THE NOISE OF A COLLECTIVE IS HARDER TO IGNORE

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ABSTRACT

This is an essay that investigates and celebrates the ways in which artists and institutions are deconstructing the art canon. The way that people can connect with identity and representation is changing from what has come before which is leading the way for impactful progress.

Within the first chapter a number of institutions, exhibitions and curators are discussed which aim to change the standard within the industry. Themes of intersectionality and its importance to the cause are introduced as an integral pillar of the writing through the selected figures listed.

Florence Given is an artist and activist who is extremely influential to my own practise and the wider conversation. The work that Given creates and the impact the artists is having on the progressive sphere is discussed through the second chapter within this piece.

The third chapter takes a deep dive into my own artistic practise and how all of the influences and ideas discussed throughout the wider thesis have an impact on the work that I produce.

This thesis is designed as a celebration of those who are challenging ideas within the canon whilst also reflecting on the work there still is to do in order to fully deconstruct previous ideas.

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INTRODUCTION

The time we are living in can be defined as a revolutionary point where the recognition of injustices and inequalities is at an all-time high and therefore the opportunity for change is fizzling with optimism. As a young woman in this world, it would be easy to be all consumed by the disparity between how people are treated based off their identities. Women, people of colour and the LGBTQ+ community are all groups of society that have been oppressed and will be referred to throughout the thesis as oppressed or marginalised groups. I am choosing to focus on seeing how I can contribute to the wider conversation around change. The art world is not escaping this change and many artists are now creating work that speaks out against the traditional ways of celebrating the white, male, cisgender artists such as Monet or Klein, that have come before.

The art canon which can be defined as the 'work that is viewed as being the standard of what is expected and epitomizes scholars' views on what constitutes proper art and history' (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 13) . This canon has traditionally left out women and other minority groups but is currently experiencing a shift in order to include all of these perspectives. This is not to say that these viewpoints have not existed before but rather were conveniently left out by a patriarchal society which is the social construct that involves 'a society where there is a male-dominated power structure throughout organized society' (Napikoski, 2020), because it suited them. The way that artists are being represented and the way that artists are starting to represent themselves is developing in a way that aligns with this shift in the canon.

Galleries such as the *Tate* in London or the *Glynn Vivian* in Swansea, which traditionally have been some of the biggest supporters of canonised art are revolutionising in order to more accurately represent the community of artists that this world contains. Intersectional feminism which is a term that defines the

concept that there is a cross-over of ideas around the oppression of marginalised groups such a women, the LGBTQ+ community and people of colour (Crenshaw, 1989), it is an important factor to consider when trying to understand how and why the norms within the art world are being challenged. The idea that marginalised communities can work together in order to create a bigger change for all is instrumental and should not be overlooked by anyone. For too long oppressed groups have separated themselves into individual categories in which each group needs to create their own change. However, looking at the bigger picture and seeing the wider connection allows for more impactful actions to be created.

Through this thesis I will be exploring various artists and bodies of work that speak, whether through traditional text mediums or visual language, about the development of ideas which have meant we are beginning to see a whole new artistic landscape. This is an exciting time to be an emerging artist and I aim to convey this through my exploration into the topic and writing.

THE GOAL IS NOT TO REIMAGINE ART BUT TO REVEAL WHAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE

Art galleries are one of the best examples of the traditional art canon in action because they are the institutions that are supposedly meant to represent a cross section of the work throughout the community. In 2017 an article was posted on the *Tate Modern's* website which stated '27 per cent of living contemporary artists in the Tate Collection are women' (Tate, 2017) which demonstrates how more often than not these art institutions are severely behind contemporary ideas of what art should be. Through finding this unfortunately all too familiar statistic I embarked on searching out an example of an improved gallery landscape, to help support the idea that things are changing for the better.

