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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Gendered Obstacles in Contemporary Art: The Art Market, Motherhood and Invisible Ecologies**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This article addresses issues of gender inequality in the UK's contemporary art sector. It combines quantitative data on shifts in gender representation from over a hundred commercial contemporary art galleries in London in 2016, 2019 and 2022 with qualitative interviews with leading gallery directors. The research seeks to uncover structural inequalities in the commercial art sector which continue to create obstacles for female artists. In particular, we highlight the impact of the myth of meritocracy and an insistence on "quality" (particularly in relation to masculine ideology around 'genius'); the continuing relationship between art history and the contemporary art market; the impact of parenting on the careers of female artists; and, the commercial sector's influence on the public and not-for-profit arena in light of dwindling government financial support of public institutions. Our key findings underline that the commercial sector is increasingly necessary for career success, and that biases against women in the commercial art world inhibit opportunities for women artists and the number of women being represented by commercial galleries. Our data, collected over a period of six years, shows a mere 1% annual improvement, to just 34% in 2022.

**| KEYWORDS**

Visual Arts; Gender Inequality; Commercial Galleries; Feminism; Contemporary Art; Motherhood

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**1. Introduction**

Participation in the visual arts, and the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), is generally characterised by ideals of meritocracy, liberalism and egalitarianism (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Littler, 2017). As this research will show, the historical exclusion of women from the canon of art (Nochlin, 1971; Pollock, 1996; Higgie, 2021), continues to define the mechanisms of the contemporary art world today. By addressing the issues of gender inequality in London's commercial contemporary art sector, this paper explores the role of the commercial sector in contributing to and maintaining this inequality. The article argues that the increasing influence of the commercial art world defines and determines an artist's success in the broader visual art ecology. In doing so, it builds on work already undertaken on the representation of female artists (McMillan, 2020) and provides the most detailed analysis of the commercial visual art sector to date. While across the CCIs fewer women appear to reach the pinnacle of their disciplines (Conor et al., 2015; McRobbie 2009), we argue that a sectorial perspective enables us to investigate the presence of specific systemic structures at play in the contemporary art world.

In May 2016, Lisson Gallery, one of the most influential commercial contemporary art galleries in the world, opened a new gallery in New York. The inaugural exhibition presented work by Carmen Herrera, who at ninety-one years old has only received recognition during the last decade. Lisson Gallery celebrated the opening event with a formal, posed photograph on Instagram titled 'some of our artists' featuring eighteen artists, seventeen of which were male (see Fig. 1).

The image in Figure 1 was re-posted on Instagram by prominent New York Art Critic, Jerry Saltz with the caption 'it's a sausage party at Lisson!'. A day later the image was removed from Saltz's feed. In private correspondence with one of the authors, Jerry Saltz declared that Lisson did indeed represent many great women artists and the post consequently poorly represented Lisson Gallery. This was a surprising choice by the critic who is known for courting controversy.

The exchange prompted a closer inspection of Lisson's gender ratio and the beginning of this research project. In April 2016, of the fifty-one artists Lisson represented via their London gallery: only ten were women. This led to the bigger question of whether Lisson Gallery was a particularly poor example of gender equality, or whether this was representative of the wider commercial sector and why. Perhaps most importantly, what is the wider impact of low representation of female artists in the commercial sector for career progression.



(Fig. 1)  
Lisson Gallery, Instagram post, 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2016  
Celebrating the opening of Carmen Herrera at Lisson Gallery's inaugural New York Gallery opening

In order to address these questions, this article combines quantitative data on gender representation in commercial contemporary art galleries in London in 2016, 2019 and 2022 with qualitative interviews with nine gallery and museum directors. The aim of the interviews was to unravel the reasons behind the quantitative data, and reflect on the wider implications of inequality in the commercial sector. The focus of the interviews was on galleries that represented fifty per cent or more female artists but the sample included a small subset of more established female gallery directors with lower representation. We also interviewed two public sector directors who had made public comments and policy changes to address issues of female representation. We were keen to examine the art ecology (Holden, 2015), specifically interconnections and interdependencies between the commercial and public sector, and why equality for female artists in the commercial sector is crucial to addressing systemic discrimination.

