother, a fiercely independent and strong woman, who instilled feminist values in me throughout my childhood. She would not have labeled herself a feminist, but she fought tirelessly to make sure my sister and I knew we were as tenacious, worthy, and capable as our brothers. One of my favorite examples of her willingness to go to bat for us is from my sister's teenage years: when my sister was in

high school, she enrolled in an honors level chemistry course with a teacher who notoriously held an archaic view of women. He told her on the first day of class that chemistry wasn't a subject for women to study, and that she would do poorly in his class. My mother found out, marched down to the school, and gave the teacher a long lecture—she made sure that we knew that someone would always be fighting for us to be seen as equal to our male peers.

My mother instilled in me the expectation that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to; if I work hard enough, success is possible and attainable to me, no matter what industry I'm in. This worldview has been shattered by my studies, not by a lack of progress in the march toward gender equality, but by the slow, lingering pace that the art industry takes in that march. For many, art as an industry represents progress and forward-thinking ideals. Art has been used to advance social movements and call attention to areas of society that are unequal for centuries; it is a living and breathing industry that changes in response to the voice of the people. It is common and understandable, then, that art would be viewed as a liberal industry, supporting women and minorities in the goal of ultimate equality—the data, however, paints a different picture of how the art industry responds to women and minorities.

In the 30-something years since the Guerrilla Girls published their infamous “Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum” graphic (Guerrilla Girls, 1989), there has been widespread discussion and debate among artists, museum administrators, critics, and historians about the place that equality has in the art industry. Is it the

museums' collective responsibility to institute quotas for women's art? Why haven't there been great woman artists? If they were truly worthy, wouldn't women make it into museums and galleries of their own merit, without the aid of the administration? These questions have been over-explained and under-solved for decades, and in 2020, one question persists: how unequal is the art industry?

Literature Review

Historically, the art world has been dominated by male artists, museum directors, and educators, and there has been little room for women artists to break into a successful and sustainable position in the industry. In a recent report by the National Endowment for the Arts (2019), researchers found that women visual artists earn \$0.77 for every dollar men artists earn, meaning the wage gap for artists is larger than the national average by \$0.02. This glaring wage gap can be difficult (if not impossible) for women artists to overcome, especially if they are not allowed the same opportunities for success that their male counterparts are. For working artists, these opportunities most often include showing their work in both group and solo exhibitions at galleries or museums, and consequently selling art to museums and private collectors. In a 2015 report for ARTnews, curator Maura Reilly found that there is a huge gender disparity in solo exhibitions. Reilly found that an overwhelming majority of the top art institutions in the United States did not showcase women and men equally, with only 30% of their solo exhibitions having showcased women artists (Reilly, 2019).

In San Diego, no such study has yet taken place. San Diego is not as well-recognized for its art community as Los Angeles or New York, but it holds a thriving contemporary art scene; museums like San Diego Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, and the Museum of Photographic Arts house impressive collections and hold exhibitions of major artists from around the world. Because I am an artist living and working in San Diego, it was important to me to study the industry environment in my present surroundings— how realistic is it that I might find work in San Diego, and how often are other women artists being given opportunities to show their work in the institutions present?