FIGURE 1 RULES OF ART EXHIBITION, CARDIFF HISTORY MUSEUM, 2022

The Rules of Art? was an exhibition that I had the chance to visit in the summer of 2022 and it particularly caught my interest because of the way it deconstructed traditional ideas surrounding art. The work throughout the exhibition was exhibited thematically and opened viewers eyes to a whole new range of visions from a balance of genders, races and identities. The idea that historical art pieces

could juxtapose and interact with contemporary photography suggested a dialogue promoting and supporting the need for a change to the system. The aim of the exhibition as taken from the *National Museum Cardiff* website is to 'reimagine what art can be' (National Museum Cardiff, 2022), however I would disagree that perhaps the goal is not to reimagine art but to reveal what has always been there behind the idealistic world created by the oppressive majority of white, cisgender men.

Deconstructing ideas of art history through the careful curation of the show also had the impact of making the show accessible to a wider audience, which is a key aspect to consider when paving the way for a more inclusive vision of art. As the show in many ways does not conform to the ideas within the wider museum, where work is traditionally displayed in a chronological fashion. The exhibition becomes more digestible, the audience does not necessarily need to understand the significance of the different periods or movements, they are simply able to view work in a way that is categorised through type. The mixture of classic paintings and contemporary photography within the space exposes the audience to a broader selection of ideas and visionaries. As the exhibition is fluid with the representation within the space the average person who does not study or understand the complexities within this subject can be shown a new way of thinking. 'These voices will question whose stories are being told, who is telling them, and who has been excluded' (National Museum Cardiff, 2022) this quote taken from the gallery text provided perfectly encapsulates the ideas I have just been discussing. The exhibition will get people thinking whether they are aware of it or not and the only way to change the way people think is to start conversations and discussion around evolving what once was.

Rebecca Solnit's collection of essays *Men Explain Things to Me* seemed especially poignant when reflecting upon this idea of representation in relation to this exhibition.

> Most women fight wars on two fronts..... simply for the right to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged in possession of facts and truth, to have value, to be a human being (Solnit, 2014, pp. 10-11).

It is exciting to see that such an important institution in Wales is making a conscious effort in including those who have been intentionally excluded for so long. However, there is still a lot of work to be done in order to eradicate the need to fight and push forward and for equity, which is 'the situation in which everyone is treated fairly according to their needs and no group of people is given special treatment' (Cambridge, 2022)to simply be the norm within the art community.

Intersectionality is an instrumental factor to consider when looking at how women or oppressed groups are represented within the gallery space. Figure 2 is another contemporary example of how artists are reclaiming gallery spaces in order to advocate for the unseen history of Black culture that is woven into the fabric of art history.

FIGURE 2 PORTRAIT OF DESTINEE ROSS-SUTTON WITH, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, WORKS BY DAVID "MR. STARCITY" WHITE (SHOWING THE BACK OF THE WORK), AMOAKO BOAFO, AND OTIS KWAME KYE QUAICOE, FROM THE EXHIBITION "BLACK VOICES: FRIEND OF MY MIND."DESTINEE ROSS SUTTON 2020

Destinee Ross-Sutton is an artist who is revolutionising representation within art by curating exhibitions which represent ideas surrounding race and identity, in turn these then open opportunities for other marginalised groups to emerge through the metaphorical cracks in the white, cubic spaces. 'Both series have helped redefine the art canon the way many know it, giving young and emerging BIPOC artists an unprecedented platform to showcase their work' (Ross-Sutton, 2022) this is the artist referring to her initial bodies of work that sparked her transition into not only curating shows but in fact creating a transitional gallery space. The keyword for me from this interview quote is the word 'redefine' as it is a powerful and a more accurate term to describe what this movement is, we are shifting the gaze. It is also instrumental to realise that each individual action, although it may seem small, will contribute to a much wider and bigger change in public opinion and standards.

The conversation around representation within institutions cannot be had without also discussing exclusion due to race. As previously mentioned, an intersectional approach to the developments is the most effective, the attention is not focussed on simply bringing up one group but instead how all factors can influence each other. *A Black Gaze* by Tina M. Campt is a revolutionary and important piece of writing when engaging in these themes.