The next section presents literature on the history of inequalities and representation in the visual arts, which provides a wider context for the ideas that emerged from our data. We then outline our methodological approach and the empirical data collected. Subsequently we discuss our quantitative findings on the representation of women in commercial galleries, including change (or lack thereof) between 2016 and 2022, followed by themes from the interviews with gallery directors; perceptions of "quality" and the myth of meritocracy; the poor outcomes for female artists in the art market; and the impact of motherhood on female artists' careers. We conclude with wider reflections on what impact a lack of support from the commercial sector means for women's careers in the visual arts.

## 2. Literature Review: Gendered Landscapes in Contemporary Art

The visual arts can be understood as an interconnected ecology (Holden, 2015) of alliances, interdependent relationships and inequality created through often-invisible exchanges and with non-monetary values. At one end of the spectrum, artists in the UK earn on average £16,150 per annum (TBR, 2018), yet the sector is propped up by the extreme wealth of individuals through philanthropic practices, underpinned by tax incentives and lucrative networking that the arts offer to high-net-worth individuals.

Additionally, the institutions that constitute the largely visible component of the funded visual arts sector (museums, galleries and festivals), rely on the free, or almost free, labour of artists (Paying Artists, 2016). The sizable donations of individuals and commercial corporations that prop up dwindling government support are rarely directed into the pockets of the artists producing creative content. The impact of this financial model on the shape and ecology of the artworld is rarely discussed. Questions have instead been largely led by feminist institutional critique in the United States (Guerilla Girls, 2020; Fraser, 2005) where the privatization of the visual arts is far more established. Some institutions have been established in Europe and the USA in response to this, most notably the 'National Museum of Women in the Arts' in Washington and the 'Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions' in Paris. However, until recently, when Frances Morris made a public commitment to displaying fifty per cent women in the 'Artist Room's' program at Tate Modern, there has been very little institutional response or commitment to gender inequality in the UK.

The current context of inequality operates despite the backdrop of over sixty years of feminist art history, feminist art criticism and the feminist art movement. There have been some attempts in the UK to bridge academic research and the visual art world, for example, Katy Deepwell (1996) in 'New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies'. Yet almost three decades on, the impact of research by feminist art historians and feminist critical studies scholars is evidenced by incredibly slow change in UK commercial and public art institutions (McMillan, 2020).

There are a number of obstacles that impact academic research into the commercial visual arts sector. They include the contemporary art world's poor transparency regarding sales, the global nature of galleries, and the gatekeeper structures of the industry. Discussions that question the impact of the industry on female artists continue to be met with resistance, 'accused of such sins as neglecting the issue of quality, destroying the canon, scanting the innate visual dimension of the artwork, reducing art to the context of its production – in other words, of undermining the ideological, and above all, aesthetic, biases of the discipline' (Nochlin, 1989, pxii). The persistence of these attitudes was evident in all the interviews we undertook for this research.

Early feminist interventions into the gallery system, particularly in the United States in the 1970s and 80s, attempted to redress the systemic ideologies that had been shaping the canon of art. As Martha Rosler (1979, p18) notes, efforts such as 'the formation of militantly insurgent artist cooperative galleries [...] and the emergence of "alternative spaces" for showing work. [...] spurred by feminists' resolve to reach audiences both outside and within the art world, despite their exclusion from established institutions, evidenced by the miniscule gallery and museum quotas for women.'

The potential of these approaches has not been exhausted, however the increasing inequality and cost of living in global art centres, has undermined opportunities to pursue alternative spaces (McLean, 2014). This has most recently been witnessed by the large number of smaller galleries closing, evidenced in the data we collected between 2016 and 2022. As our data also indicates, the smaller, less profitable galleries are also more likely to represent more women.

