

## ARTICLE

## The Presence of Women Photographers in the Permanent Collections of Ten European Museums

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**Abstract** Gender inequality in the various artistic disciplines is still a socio-political problem despite the efforts of governments and institutions. The aim of this article was to examine the catalogues of the permanent collections of ten European museums: the Tate Modern, the Centre Pompidou, the MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona), the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the Istanbul Modern Art Museum, the MUMOK (Museum Moderner Kunst), the Stedelijk Museum, the Kiasma, the Hermitage Museum and the Astrup Fearnley Museet, and then compare the proportion of women among the artists in their collections. For this purpose, the number of works and artists was counted and analysed in each museum in the sample taking into account the social, political and economic conditions of the institution and relating them to the rest of art institutions. The results show a clear underrepresentation of women artists.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women's work has been consistently pushed into the background. In the case of the arts and specifically in photography the same phenomenon can be observed. After the resurgence of social movements in the US and Europe in the 1960s, a new brand of feminism, the so-called second-wave feminism, evolved and extended well into the 1980s (Lamas 1986).

The idea for this research arose from an observed underrepresentation of women photographers in artistic institutions, notably in museums (Pollock 2003). The debate on this inequality has been studied appropriately and widely in art history in general but we argue that it has not been dealt with satisfactorily in the specific field of photography. We felt it

necessary to verify the possible correlations revealed by quantitative analyses of this inequality and engage in the discussion of its causes and consequences which has been taking place in art history and sociology considering the particular facts and conditions in photography.

Since photography started in the 19th century, research can follow two paths. On the one hand an analysis can be made of the ways in which this artistic practice has followed the established patterns in art traditions to date. On the other hand and due to its singularity, it is possible to study its departure from traditions and connections to new political, social, economic and technological contexts (Hill et al. 1979).

The image of women has been created and disseminated by male artists, who historically objectified women and denied female

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subjectivity (Gabbard 1998). Women need to construct their own image in order to understand their historical context. The opportunity to produce their own representations of the female body is an empowering vehicle for female identity (Spence and Solomon 1995).

Feminism started to become a movement in the USA in the early 20th century and its first accomplishment was the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote in 1920. But despite the democratic achievement, the movement lost impetus due to its lack of cohesion and organization. It was not until the 1960s that the movement came back in its second wave with a more solid structure and unified and clear objectives (Miguel Álvarez and Amorós Puente 2005). In this renewed fight for women's rights, art was used as a political instrument. Women artists working in feminist circles since the 1970s gave their creations a strong political, social and critical orientation (Norma and Ary Garrard 1994). This activity is developed at the same time that the New Left was arising with its antiracist, pacifist, feminist and radical student currents. With the New York Radical Women (NYRW) group, formed in 1967, radical feminism became visible and active nationally in the US first and then in Europe. For this reason our research starts in the 1960s.

A major goal in second wave feminism was to dismantle the roles assigned to women by male-dominated society until then. In this context, a high number of women artists used their photographic cameras as an empowering tool for the construction of an authentic picture of women, a more natural and fair representation of women using photography as a mirror reflecting the social reality of contemporary women (Isaak 2002).

Inequality in art does not only affect gender and includes issues such as race, ethnicity, sexual

orientation or social class, all of them related to minorities or groups outside the norm, imposed by a patriarchal capitalist system. This system benefits from a reaffirmation of power at all levels including culture and the symbolic representations in art and the media (Sandell 2003).

After decades of social struggle and criticism, new legislation was passed in the second half of the 20th century aimed at reducing the said gaps and increasing the civil rights of underprivileged minorities. The first active policies towards gender equality began in Europe a decade before the resurgence of feminism but it was not until the creation of the United Nations and the European Union that specific policies were adopted for the equality of opportunity for women and men (Paredes 2006). The first mention appears in the United Nations Charter (1954), which establishes the rights of women as a basic principle. The second took place when the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted in 1979. But it was not until the nineties that an international commitment was made to eliminate gender inequality (Fajardo 2012).

Taking the presence of women artists in museums as a starting point, the goal of this research was to obtain quantifiable data on the current situation of women photographers in major European museums of modern art, analyse the results and contrast them with those of male photographers. Ten of the main European art museums were selected according to two criteria: having an important section devoted to photography, and being located in different parts of Europe so that the institutions represented a diversity of socio-political and economic backgrounds.