> 'A Black Gaze is a structure of visual engagement that implicitly and explicitly understands blackness as neither singular nor a singularity; it embraces instead the multiplicity of blackness these artists simultaneously grapple with and personify" (Campt, 2021)

The term 'black gaze' acknowledges that there is the need for a new way of seeing in order to reveal what has always existed, the battle to be understood and celebrated for the differences in perceptions as opposed to hidden away. The principles behind these ideas can be applied to each marginalised group and is an important reminder that we need to find a way to celebrate and acknowledge the

individual nuances of all aspects of the art community. It is essential for us to consider how these things can be transformed into a tool to bind various communities together and create an important and long-lasting change.

After considering these two initial examples of institutions that are making an important statement, I was reminded of an exhibition I came across within my first year of studying for this degree. *Within and Without: Body Image and the Self* was an exhibition in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery during the latter part of 2018 which was a living, breathing example of subtlety subverting the canon into practise.

Figure 3 Within and Without: Body Image and The Self Exhibition 2018

This exhibition was curated as a collaboration between a number of artists as well as volunteers from a local girl's school, the Birmingham LGBTQ+ Refugee group and an over 50's group. In an article published by The Museums Association the exhibition is described as 'a space designed to test storylines and engagement methodologies' (Vo, 2018) . The collaborative work behind this exhibition

demonstrates how ideas can become actions and acknowledges that institutions or artists cannot alone envision new standards. The involvement of community group in itself is an example of opening art, making It more accessible and a better representation of all.

> The domains of political and linguistic "representation" set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended. (Butler, 2006)

The purpose of an exhibition like this is to comprehensively begin to destroy the ideas of what representation means to the wider community as laid out by the quote included by Judith Butler. A lot of the curatorial decisions in this exhibition have similarities to the more recent *The Rules of Art?* exhibition I mentioned earlier in this writing. An intriguing combination of archival and contemporary work is amplified within this exhibition space as a result of the cultural and materialistic aspects of the work. This demonstrates how there is a new structure emerging, one that seems to be very successful in challenging the gallery format. From this chapter the key aspect I have seen is that talking about these issues is simply not enough to change them as seen throughout the exhibitions I have explained and my own writing. Inspiring people whether through writing, curating or simply showing up and representing is far more of effective approach which grows to hold an increasing number accountable.

AN UNIGNORABLE CATALYST FOR CONVERSATION

It is not just the responsibility of institutions to create and hold a conversation around change. We should not forget how many collective actions from individuals can impact just as big of a change in the tides. However, it is also important to remember that there will be just as many attempts to silence these artistic activists. This idea is encapsulated by the idea that 'Western theatre perpetuates a social order that requires either the death, domestication, or sacrifice of the female protagonist' (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 7) which although refers directly to the theatre is an idea that can be seen throughout all art. Generally, the oppressors have decided that the oppressed groups pose no threat as long as they are able to be controlled however, this is not acceptable and there are many breakthrough artists emerging to tackle these issues. One of the most exciting and influential artists that has been inspiring and powerful with her impact in the recent years is Florence Given. An artist who is not only working to change the standards with her art but is also deconstructing patriarchal ideas by creating intersectional and inclusive work across visual art prints, her best-selling book *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* and podcast *Exactly*.

Figure 4 There is Enough Room Print Florence Given 2020

Through Given's work a theme of community is often conveyed which is demonstrated with Figure 4., the idea that we can all help each other progress in an environment that has taught us we should see each other as competition. A quote taken from her book *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* reads:

> Internalized misogyny is the silent, insidious killer of progress, and when it shows up in our lives it can make us act out in all kinds of ugly ways (Given, 2020)

The idea that although we may not be consciously continuing to act within the confines of society or even the art canon, but still continue to conform as a result of years of oppression is one that this work and quote directly taps into. 'Internalized misogyny' can be described as women treating others in a way in which they have been told is acceptable in line with the patriarchy and is something that is so intrinsically woven into the fabric of society of tends to go unnoticed (Weiss, 2015). The way that this artist produces work is extremely direct and often explicit which brings attention to these behaviours that we often miss. This style of working in relation to this topic is very successful as it acts as an unignorable catalyst for conversation.