The persistent organising and activism of groups such as the Guerilla Girls (2020) have continued to shape and inform discussions about the representation of artists in institutions. In 1989, a 'wienie count' (Kahlo & Kollwitz, 2010, p.204) of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York found only five per cent of the artists were women, but eighty-five per cent of the nudes were female. In 2017, at an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London, they asked 'Is it even worse in Europe?', by presenting responses to a questionnaire sent to 383 museums in Europe. While only twenty-five per cent responded, it painted an even grimmer picture than anticipated. While the data was not collated quantitatively, it underscored the weight of European history in skewing the representation of female artists. The press statement asked:

'Are museums today presenting a diverse history of contemporary art or the history of money and power? [...] Unless museums and Kunsthallen show art as diverse as the cultures they claim to represent, they're not showing the history of art, they're just preserving the history of wealth and power.' (Whitechapel, 2017, n.d.)

More recently, there have been several UK and international studies on gender representation in visual art which provide context for our own investigation. The Great East London Art Audit's (GELAA) analysis of 134 commercial art galleries found that only thirty-one per cent of the 3,164 artists represented were women (GLEAA, 2013). The Freelands Foundation annual report, 'Representation of Female Artists in Britain', highlights issues in other commercial settings: in 2019, eighty-eight per cent of artists featured in Sotheby's three contemporary art auctions across the year were male – an improvement of only 2% from the previous year – and eighty per cent of the highest grossing sales were works by men (McMillan, 2020). Meanwhile, the Freelands Foundation report showed that in 2019, in the twenty-eight major galleries, the number of female artists presenting during Frieze week fell by four per cent from the previous year (*ibid*). In Australia, 'The Countess Report' (Prceovich, Richardson & Samuels, 2019) paints a similar though slightly different picture. Whilst gender parity was reached in the most recent collection of data pertaining to commercial galleries in 2019 (fifty-three per cent) – up from almost thirty-seven per cent in 2016 – representation in state museums and galleries had dropped 3% over the same period to slightly less than thirty-four per cent. The changes in Australia are

encouraging, but they are contextualised by a much smaller, local art market without the influence of major artists and global galleries.

A gender blind study with participants evaluating the values of works going to auction revealed that when participants were told an artwork was by a woman, they estimated the value of the artwork as substantially less than when the gender was not evident (Adams et al., 2017). Evaluated across forty-five countries, it also found that where countries already had high gender inequality across society, that this was reflected in auction values for women artists (ibid). This study highlights the often, immeasurable effect of unconscious bias in the valuing of artwork by women. Crucial to understanding these mid and late career statistics is in recognising that across the developed world, almost seventy per cent of art school graduates are women (McMillan, 2020).

In the UK, public institutions are suffering from lower funding levels and more demand for public and community engagement. Museums, like those in the United States, are consequently looking to source financial support from commercial galleries to support exhibition programs and commissioning projects. This has led to a situation where institutions can less afford to show artists who don't have the backing of commercial galleries. Pogrebin (2016) reported that galleries in the US are asked to contribute between \$10,000 to \$200,000 to museum shows, a model that is being adopted to prop up dwindling government support for public institutions in the UK. Halperin (2015) analysed 590 solo exhibitions in sixty-eight museums in the United States between 2007 and 2013 and found that one third of artists were represented by one of the five mega-galleries - Gagosian Gallery, Pace, Marian Goodman Gallery, David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth. It is for these reasons that gender equality in commercial art galleries matter.

### 3. Methodology

In April 2016, a quantitative analysis was undertaken of the gender of artists represented by 111 commercial contemporary art galleries operating in London (see appendix one), representing 2,502 artists. This was achieved by categorising the artists named on their websites. If it was unclear whether the artists identified as male or female, further research was conducted into articles and use of pronouns, by the artists themselves, the gallery or journalists. There were no non-gender identifying artists identified in this research. Where artists were part of a collaboration or partnership, they were split into gender pools.

While this was 'snapshot' data, reflective of the website data available in April 2016, the results still provided useful insights. We found that only twenty (seventeen per cent) of those galleries represented fifty per cent or more women. Some represented none. Overall, women accounted for thirty-two per cent of represented artists. The process was then replicated in 2019 (see appendix two) with ninety-five galleries, and in 2022 with a further reduction to eighty-seven galleries, to assess whether there had been any change in representation (see appendix three).

