

The Countess Report

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Introduction

Elvis Richardson's blog CoUNTess: Women count in the art-world has published data on gender representation in Australian contemporary visual arts since 2008. Its data-collecting activities provide hard evidence of the need for – and add substantial traction to – action by women artists working to bring gender equality to art education, art practice and contemporary art culture. It is frequently cited.

Responses to gender inequality in contemporary art have increased internationally over the past few years. They include influential New York critic Jerry Saltz's ongoing commentary on gender statistics, The East London Fawcett Group's Great East London Art Audit, a data collection project focusing on London contemporary art galleries in 2012, the 2014, Gallery Tally in which Los Angeles artist Micol Hebron asked artists to submit posters visualising the gender representation of commercial galleries then exhibited them online, and the continuing artistic activism of the US-based Guerrilla Girls and Pussy Galore. All these projects have used statistics about unequal gender representation to question how notions of quality and taste apply in determining artistic merit and success.

The Countess Report is a benchmarking project and online resource on gender equality in the Australian contemporary art sector. Put together by Elvis Richardson, it compiles and analyses data on education, prizes, funding, art media, organisational makeup, and exhibitions of various kinds across a wide range of galleries including national and State, regional, commercial, ARIs (Artist Run Galleries), and CAOs (Contemporary Art Spaces). The Countess Report is based on publically available data collected from websites, exhibition catalogues, magazines and media in the calendar year 2014, chosen because the data set is recent, complete and still readily available. Detailed findings now available in The Countess Report offer evidence not previously available and provide a test case sample for future benchmarking.

The project has been designed as a public resource in the form of a website <http://www.thecountessreport.com.au> where the base collated data is presented. The results of this data are also available in summary form in this report. The project raises questions rather than provides answers, although this report does contain preliminary findings and initial recommendations for future research and activities.

The Countess Report was conducted by Elvis Richardson, through the initiative and research funding of the Cruthers Art Foundation and assistance provided by NAVA (National Association for the Visual Arts), an Advisory Committee and other paid and unpaid assistants.

While previous Australian and overseas studies have dealt with collecting and commenting on data about gender representation in visual art, The Countess Report adds a significant and extensive new contribution by expanding the field to include data on visual art education, art prizes and art media as well as exhibitions.

When compared with data collected by countesses.blogspot.com since 2008, this study shows some significant changes to gender representation in 2014, including a higher percentage than previously recorded of female artists exhibiting in some types of Australian galleries and exhibitions.

The Biennales, ARIs and prize winners categories for 2014 all included more women than men, possibly reflecting structures in which decisions are made by several people of mixed genders rather than one individual. Whatever the reason, the result indicates that it is possible to achieve equal opportunity in practice and the question arises - with the percentage of women as high as 70% of the total pool of all artists at the point where they graduate from art schools, should 50/50 be the goal?

Commercial galleries showing 40% female artists and state museums showing 34% female artists in 2014 tell a different story – one where commerce, history and taste are more traditional and hierarchical. The closer an artist gets to money, prestige and power the more likely they are to be male and male artists' work sells for higher prices than female artists' work. These results are not surprising as they mirror those in almost all other areas of creative production as well as in almost all spheres of power and influence.

This study reveals that a major influence on the perceived visibility and impact of female artists is their extremely low representation in art media – considerably lower than their actual presence in exhibitions and on gallery rosters. Only 34% of all articles and reviews in art magazines in our study featured women. A study of 2014 newspaper art reviews longer than 800 words revealed that the greater presence of women in exhibitions has gone largely ignored in those publications.

General Summary of the findings

This study has found that in 2014 female artists may be claiming new ground, and certainly that the number of women showing in Australian galleries is rising, but that the pool of male art graduates still have between three and four times the number of exhibition opportunities as the pool of female graduates. The study establishes that women are 74% of visual art graduates and 48% of exhibiting artists in ARI's the most gender equal of the gallery types. Both categories – art schools and ARIs – are open call. A surprising and pleasing result is that the percentage of female artists showing in CAOs galleries rose from previous levels that were consistently below 40% to 45% in 2014. Art Prizes also took a turn for the better, awarding 56% of the prizes to women,

though only 47% of the prize pool by value. When we looked at prize data historically, the 2014 result indicated a recent and significant improvement perhaps because women won three of the richest art prizes in this year. The analysed biennales and public galleries also achieved percentage representation of women in the mid to high 40s.

Commercial galleries showed little change from previous Countess findings and remained consistent with 40% female artists represented and exhibited during 2014. While representation of women in state museum exhibitions achieved only 34%, a case study of acquisitions by the National Gallery of Victoria in 2014 showed that 44% of works acquired were by female artists.

A brief summary of the findings by category.

1. The review of **Educational Institutions** is important as the exit number and gender of graduates determines the size and make up of the pool of contemporary artists. In Throsby & Hollister's 2003 economic study of professional artists. Don't give up your day job, 67% of visual art respondents nominated formal tertiary education as the most important training they undertake to become an artist (p30) while 15% were self-taught and 18% nominated other private training.