A previous selection was attempted on the basis of the popularity of the museums but most European institutions do not keep a

record of the number of visitors to their permanent collections. Therefore the selection was eventually made on the basis of the artistic significance of the museums and their location in Europe; a third criterion was accessibility to the permanent collections online so that the count could be made from the web sites. This made it possible to obtain, analyse and compare the data from the different museums.

The final corpus for the analysis was the following: the Tate Modern (London), the Centre Pompidou (Paris), the MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona), the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid), the Istanbul Modern Art Museum (Istanbul), the MUMOK (Museum Moderner Kunst, Viena), the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), the Kiasma (Helsinki), the Hermitage Museum (San Petersburg) and the Astrup Fearnley Museet (Oslo). Although the Hermitage Museum is not devoted exclusively to contemporary art, it has been included in this research because it exhibits an important collection of photography and because it has a fundamental reference value for Eastern Europe. It is also a prime example since it is one of the oldest museums established in Europe (Duncan and Wאלlach 1980).

After counting the number of photographic artworks in the collections of each institution, they were classified according to the gender of the artist. Then the data were analysed considering the age of the institution, its socio-political background and whether it promoted policies to enhance the visibility of the work of women artists.

For convenience, the data were converted into percentages, which facilitate the comparison across different museums. Anonymous works were disregarded for obvious reasons and group works were also discarded because of the

difficulty to trace the authorship of works produced by a photographic studio.

Photography was officially born in 1839 with the first daguerreotype and came into being as part of the Industrial Revolution (Gasser 1992). Thus it was set to be a contemporary art medium. The research focuses on the European context but the nationality of the artists in the collections is very varied and never restricted to the country or continent where the museum is located. However, most international works come from the United States and the representation of African, Asian, Latin American and Australian artists is minor.

## WOMEN AND MUSEUMS

According to the definition given by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM, 2007).

Museums are hierarchical institutions based on traditional patriarchal values which began to be established in the eighteenth century (Hernández 1992) as tools to control culture (Maceira Ochoa 2008). It is no surprise that the conservation, study and exhibition of works of art is oriented towards male artists and that the number of works by women is a small percentage in the museums' holdings. As a consequence, collections do not display the real historical heritage of a period but only the artistic expression of male artists and the resulting cultural education adopts a patriarchal rather than egalitarian perspective.

Women's visibility in museums is mostly derived from their figurative representation

through the male gaze. Such representations generally portray unrealistic women lacking an identity and treated as objects (Muñoz-Muñoz and González-Moreno 2014). But museums are frequented by a variety of visitors including a majority of women to whom they should respond and who will not feel their presence in collections and exhibitions which often focus on social issues. The reduced number of women artists in art collections is a historic gap that needs to be filled because it gives women a secondary role after male artists.

Museums, understood as institutions serving the interests of power, have been used since their foundation as structures for the formation of standardized cultural identities. As such, their traditional identification with an imposed narrative made by the privileged is justified. It is hardly questionable that their operation is designed by men and for men. Museums have traditionally prioritized the inclusion of male artists in their collections and at the same time have adopted a male hierarchical and patriarchal organization. Only at the beginning of the 1970s did the works of female artists begin to have a presence in museums, both in acquisitions for permanent collections and temporary exhibitions.

New cultural policies in the past few decades have produced a significant change. At the same time the debate about the new museology has resulted in new goals for art institutions, notably representing an equal number of male and female artists. For this purpose active gender policies have been developed (Prince 2006). As a result of these initiatives, regulatory measures have been established by government institutions in different parts of the world encouraging curators to acquire new works bearing in mind the proportion of art created by women (Ochoa 2008).

The organization charts of museums have traditionally included male members and this has not changed in recent years. Almost all the directors of the ten museums analyzed are male and the number of women in decision-making posts is low. It has not been possible to access the history of organization charts but the data available show that leading institutions such as the Tate Modern or the MACBA have never had a woman director in their boards of directors. It is welcomed that lately the presence of women in positions of power is rising slightly, as is the case in the Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Stedelijk Museum, both chaired by women over the last third of their existence.

Museums perform an important educational role because the earliest visits take place during childhood and they are regarded as open spaces for expression where artists make manifest their perceptions of the surrounding world (Kotler and Kotler 2000). Museum visitors are increasingly aware of the gender inequality in the art scene although this awareness is insufficient and superficial due to the social education to perceive as normal a majority of works by male artists in museums. Education is dominated by patriarchal norms and perceptions so it is difficult to ensure an effective awareness of gender inequality (Stoller 1968). This is why equality policies are so important. Given their educational character, it is crucial that museums adapt to gender policies in their acquisitions and temporary exhibitions. Thus they will contribute to the elimination of gender inequalities.