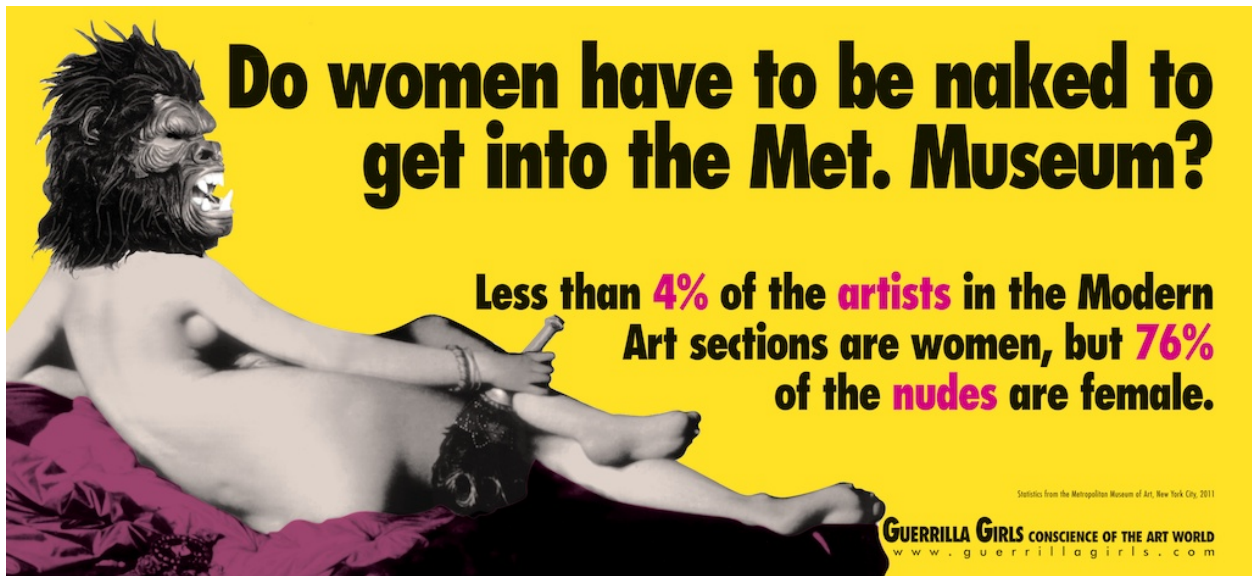


Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Less than **5%** of the **artists** in the Modern Art sections are women, but **85%** of the **nudes** are female.

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

The Guerrilla Girls, 1989



Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Less than **4%** of the **artists** in the Modern Art sections are women, but **76%** of the **nudes** are female.

Statistics from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 2011

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD
www.guerrillagirls.com

The Guerrilla Girls, 2012

Autoethnography as a Method

Social research rarely exists in a vacuum, but is rather informed and contextualized by the social culture of the researcher. Autoethnography is a method that is often utilized in social research in response to and as a method to gather both qualitative and quantitative data; by acknowledging and utilizing the researcher's social context in reference to their research, the data is presented with a more visible application to life. Dr. Mariza Méndez of the University of Manchester, England speaks to this idea in her review of autoethnographic writing:

“Although a qualitative approach opposes the positivist standpoint that assumes that reality is objective and independent from the researcher, it has been accepted as a valuable practice of research. Qualitative research employs a variety of methods which imply a humanistic stance in which phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants. It is because of this particular approach to inquiry that personal narratives, experiences and opinions are valuable data which provide researchers with tools to find those tentative answers they are looking for.” (Reilly, 2019)

By using a first-person, narrative voice that brings in the researcher's own context and experience, a window is opened that gives better access to the research itself, and gives human problems a more human environment. Autoethnography rejects the idea that all research exists in a sterile field, and embraces a research style that aligns more closely with the humanities studies than that of the hard sciences.

Autoethnographic writing is not without its criticisms, however, the most prominent being the marriage of “self” narrative with research. There is a perceived unreliability of one's own perception of “self” as it pertains to social phenomena; there

can be a lack of personal clarity with one's own lived experience as it pertains to the lived experience of others, and this issue can muddy the results of the social research. There is a level of bias that will always be present in autoethnography because personal narrative can never be truly objective. But does it need to be? The use of storytelling and the sharing of experience is a valuable human trait; should social research be completely without personal application to be valid research?

The goal of autoethnography is not to assert that the experience of the researcher is the important part of the research, but rather to provide an accessible method for the reader to examine their own experiences through the narrative and data of the researcher. My demographic context, the fact that I am a woman and an artist, has absolutely informed this research and the conclusions to which I've come from the results. By sharing my experiences as a woman artist and using a narrative style of writing, I hope to give insight into the experiences of many other women artists, and open a window into the issue to those who have not lived through a similar experience.