*Our data collection on **Educational Institutions** found that those graduating with degrees in fine art or visual art in 2014 were 73% female and 27% male, while those with post-graduate degrees were 75% female and 25% male.*

2. **Artist Run Initiatives**, which, as the name suggests, are programmed and managed by artists, are seen both as independent spaces that foster experimentation and as sites where professional experience for emerging visual artists takes shape in a self-organising way. Artist run initiatives accept proposals for exhibition rather than working by invitation only. The data show a greater representation of women as participants in this sector as opposed to the invitation only exhibitions in museums and public galleries. Women held most of the organisational and administrative roles in ARIs in the period of study while men held the majority of the curatorial and advisory roles, reflecting a common pattern of women in supportive, organisational and housekeeping roles.

*Our data collection on **Artist Run Initiatives** found 49% female artists and 39% male artists participated in the exhibition programs in 2014 while the remaining 12% were collaborations. Women took on 67% of the organisational and board roles and men 33%.*

3. CAOs are members of **Contemporary Art Organisations** Australia, a national network of twelve independent art spaces, triennially funded by state and federal governments. CAOs produce, present and interpret artwork created by living artists. CAOs galleries are an important area for data collection as they focus exclusively on contemporary visual art and support contemporary artists at all career levels. As recipients of public

funding it is not unreasonable to expect an even distribution of gender participation. CAOs galleries originally operated around a proposal based model but most have now adopted a museum style invitation only model.

*Our data collection on **Contemporary Art Organisations** found 45% female artists and 48% male artists and 7% collaborations participated in their exhibition programs in 2014. Women held 47% of the Director roles while men held 53%. The organisations' board members were 45% women and 55% men, and the board chairs were 31% women and 69% men. When Countess blog counted a sample of CAOs galleries in 2011 women were at 35% representation in exhibitions and at 38% in 2013, so 45% in 2014 is a very healthy result.*

4. **Art Prizes** offer a chance at the jackpot in the exposure economy of contemporary art. Prizes data collected for this study reveals that overall women were selected 54% of the time as finalists, but how many applied? Data on the gender representation of applicants is not generally publicly available. In a 2009 countesses.blogspot.com post on The Basil Sellers Art Prize quoted statistics on the gender of applicants released by the prize organizers revealing that 39% were female artists who subsequently only made up 7% of the selected finalists. The Basil Sellers Art Prize established in 2008 awards \$100,000 for an artwork addressing themes of art and sport and provides an affecting example of how male dominated narratives (like sport) can shape curatorial and conceptual underpinnings sidelining the value and contribution of female artists who for obvious reasons might not be championing sport in quite the same way as their male colleagues. While sport claims to be unifying and community minded the absence of women in this prize could perhaps tell a different story.

*Our data collection on 76 **Art Prizes** in 2014 found 56% of the winners were female artists and 44% male artists, but also found that women received 47% and men 52% of the total prize pool of \$1.35M. A further case study showed that in the five richest prizes over the previous ten years 12 women won 29% and 25 men won 64% of the total prize pool of \$3.1m. In 2014 female artists won three of the major art prizes which considerably affected the overall positive outcome for women in this category. This is a standard we hope will continue.*

5. **Commercial Galleries** are an important area of study as gallery representation can significantly influence the success of an artist by giving access to greater financial and exposure opportunities with the gallery sharing responsibility for promotion and sales. Commercial galleries' artists make up the majority of artists exhibited in state museums and biennales and reviewed in art media. In the months when international survey shows are held in state museums, the local commercial galleries are simultaneously more likely to exhibit a male than female artist.

*Our data collection on **Commercial Galleries** found 40% female artists, 55% male artists and 5% collaborations participated in 923 exhibitions in 2014.*

Artists listed as being represented by commercial galleries in the same period were 40% women and 58% men and 2% collaborations.

6. Government **Funding** in Australia assists contemporary artists to pursue their artistic activities. It provides funding as well as support and prestige. Government funding affects the type of art seen and the artists who continue to practice. The category of Funding collected data on individual recipients in 2014 from the project grants categories of two funding bodies, The Australia Council for the Arts and Arts Victoria. The Australia Council exercises equal opportunity principles with the data showing an even gender distribution of funds, proving organisations can clearly uphold gender equity and artistic merit simultaneously.

*Our data collection on **Funding Bodies** found that, from a pool of \$2.8m, the Australia Council Visual Art Board funded an exactly equal number of 47% female artists and 47% male artists and 6% collaborations.*

7. **Museums** represent the state sanctioned height of artistic merit and as such the data reveals how tradition and discrimination hide within the notion of artistic excellence and merit. Most artists who are selected for museum exhibitions are drawn from the commercial gallery sector. Exhibitions in museums are not open call and generally cannot be applied for, but are by invitation only and as a result show why the economy of exposure and reputation hold so strongly. Museums do pay nominal artists fees to exhibit existing works and do commission new work in the context of curated shows and solo exhibitions.