The first women's museums were established in the 1980s with the aim of exposing and challenging the policies and approaches of traditional museums by giving visibility to women's gaze and authorship. These museums devoted to women's art with women in

significant positions appeared during the second wave of feminism (Carro Fernández 2012). The oldest one, the Frauen Museum, was established in 1981 in Germany (Fernández Valencia and Bernárdez Rodal 2012). Since then, many other countries have followed suit and nowadays there are around fifty women's museums. Most of these institutions have been created privately by groups of women and do not rely on public funding or support. Women have undoubtedly been the protagonists of the history of art as artistic objects but they have been underestimated and excluded as artists. One of the key aims of women's museums is to carry out research on outstanding female artists who have remained hidden through history. In the 1980s, a group of women artists outraged by the white male dominance of the art scene formed the Guerrilla Girls. Their aim was to denounce gender inequality and promote a more inclusive artistic system that reflected the reality and diversity of our world. One of their most talked-about actions was performed in front of the Metropolitan Museum of New York (Martín 2013). They displayed a yellow poster featuring Ingres's "La Grande Odalisque" with the head replaced by a gorilla mask. The text accompanying the image was: "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." The denunciation of the situation of women artists included the eye-opening facts and figures. Their actions are known worldwide and every new protest gets much media attention in western countries. Before their first actions, the only regulation available for museums to foster equal rights for artists regardless of their ethnicity, race or sex was the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights signed in New York in December 1976 (Symonides 1998).

But it was not until the first decade of this century that cultural active policies began to be adopted in Europe. The first was the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union proclaimed by Parliament on December 10, 2000. After the Charter, the following regulations and legislation on culture was passed by the UN and the European Parliament:

1. United Nations Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Gender Equality (Beijing +5), 5–9 June 2000
2. EU directive 2002/73/CE, 23 September 2002, modifying directive 76/207/CEE on equal treatment of men and women.
3. European Parliament resolution of 25 February 2010 on Beijing +15 – UN Platform for Action for Gender Equality.
4. Decision No 1855/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006 establishing the Culture Programme (2007 to 2013) (MAV. *Mujeres en las Artes Visuales*).

With the exception of the Hermitage and the Stedelijk, the museums examined in this article were established in the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century so it is pertinent to verify whether the above policies are implemented by contemporary art institutions.

#### **THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS**

The subjugation of women in art was such that works by female artists were

regularly signed by male close relatives, the father or husband, so that they could be exhibited or published (Arana Benito Del Valle 1999). Female art lacked economic value in the market, its merit was questioned and female artists were even condemned by the normative view of society.

When the Industrial Revolution brought about a change with the mechanization of art and its democratization through reproduction women began to play a more active role in art media than simply being the represented “object.”

Before being accepted as artists, women had worked as copyists in museums. It was not until the end of the 19th century that women found in photography a creative activity in which they could achieve recognition. Since then they will become photographers and expand an artistic form created by men.

The 1960s saw the peak in the vindication of the feminist movement (Wolf 1991), when women rebelled through photography to denounce their unfair situation and the fixed roles they were forced into by patriarchal society. They also reclaimed a right to produce their own representations using the female body as a space of creativity and criticism (Broude & Garrad, 1996).

Museums are created by government institutions as spaces for cultural dissemination and control. Accordingly, their foundation and operation is designed by and for men. Since their foundation they are full of men’s works shaped by a hierarchical and patriarchal organigram. In the early 1960s the works of women began to have a presence in museums both as purchases for permanent collections and in temporary exhibitions.

The customary policy of museums is to acquire photographic works by renowned artists. This guiding principle reduces the

presence of women since the history of photography, like history in general, is created from a male perspective. The majority of works by women photographers are dated from the 1960s, the decade when feminist art was born and when female artist photographers became known. An analysis of the work of the most significant women photographers over the last few decades reveals the existence of a feminist trend that approaches photography by using the female body in an attempt to subvert traditional male values. With this artistic movement to regain the capacity to construct the image of women begins the recognition of the work of women in photography, both institutionally and historically.

The history of art photography begins by collecting works by male artists and as women become photographers their presence increases progressively in collections. The goal of this research has been to establish the number of photographic works in the permanent collections of ten museums across Europe comparing the proportion of women artists in them.