Methods and Data

For the purposes of my study, I primarily looked at two areas in which women artists are represented in museums: being showcased in an exhibition (this could mean a solo exhibition in which only one artist's works are being shown, or a group show in which many artists' works are being shown) and having art acquired by the museum as part of their permanent collection. Both areas are important for the success of an artist. To find accurate data on this representation in San Diego institutions, I reached out to

curators, assistant curators, and registrars at each museum or gallery; they provided me with their statistics from 2019, which I then simplified and cataloged into figures and tables 1-4. Figures 1 and 2 show the number of women artists represented in each institution's exhibitions in 2019, while figures 3 and 4 show the number of women artists that are represented in each institution's permanent collection. The Museum of Photographic Arts is not shown in figures 3 and 4, as they were unable to provide me with the number of women artists whose work is contained in their permanent collection.

TABLE ONE: Exhibitions, 2019

	San Diego Museum of Art	Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego	Museum of Photographic Arts
Men Artists (percent)	60	48	55
Women Artists (percent)	40	52	45

FIGURE TWO: Exhibitions, 2019

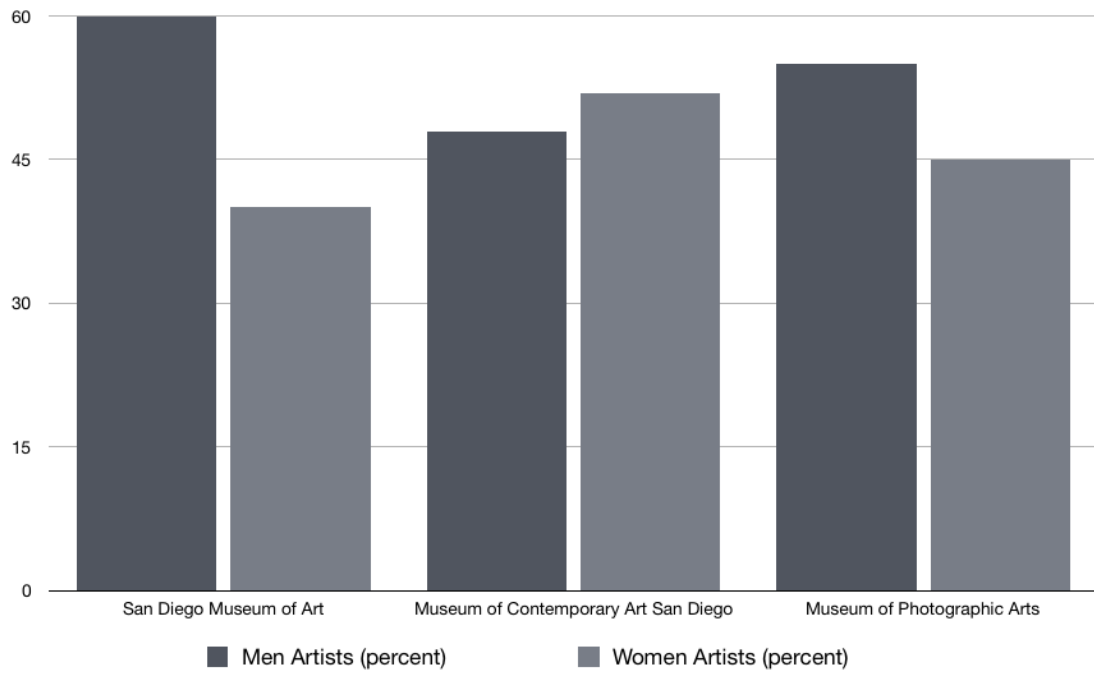
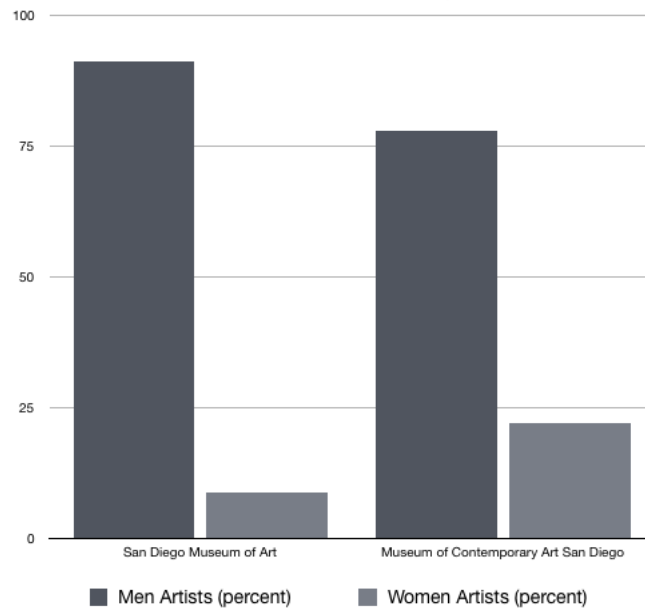