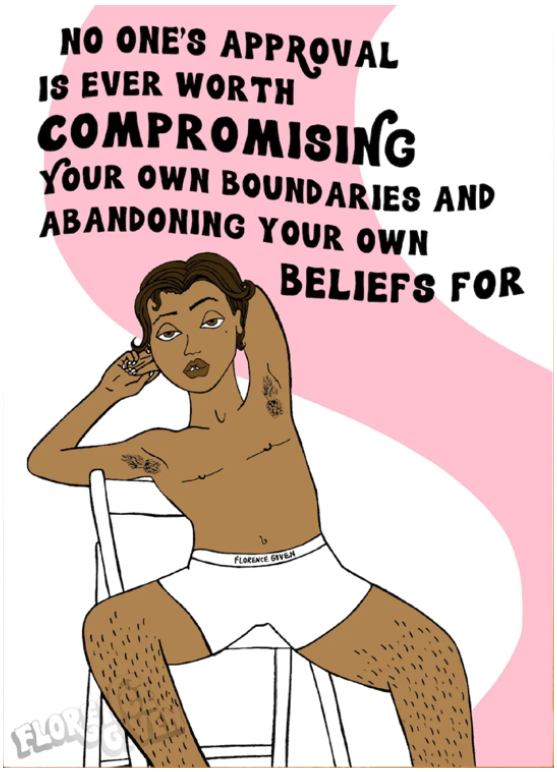

FIGURE 5 APPROVAL PRINT FLORENCE GIVEN 2020

Although Given is paving the way for a new generation of thinking and understand these social issues within the art world, she is not unaware of the privilege she has from being a white woman. Inclusivity is also a pillar of her work which makes the work ever more valuable because in my opinion intersectionality is the most powerful tool we have for making a lasting difference. Figure 5 is one of the many examples of prints that has been created depicting a person of colour not in a cisgendered way but rather as an ambiguous and intriguing individual. The awareness of the wider community is what makes this work speak to and educate a much larger section of society without conforming to the ideas and rules constructed by the art world.

The use of colourful shapes, a bold and recognisable font and bold imagery all work together in a very clever way in order to create visually eye-catching pieces. In the current time we are living in the dominating landscape is actually the online space and perhaps this is even more important to conquer than the passive gallery landscape. The fact that Given's pieces are 'instagrammable', which by the definition of the Oxford Dictionary (2022) 'is attractive or interesting enough to be suitable for photographing and posting on the social media service Instagram', is what sets her work in a good position for enveloping as many people as possible into this topic and open discussion.

Given's work like many of the artists who create work in the sphere of representation and identity was one that was born out of anger

> 'You could do what you wanted with your illustrations. And I just fused this anger with the naked women that I was drawing. And then I put it online because no one in my life was listening to me' (Given, 2022)

Social media can become an echo chamber for the same opinions, and this can be become a viscous feeding ground for the traditionally powerful groups. Infiltrating social media platforms with stark

reminders of the imbalance and injustices that still exist is likely to be the most effective way of ensuring impactful notions.

Although social media is a very current and active place for discussions and thought sharing there is still new long-form mediums that are becoming increasingly popular: Podcasts. Since 2020 and the Covid Pandemic the world has shown an extremely increased interest in the idea of learning and experiencing through audio with podcasts seeing a huge boost in the amount of listeners. It is estimated that by the end of 2022 there will be '424 million podcast listeners by the end of 2022' (Ruby, 2022) and 'around 50% of people between the age of 12 to 34 listen to podcasts every month'

(Ruby, 2022). Florence Given has capitalised on this outreach by creating her own podcast *Exactly* where a number of taboo and difficult topics are discussed with a wide range of guests from all backgrounds and identities. Given is not afraid to show a vulnerability through the podcast and she openly privilege checks herself through these conversations. An interesting example of one of these episodes is *Feminism: Trans Liberation, Culture Wars and Class with Shon Faye* where they discuss issues around the idea of being trans and how there is still a long way to come even for feminists. Although these conversations do not directly link to art, a lot of the work that Given produces comments on the idea that progression can be so much more than what it is. This is what I have chosen to take from this artist and why I included her as such an instrumental part of this body of writing.