Between 2016 and 2022 a number of galleries included in the 2016 data collection had closed, were no longer showing contemporary art, or had moved out of London and therefore were not included in the 2019 and 2022 audit. It is interesting to note that during this time almost all the larger galleries included in the sample increased the numbers of artists on their books, suggesting they were hoovering up artists/business from the more precarious galleries who had closed.

In response to the 2016 data, interviews were sought with gallery directors between 2017 and 2020, primarily those who represented fifty per cent or more female artists. These galleries were typically small to medium size galleries located in London and were not part of global franchises. In addition to this, an interview was undertaken with Maureen Paley who was representative of older, more established female gallery directors who had poor gender equality (twenty-six per cent in 2016; twenty-nine and a half per cent in 2019 and increasing to slightly more than thirty-one per cent in 2022). An additional, more established gallery director was also interviewed but she later declined to be involved. Alongside seven commercial galleries, two additional interviews with institutional directors, Helen Legg (Spike Island, now Tate Liverpool) and Frances Morris (Tate Modern), were undertaken. Both directors had publicly made policy changes to support more women and were included to explore the connections between the commercial and public arenas (see table one).

Table one. Gallery Directors included in the research

| Category                    | Name                          | Institution/Gallery  | Female artists 2016 (%) <sup>1</sup> | Female artists 2019(%) | Female artists 2022 (%) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Commercial Gallery Director | Rozsa Farkus                  | Arcadia Missa  | 87.5%                                | 77%                    | 50%                     |
| Commercial Gallery Director | Maureen Paley                 | Maureen Paley Gallery  | 26%                                  | 29.5%                  | 31.11%                  |
| Commercial Gallery Director | Alexandra Warder & Lana Bount | Bosse & Baum   | 100%                                 | 75%                    | 83.3%                   |
| Commercial Gallery Director | Pilar Corrias                 | Pilar Corrias Gallery  | 55%                                  | 60%                    | 69.7%                   |
| Commercial Gallery Director | Annka Kultys                  | Annka Kultys Gallery   | 75%                                  | 66.6%                  | 50%                     |
| Commercial Gallery Director | Lisa Panting                  | Hollybush Gardens  | 60%                                  | 66.6%                  | 77.78%                  |
| Commercial Gallery Director | Marisa Bellani                | Roman Road Gallery   | N/A                                  | N/A                    | N/A                     |
| Institutional director      | Frances Morris                | Tate Modern  | N/A                                  | N/A                    | N/A                     |
| Institutional director      | Helen Legg                    | Spike Island, Bristol (Currently Director of Tate Liverpool) | N/A                                  | N/A                    | N/A                     |

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at participants’ place of work and ranged from one to three hours. All participants consented to take part in a recorded interview and be named in the study. They were also given prior notice of the main discussion topics which included: their perceptions of challenges for women in the art world; personal experiences of gender bias in their career; how they saw this issue in the commercial sector affecting the wider art ecology; and whether they actively supported women artists (and how).

The limitations of these interviews were that the participants may have seen this as a public relations opportunity to situate their gallery positively within the research and wider sector. Claims made by gallerists were therefore substantiated through further research where possible. These well-known directors may have felt guarded or defensive, or not able to recognise their own implicit bias; and how this effected their perception of the value and potential of the artists they represented. Therefore, in addition to taking part in recorded interviews, all interviewees were able to give ‘off the record’ comments, which whilst remaining confidential, nonetheless informed the course of this research. Complete anonymity may have resulted in more candid responses, but the methodological design deliberately aimed to install transparency in the research, to counter the opaque mechanisms of the art world. Ethics was sought from King’s College London (ethics reference number MR/16/17-19).

**4. Results/Findings**

This section presents the quantitative findings on the representation of female artists in commercial art galleries in London in 2016, 2019 and 2022 with comparisons drawn between the years. Here we discuss the key findings from this analysis, with the full breakdown of the data available in appendices one (2016) two (2019) and three (2022). In 2022 just 34% of the artists represented in our data set were women, with a one per cent increase per year since 2016. Based on this rate of change, it will take a further thirty years for the commercial sector to represent the same number of women graduating from art school (McMillan, 2020).