TABLE THREE: Collections, as of 2019

	San Diego Museum of Art	Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego
Men Artists (percent)	91.2	78
Women Artists (percent)	8.8	22

FIGURE FOUR: Collections, as of 2019



I also looked at already completed studies on museum representation for points of comparison, and specifically honed in on a study on artists in prominent museums across the United States led by Chad Topaz of Williams College. The 2019 study provided some of the first data of its kind by cataloging the complete demographics of the artists whose work was contained in each museum's collection; these demographics include gender, birth year, ethnicity, and geographic origin. Figure 5 is a sample of their data collection, and shows the percentage of women artists who are represented in each museum's collection. The percentages found on figure 5 will be used for comparison against the amount of women artists whose art is contained in San Diego museums' collections.

In figure 5, the colored cells (in red and green) refer to data that is significantly outlying from the total proportion by 5% or more. The rightmost column, labeled "95% CI," refers to the research group's confidence interval for each museum's data, and finally for the overall proportion. The confidence interval is a range of percentages so defined that there is a 95% probability that the true proportion lies within the CI range. This range is unique to each museum to ensure the 95% CI (Topaz et al., 2019).

Figure 5

Museum	Women (%)	Women (95% CI)
DIA	7.4	4.8-11.4
MMA	7.3	4.7-11.2
MFAB	8.2	5.2-12.6
NGA	10.4	6.4-16.5
PMA	8.8	5.8-13.0
AIC	12.5	8.2-18.7
NAMA	11.6	8.0-16.5
RISDM	13.1	9.3-18.1
YUAG	11.6	8.2-16.2
DMA	15.1	11.1-20.2
DAM	13.3	9.9-17.7
HMA	10.7	6.9-16.4
LACMA	10.6	7.3-15.2
MFAH	16.1	12.2-21.0
MOCA	24.9	19.0-32.0
MOMA	11.0	6.9-17.1
SFMOMA	18.1	13.5-23.8
WMAA	22.1	16.9-28.3
Overall	12.6	11.9-13.4

In my research and in Topaz’ study, artists who identified as nonbinary were excluded

from the data sample, as the purpose was to compare the representation of those artists who identify as men with the representation of those artists who identify as women.

I'd like to note the resistance that I met in the researching phase of this endeavor. When requesting information from museums and galleries, I was often met with an array of probing questions about my plans for the information, and then sent away with a firm "we don't release that kind of information." Though I originally cast quite a wide net in terms of which galleries and museums I looked at for data collection, very few were willing to speak with me or had information relevant to this endeavor on their public websites. I am one woman, unknown to the industry; I am not a powerful institution with the funds or reputation to compel art institutions to provide me with information. While I am grateful for the willingness of SDMA, MCASD, and MOPA to volunteer information, I am disheartened by the amount of institutions that were unwilling to share theirs.