As artists and individuals, we can do so much more than what is expected of us and we should always aim to break through the glass ceiling imposed on and us. The work and career of Given also provides an inspiration to use our gifts of creativity in whatever way it manifests in order to contribute to

conversations we want to be part of. Revolutionising the art world will only come when we are able to revolutionise the world by making space for voices that may not have been allowed space previously and part of this is also using our own ability to create to open the doors for others who may be stuck behind them. Everything created by Given is intended to make people think and evaluate their position within the world whether that is through anger or empowerment, art or writing.

EVERY DECISION I MADE WAS INTENTIONAL

As an artist myself I am not exempt from all of the ideas that have been suggested throughout this writing I realise that I too have a role to play in this landscape. This awareness is what is inspiring this writing and also helps to develop my artistic practise. Through reading and writing I have learnt that even without always realising it my work has always been linked by themes of identity and representation. It is also important to acknowledge that simply creating work sets the tone because it is a refusal to be silent and conform. Having the ability to create art that works as activism is something that is a privilege, 'I grew up to have a voice, circumstances that will always bind me to the rights of the voiceless' (Solnit, 2014, p. 16), working in a way that will inspire or open opportunities for others is a driving force for my practise.

FIGURE 6 IDENTITY? LUCY BECKETT 2020

Figure 6 is the first piece of work I created when embarking on this degree and retrospectively I am now able to refer to it as the starting point of what my practise would encapsulate. The poster is a reference to the culture surrounding gender identity whilst also incorporating a wider conversation surrounding contraception and menstruation. The decision to use cyanotype to create a thumbprint type shape is one that aims to call back to the use of blue liquid as opposed to red in menstrual product advertisements. Every decision I made was intentional and all aimed to work together to create an impactful and educational piece of work.

> 'How are we supposed to know how much of our identity is constructed or real, and how much of it is a product of the society we are brought up in?' (Given, 2020, p. 156)

This was a question taken from a chapter in *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* entitled *Women Do Not Exist to Satisfy the Male Gaze* that I pondered many times when working on this poster and one that I have carried forward into more recent projects. In order to truly progress we have to undertake a personal deconstruction of what the patriarchal society has told us is the truth in regards to all aspects of life. Creating art or writing is a powerful method of discussion to gather a clarity which will provide strength to the cause and our purpose.

Having a starting point within my practise to take me on my journey to writing this thesis was extremely important however, it did not manifest itself artistically again until the end of the second year of my degree.

FIGURE 7 LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU GET HOME SAFE LUCY BECKETT 2022

Figure 7 is an image from a series of images I produced in a project entitled *Let Me Know When You Get Home Safe* which was part of a wider book project *Sisterhood*. This was a body of work that was born out of an outrage because of the countless stories on the news involving safety on the streets for women. According to the *Office For National Statistics* 'Four out of five women felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a park or other open space, compared to two out of five men' (Stripe, 2021). This statistic demonstrates something that is of no surprise to any marginalised communities within society. Although these figures directly refer to cisgender women and men it is something that is sure to be repeated if not amplified when further factors such as gender identity, race, religion, sexuality or disability are taken into account. The idea that 'Violence doesn't have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender' (Solnit, 2014, p. 21) is a bold one however, it is also not one that

the statistics would argue with as there is undeniably a disparity between how different communities feel safe in different environments.