*Our data collection on **State Museums** found 34% female artists, 59% male artists and 7% collaborations were represented in the exhibitions held in 2014. When we looked more closely, we found that of a total of 26 solo exhibitions by contemporary artists in state museums, 38% were by female artists, 58% by male artists and 4% by collaborations. A case study of total acquisitions of Australian fine art by the National Gallery of Victoria during 2014 showed that 44% of the work collected was by female artists, 53% by male artists and 1% by collaborations with 2% unknown.*

8. **Public and Regional Galleries** is our largest category and includes regional art spaces, national museums and metropolitan art centres. Exhibition programs at regional galleries include solo and group shows of regional artists as well as touring exhibitions, art prizes and collection display. These galleries generally invite artists to exhibit, while some may take applications. All should be paying an artist's fee and on occasion provide a production or presentation budget. Therefore an exhibition for an artist at a regional gallery can represent a significant professional opportunity.

*Our data collection on **Public and Regional Galleries** found 45% female artists, 50% male artists and 5% collaborations were represented in*

exhibitions during 2014.

9. We collected data on the gender of participants in the three international and national contemporary **Biennale** survey exhibitions held during 2014 – the 19th Biennale of Sydney, the 14th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and the Tarrawarra Biennale 2014. Biennales are held in public museums and galleries. They survey and select artists from national or international locations under a curatorial theme and produce essays and catalogues. To be curated into a Biennale is a career highlight for any artist, but typically artists receive unequally distributed funding which may not cover the cost of making the new work exhibited. It is at this intersection that relationships between museums, commercial galleries and collectors can provide the extra benefit of support for the represented artist both financially and in kind. The requirement in Biennales for “museum quality work” excludes artists without these resources and disguises this exclusion as artistic merit.

We noted in the one international biennale – BOS19 – where the catalogue states the artist's date of birth, that 88% of the artists were under 40 years old. Further investigation showed most had commercial gallery representation and many had exhibited in other international biennales. This indicates that most Biennale artists are selected from a networked pool of those who are already deemed successful. Nevertheless, it was heartening to see that female artists were so well represented in this exhibition as they may form a vanguard.

*Our data collection on **Biennales** found 43% female artists, 41% male artists and 16% collaborations. Women outnumbered men in all but the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (41% female artists and 53% male artists). There were 2 female curators and 2 male curators.*

10. We collected data on **Art Media** and counted the gender of artists represented in articles, reviews and advertising in national contemporary art magazines and media including fully publically funded as well as strictly private enterprises. Inclusion in the economy of exposure in art related media is essential to a viable artistic practice. Artists who are not with a copyright licensing agency typically do not receive even small fees when images of their work are used in publications, and reward may be located only in a possible increase in professional reputation and relevance to current and historical dialogues arising from exposure in articles, reviews and advertising. The representation of female artists in this important format showed the lowest results in this survey and may account for the lower visibility and impact of female artists' exhibitions. The actual higher participation of women in this report's categories has yet to impact on the art media.

*Our data collection on **Art Media** found 34% female artists, 61% male artists and 5% collaborations were the subject of feature articles and reviews, while the covers included only 20% female artists and 80% male artists.*

Recommendations

Counting gender representation is a fundamental tool of feminist research methodology and in this report the numbers simply serve to highlight who is getting a voice, platform and support in all areas of contemporary visual arts culture in Australia.

1. *The Countess Report* recommends that stakeholders in the Australian visual art sector routinely collect, analyse and publish gender disaggregated data and use it to inform decision making.
2. *The Countess Report* recommends that stakeholders in the Australian visual art sector promote and advocate for gender equality in their activities, operations and policies.

Areas for further investigation and study

1. Why so many female visual art graduates (74%) and so few female artists in the commercial and museum sector (40%).
2. State Museum collection practices require further study considering the relationships between museums, commercial galleries and private collectors.

Data

1. The data collected are drawn from artists who have exhibited across a range of exhibition spaces in Australia from Artist Run Initiatives to Museums and Biennales. In addition, other organisational roles have been counted including board members, board chairs, curators and directors. The data collection is extensive and contains over 20,000 individual entries detailing role (artist/curator/director etc.) name, gender, exhibition name, type of exhibition (solo, group), the organisation name and date.
2. The website and data together form a resource that can be available for future comparative studies.
3. *The Countess Report* draws on publicly available data collected from websites, exhibition catalogues, magazines and media.
4. Where data were not available in the public realm, we extended direct requests to organisations and institutions.
5. *The Countess Report* relied on the veracity of available data whether in the public realm or acquired by direct request.
6. No independent investigation and verification of data was undertaken.

7. We invite you to submit appropriate data to countesses@gmail.com if your organisation was not approached to provide information during the main round of data collection.

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