Transparency is the backbone of accountability, and it is disappointing, though not surprising, that so many art institutions would shy away from showing what strides they've made towards women's equal representation in art. As the Russian proverb says, "trust but verify"—when an institution takes away the public's ability to verify, I see very little reason to trust. In this Me Too era, it is popular (even trendy) to use women's equality as a marketing ploy, though there is often very little action behind the sentiment. It is not enough to say that an institution is "pro-equality" without the commitment to be held accountable by the public for their action (or inaction) towards that goal.

Analysis

When comparing figures 3 and 5, it is clear that there is a massive disparity between the amount of art made by men in museum collections and the amount of art made by women in those same collections. In Topaz' study, the average percentage of women artists represented in the studied museums' collections is 12.6% women; in my study, the average percentage of women artists represented in the two museums (SDMA and MCASD) averages to 15.4%. San Diego's most prominent art museums are slightly more inclusive of women in their collection than the average across the top eighteen museums across the United States, with a 2.8% disparity between the two averages.

To provide a context for those percentages, I've looked at the current and past demographics of the artist community in the United States; the 2016 American Community Survey, an ongoing survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, found that in 2016, 50.4% of American artists were women. There is a clear disparity present between the amount of women artists making art in the United States and the amount of women artists whose art is being purchased by art institutions.

MCASD has a higher percentage of women artists represented in their collection (22%), which can be partially explained by their emphasis on contemporary art (art created in the late 20th century through the present day); because women artists have had more opportunities to become successful in art-making in the contemporary period than in previous eras, it makes sense that a museum whose focus is on contemporary art would house more women's art in their collection. Contrastingly, SDMA has quite a low percentage of women artists' art in their collection (8.8%). Their collection spans all art

eras, from prehistoric and utilitarian art to art from the present day; by the same logic, it makes sense that they would have a lower percentage of women artists's art present in their collection.

For women in exhibitions at San Diego museums, the percentages are much more equal; for each museum (SDMA, MOPA, and MCASD), the percentage of exhibitions that showcased women artists was at or above 40%, with the highest percentage being 52% at MCASD. These numbers represent both group and solo shows, so it is unclear how many of these shows have a high ratio of men to women represented; this possibility offers room for discrepancies in the reported data. Because this information was largely unavailable at the surveyed museums, it is not clear how large the margin for error in each museum's data reporting is.

Implications and Conclusions

There is a clear trend in art institutions across the United States of a lack of gender diversity among the artists whose art they collect. The highest percentage of women artists represented in museum collections across my study and the Topaz study is at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, with 24.9% of their collected artists being women (Topaz et al., 2019). The lowest is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, with only 7.3% of their collected artists being women. Even when looking at MOCA's high percentage of women artists in their collection, there is a huge disparity between the percentage of women in their collection and the percentage of artists that are

women; there is a 25.5% difference between the percentage of women artists in the United States and the percentage in MOCA's collection.

I do not believe that perfect equality between men and women artists is possible in the art industry; the unfortunate fact is that there is a centuries-long tradition in art of giving more and better opportunities to men, and there are centuries-worth of art that is representative of that tradition. Eras and movements like the Renaissance or Dada are overwhelmingly dominated by male artists, and there is no way to turn back time and give women the opportunity to make art in those times. There is, however, ample opportunity for institutions to support the art-making of women in this contemporary era, and to more frequently show art made by women in past eras.

It is possible that it is too soon to see the results of museums' efforts to acquire more art made by women— if significant attempts to bring in more art by women have been made in recent years, it could be too soon to see the dent being slowly made to these high percentages of men's art in collections. However, this is not the case. In a joint investigation by In Other Words (a podcast produced by Art Agency, Partners) and artnet News (an art market information network), researchers found that in the ten years between 2008 and 2018, a total of 260,470 works of art were acquired for the collections of twenty-six of the most prominent museums in the United States; 29,247 of those pieces were made by women, which accounts for only 11.2% of the total number of pieces (Halperin & Burns, 2019). These findings contradict and disprove the narrative that there are changes being made to achieve gender parity in the art industry. Art

institutions are acquiring and showing women's art, yes, but they are acquiring and showing men's art more often and in greater quantity.