The book was designed to be a piece of activism that was easily accessible to anyone because of its combination of experimental processes and the photographic medium. A huge problem with some of these conversations is that people feel they need to be academically educated in the subjects to join in or have anything valuable to say. As artists we should all aim to work to break the stigma around these topics not just for others but for ourselves. It is also extremely important that we realise we do have to directly discuss issues to create a change, us simply taking up space within the art world is a statement in itself and we should not feel we morally have to comment on any subject as a result of our social confines. Producing this book was a defining moment for my practise and is something that has shaped my work going forward however, it was also one of the hardest projects that I have ever created. The strength to produce work within personal subject matters is something indescribable and is an important point for the artist and viewer to consider in regard to this type of work.

The outlook that I have discussed is only something that can be gained from learning and educating ourselves on the issues that we feel affected by. My current project does not deal directly or obviously with themes that I have focussed on before such as gender specific issues. However, it still deals with themes of representation but angled in a different way.

FIGURE 8 IMAGES FROM THE SERIES NANNY AND GRANDAD LUCY BECKETT 2022

Figure 8 are examples from this current project, it is not a complete body of work yet and therefore it only has a working title of *Nanny and Grandad*. Through this project I aim to represent my grandparents who are people I know so well yet do not fully understand. When creating this project I am considering the idea of how self-representation can differ to how others may represent you. I am working towards this by combining photos from family albums as well as my own analogue photographs. In *Camera Lucida (*1980) by Roland Barthes he deconstructs and writes about themes of representation in photography as well as how it can be used to convey feeling and family narratives. 'Photography, moreover, began, historically, as an art of the Person' (Barthes, 1980) encapsulates the idea that photography is an extension of our own eyes and that we are able to use to medium to materialise our own thoughts and visions. This idea created a pillar of discussion within this project and one that I am constantly evaluating through other projects. How am I able to use my work to convey how I feel about certain topics whilst simultaneously being aware of how these representations influence and comment on the wider art world?

The project also helps to me educate my own family on how my artistic voice can be used in order to incite a change which will trickle down in order to add to the wider conversation. It is an important reminder of my writing earlier on in this thesis, that a collective of small actions can lead to a bigger change. Utilising the circumstances that influence you personally is an extremely effective technique for producing work that will infiltrate the world of canonised art and make a lasting impact, that will perhaps inspire others who may feel they do not have a voice to comment on their own circumstances. The purpose of this project is to further root myself within my community and identity, this will only work to strengthen and fuel the more political or activist style work that has just as much of an important role within this sphere.

CONCLUSION

When considering this body of writing the purpose is to inspire other people from oppressed communities to break free from the canonised cage we find ourselves in. Things in the world are being forced into change as those who have been left out demand to be noticed, the art world is no exception to this. There are an unlimited number of artists who are emerging from the shadows and challenging the standard of what is expected. It is an exciting time to be a creative as this is the development of an new era of art, one that can perhaps be labelled as progressive. My own practise as well as the artists, creatives, curators and institutions mentioned within this writing are a few notable examples that really set the tone for this new vision of creativity.

> ' i stand
> on the sacrifices
> of a million women before me
> thinking
> *what can i do*
> *to make this mountain taller*
> *so the women after me*
> *can see farther'*
> (Kaur, 2017)

This poem is the perfect embodiment of the flame that we all need to light within us as artists in order to push for further change. Alone we are not able to able to do all the work but if we join together in a

way that promotes intersectionality and openness then we can make an undoable difference. By visiting these refreshing exhibitions, reading writing from different communities from our own and absorbing art being produced by those brave enough to speak in a world that tells them no, we are making a change. The noise of a collective is harder to ignore and the bigger the institutions and figures we can gain on our side the more chance we have of shattering the canon into non-existence. If the reader takes anything from this writing it should be that things are changing no matter how small or insignificant, they are may appear and that now is the time to be inspired and active. It is easy to be passive when the situation seems overwhelming but the most important thing to be is active, make work and use creativity to channel our energy. It is also important to be excited, anger does not need to be the only fuel for strengthening the development of art. The artistic landscape is changing form and as a result is opening doors to the oppressed, it has never been more important for me to be a young woman making art.

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