A brief description of the ten museums housing the photographic collections studied provides the necessary background. Beginning with the oldest, the Hermitage, founded in 1764, is one of the largest museums in the world. Modern art is displayed in the General Staff Building, situated on Palace Square, in St Petersburg in front of the Winter Palace. The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, opened in 1895, is known worldwide for housing one of the most important collections of contemporary art with almost 90,000 objects and art works. The Museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien (MUMOK) was inaugurated in 1962 in Vienna and is the largest museum in Central Europe for art since modernism. Its holdings feature important works from Classic Modernism, Pop Art, Fluxus, and Viennese Actionism



to present-day film and media art. The Centre Georges Pompidou opened in 1977 in Paris and houses the Musée National d'Art Moderne, which is the largest museum for modern art in Europe and the most significant institution in the contemporary art world together with New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and London's Tate Modern.

The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid has also had a leading role in the European art scene since its opening in 1992. Its collection was started with donations by the heirs of renowned Spanish artists such as Julio González and Joan Miró. Its photographic collection includes the work of such twentieth century masters as Robert Capa o Brassai but few women's works. Currently, the museum is expanding its collection with video and film-based works of Latin America and other less known parts of the world. In 1993 the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art was opened in Oslo. It is well-known for its world-wide collection, which includes artworks from all continents and cultures. This museum aims to be a point of reference for contemporary art from different parts of the world although its photographic collection is very limited. The Museu d'Art Contemporani was inaugurated in Barcelona in 1995. It is one of the most important museums in Europe in terms of the number of contemporary artists included in its collections. The museum's holdings comprise numerous works by acclaimed artists and increasingly include such new channels of artistic expression as video art and digital art. This museum shares the Astrup Fernley's policy of acquisitions focused beyond the continental borders and features one of the largest collections of Latin American works. The Kiasma, established in 1998 in Helsinki, exhibits the contemporary art collection of

the Finnish National Gallery and its purpose is to collect the best works Scandinavian art of all kinds.

The Tate Modern, founded in 2000, is an institution of reference in contemporary art. Its collection is one of the richest in the world. Despite the diversity and variety of its holdings, the patriarchal nature of the institution is apparent in the overwhelming majority of male artists in its photographic collection. There are only two women artists in the permanent collection.

The Istanbul Modern Art was established in 2004, representing the youngest institution included in this analysis. Its collection is small compared with the rest of museums and its

Table 1.  
Number and percentage of artists by gender in museums

Museum	Women		Men%		Total no of artists
	No	%	No	%	
Tate modern (London)	2	6.45	29	93.54	31
Centre pompidou (Paris)	6	21.4	22	78.5	28
MACBA (Barcelona)	11	12.2	79	87.7	90
Reins sofia (Madrid)	60	18.8	258	81.1	318
Istanbul modern art museum (Istanbul)	7	11.8	52	88.13	59
MUMOK (Vienna)	2	13.3	13	86.6	15
Stedelijk museum (Amsterdam)	98	19.06	416	80.93	514
KIASMA (Helsinki)	58	35.58	105	64.4	163
Hermitage museum (St. Petersburg)	1	1.58	62	98.4	63
Astrup fearnley museet (Oslo)	4	33.3	8	66.6	12

photographic holdings include works by Turkish artists mostly.

The predictable gender imbalance is evident in Table 1. However it was unexpected that the inequalities to the detriment of women spread across all institutions, from the oldest to the most recently established. Arguably, the Hermitage may not have implemented corrective measures in favor of an increased representation of women artists given the massive number of artworks it houses but the Istanbul Modern Art Museum, which houses so few, seems to have been established without any equality principles guiding its acquisitions. The rest of the museums were born in the decades when equal opportunity policies were being enforced at some social and cultural levels. Anyway, the findings are worrying since only 17.3 percent of the works in the whole sample of museums have been produced by women artists. The Astrup Fearnley Museet features the highest proportion of female photographers at 33 percent. The galleries with the smallest presence of women are the Tate Modern and the Hermitage, with less than one percent.

**NUMBER OF WORKS BY WOMEN IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS**

Predictably, the total number of photographic works by women in the museums' collections correlates with the number of female artists (see Table 2). These data indicate that the policies of gender equality are ineffective in art institutions across Europe, since results are consistent regardless of the location of the museums.

As can be seen in Table 2, inequality is clear even in institutions with such an international projection as the Tate Modern or the Pompidou Centre. In both cases the photographic holdings are overwhelmingly by male artists with only one percent of female photographers. Even a large collection of 114 group works in the Tate by a couple of artists, Gilbert & George, happens to be made up of two male artists, contrary to the usual couple collaborations with a male and a female partner that we found in several other catalogues.