In a statement to artNews in response to their data, Christopher Bedford, the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, had an explanation as to why the number of women artists in exhibitions is rising while the number of acquisitions of women's art remains stagnant: "The great testament to the commitment an institution makes to an artist is through acquisitions, not exhibitions, which are sweeping and frankly cheaper. (Halperin & Burns, 2019)" It is true that it is often a budgetary battle between curators and boards of directors or shareholders to acquire new artworks for their collection, as the collection is what puts most museums on the historical map. A museum's collection serves as their legacy, and is often the most telling quality of the character of an institution. It is easier, and often much cheaper, to add in a woman artist here or there into an exhibition (more often than not a group exhibition, rather than a solo exhibition showcasing a single woman artist) to show the public that the institution cares about gender parity.

Museums' collections are also dependent, in large part, on the collections of each institutions' donors; for centuries, the collection trends have favored men artists, so that is what donors have, and therefore what they can provide to museums. Because collectors favor the big, flashy, known artists, that is what they try to collect— leaving lesser known, structurally unfavored artists to fall by the wayside. This, then, is the (simplified) cycle of inequality in the art world machine: there are few opportunities for women artists

to show and sell their work, therefore they remain unknown or lesser known, which means collectors do not want to risk buying their art. This lack of purchasing leads to few collectors donating women's art to art institutions, which then leads back to few opportunities for women artists to show and sell their art.

How, then, are women to break out of this cycle? How are women to become “great” or noteworthy artists? The commitment to support women's art must come from the very top, and structural changes must be made to the cycle of industry that is present in the art world. It must come from collectors, certainly, but it must also come from museums; the tone for the art world is set, largely, by the institutions that house art. If the demand is high for women artists, the art and the audience (not to mention the donors) will follow. There must be firm, unwavering commitment to gender parity in the industry, rather than half-hearted, blatant attempts to throw a woman artist or two in a group show and call it equality.

It seems that the fact of gender inequity in the art industry is willingly ignored and purposely unconsidered at an administrative level. There is no protection or safeguard in place to uplift emerging (or experienced) women artists— we are left to fend for ourselves, hoping that by some stroke of luck we might meet the right person, make the exact right piece of art, present ourselves just right, and hopefully come by some meager version of the success our male counterparts can experience (at least). There is no longer a question that there are great women artists today, but the fight that those women must

engage in to be recognized as great is one that very few can win in the current industry climate.

During my junior year of my undergraduate studies, I gave a presentation on the portrayal of women's bodies in visual art for one of my classes. A lively and slightly awkward conversation followed, and in concluding the discussion, the professor said this: "Well, one thing's for sure: it's a really good time to be a woman in art. No one wants to see art made by white guys anymore!" I was left speechless during that conversation, because I do not see this present time as a "really good" time to be a woman in art; I think he was right that this present time is better for women in art than times passed, but that hardly makes it ideal. It is like if someone painted one small patch of a bare, ugly wall—sure, it is better than it was, but the problem is far from being fixed. It seems clear that the margin for what amount of equality is acceptable is very low in the art industry, and it seems even clearer that museums absolutely want to see art made by men—the data spells it out well.

Men's art is being acquired more often and in greater quantities than is women's art. Men's art is more present in museum collections across the United States than is women's art. Men's art is being shown and exhibited more often than is women's art. These are not the rantings of a bothered feminist, but rather the uncomfortable, unsightly facts of the industry. It is the driving, persistent pursuit of equality that propels research into such hopeless-feeling social phenomena, and it is my own hope that the art industry can remedy their pace in the march toward gender parity. The commitment to equality of

opportunity must be made to help solve the plight of women in art, and it must be made by the people with the power to make change: the formal institutions that house and immortalize great art.

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