The museum with the lowest share of works by women, less than one percent, is the Hermitage. One factor to be taken into account is that most works in the museum's collection are monochrome photographs (sometimes

Table 2. Number and percentage of artworks by gender in museums

Museum	Women's works		Men's works		Group works		Anonymous		Total No of works
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Tate modern	2	0.85	144	61.53	116	49.5	2	0.85	234
Centre pompidou	7	1.70	402	98.0	1	0.24	-	-	410
MACBA	114	16	399	56	133	18.6	-	9.2	712
Reioa sofia	256	1304	1628	82.9	35	1.78	43	2.1	1962
Istanbul modern art museum	7	11	53	88.3	-	-	-	-	60
MUMOK	2	1.58	120	95.2	4	3.17	-	-	126
Stedelijk museum	392	10.64	3243	88	18	0.48	29	0.78	3682
KIASMA	202	24.3	608	73.25	20	2.4	-	-	830
Hermitage	4	0.72	375	67.8	18	3.25	156	28.2	553
Astrup fearnley museet	20	43.4	26	56.52	-	-	-	-	46



combined with sepia-toning) dating back to the nineteenth century. They often trace the history of Russia focusing on social transformations.

The MACBA features a small but international collection of photography, 56 percent by male artists and 16 percent by female artists. The Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the institution with the second largest collection of photography in the sample, displays the same gross disproportion of male artists as the MACBA. This is also the case in the Istanbul Modern Art Museum despite having been established in the twenty-first century. The MUMOK, located in the heart of Europe, is no exception in its lack of equality.

The Stedelijk Museum has one of the most important photography collections in the world and the largest in the sample, 3682 works by all the internationally acclaimed artists. The museum also offers institutional support to Dutch artists and gives visibility to their projects. Comparatively, The Netherlands is one of the countries in Europe with the highest spending on culture and the collection of photography in the Stedelijk is proof of that but despite having a significant collection by women artists, the catalogue of works by male photographers is ten times bigger.

The Kiasma is has the third largest collection of photography in the sample, after the Stedelijk and the Reina Sofía. Although a disproportion is found between the number of works by male and female artists, this museum comes second in the institutions with the highest proportion of photographs by women.

Finally, the Astrup Fearnley Museet is the museum with the highest gender equality in the sample. 56.52 percent of the works exhibited have been produced by male artists and 43.4 by female artists. At least these figures give hope for a future with greater gender equality although the five decades of equality policies hardly show in art institutions. On average,

European museum collections are far from featuring a balanced fifty percent of works by male and female artists.

## CONCLUSIONS

The presence of women artists in the field of photography in permanent collections is very low. Women are still disregarded in what seems to be a male-dominated medium. Equality policies are intended to undermine the patriarchal model but their implementation has been at best irregular both in the management of museums and the acquisitions. It is significant that seven out of the ten museums studied were established in the same decade when the first equality guidelines were adopted.

The analysis of the photographic collections in noteworthy European museums confirms the hypothesis that women artists are underrepresented. The findings corroborate that female photographers lack recognition and dissemination in the art field compared to male artists. This applies both to the number of artists in museums and the number of works in the collections. As a result, women remain outside the focus of interest.

Like most other art forms, the first acquisitions of photographs accessioned into museum collections were created by male artists. Given the long history of preserving only works by men, correcting the imbalance in museums today is a hard task that take many decades. Our research demonstrates that the visibility of the consequences of an ill-functioning system are not easily rectified since the work of women contemporaries of the earliest male photographers are rare. While the acquisition of more works by female artists to balance the volume of male artists may not achieve any new result that advances the field. Rather, the real change will come when social awareness, educational, and

institutional reforms recognize and acknowledge the historical deficit no matter which works are presented to the public.

Photography is only a small field in contemporary art but we can conjecture that the numbers could be similar in the full artistic spectrum. The present findings also show that the acquisitions of photographic artwork is small compared to other arts such as painting but art institutions have substantial work still ahead in order to improve the situation. To begin with, all types of museum visitors should be made socially aware of inequalities, and the acquisitions policies and decisions regarding temporary exhibitions should be revised.

The importance of education for equality is crucial so that the new generations make it possible to have an art world free of social prejudice. Museums have the opportunity to become educational institutions that can promote freedom and equality by demonstrating that art can be an empowering tool for the expression of everyone's identity.

END

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