Of the 111 commercial galleries in London surveyed in 2016, only twenty (eighteen per cent) showed fifty per cent or more female artists, meaning eighty-two per cent of galleries showed less than fifty per cent women. Sixty-four per cent of galleries represented less than forty per cent women; and fifty-two per cent of galleries less, than thirty per cent. Twenty-six per cent represented less than twenty per cent female artists.

In 2019, twenty-five (twenty-six per cent) of the ninety-five galleries surveyed represented more than fifty per cent female artists. Almost seventy-four per cent represented less than fifty per cent women. Just over sixty-four per cent of galleries represented less

<sup>1</sup> Statistics are not given for institutions as they are not comparable with the commercial galleries included in the 2016, 2019 and 2022 surveys; Marisa Bellani (Roman Road Gallery) was interviewed in addition to the original sample to comment on the wider art market as a gallery which does not represent artists but sells work through exhibitions.

than forty per cent; forty per cent of galleries represented less than thirty per cent and almost eighteen per cent of galleries represented less than twenty per cent women.

In 2022, twenty-seven of the eighty-seven galleries surveyed represented fifty per cent or more female artists, equating to just twenty-six per cent. There was still almost fifteen per cent of galleries who represented less than twenty per cent.

What these changes indicate is that there were some improvements at the top and bottom of the spectrum, but there was very little change in the 'middle ground' galleries. Overall, the shifts amounted to tiny annual increments from twenty-eight per cent of female artists in 2016, thirty one per cent in 2019 and almost thirty five per cent in 2022 – less than a one per cent each year, across six years.

In 2016, the five most significant London galleries had some of the least gender equal statistics. Of the larger galleries, White Cube represented the most women at thirty-one per cent, followed by David Zwirner at twenty-five per cent and then almost at the bottom of the table was Lisson Gallery at sixteen per cent; Gagosian at fourteen per cent and Pace at thirteen per cent. Of the twenty galleries which represented fifty per cent or more women in 2016, only three would be considered mid-level or reasonably influential galleries – Frith Street Gallery (seventy-four per cent); Pilar Corrias (fifty-three per cent) and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery (fifty per cent). Some of these galleries are not driven by purely financial goals and may therefore have more flexibility in considering the artists they represent. However, a smaller emphasis on financial success isn't always beneficial for under-represented artists who ultimately want to make enough money to support themselves and develop new work for museums and other projects.

In the 2019 data there were very few significant improvements. Gagosian had increased the number of women they represented by a mere half a per cent (to 14.5%) but had notably doubled the number of artists they represented in the same period from 121 to 240. In 2022 Gagosian represented 268 artists and had increased their ratio of female artists by five per cent to just over twenty per cent. Pace Gallery had increased by almost five per cent in 2019, but still only eighteen per cent of their artists were women. In 2022 they had increased the number of women by almost 3% a year to twenty-one per cent. Lisson had increased the number of female artists they represented by seven per cent in 2019, but again, only to twenty-three per cent, which then dropped in 2022 to eighteen per cent. David Zwirner had decreased by almost two per cent to twenty-four per cent in 2019; and then made a substantial increase to almost thirty-eight per cent in 2022.

On average however, most galleries who made improvements, did so at approximately one per cent per year. The more profitable galleries, in increasing the representation of artists who are women, were more likely to do so by securing deceased estates, rather than investing in, and supporting younger or mid-career artists. This suggests that only once an artist's career and insertion in the art-canon has been secured that the 'risky' business of supporting women artists is mitigated.

What becomes clear when examining this data, is the less (living) female artists you have, the more profitable your gallery appears to be. In the remainder of the paper, we reflect on gallerist's perspectives and their perceptions of the barriers to gender equality in the art world.

#### **4.1 'Quality not quotas'**

One method of addressing a lack of representation is through quotas. Frances Morris is well-known for implementing gender quotas into the permanent displays and acquisitions at the Tate Modern, although not without challenges from within the organisation. She stated 'I feel I have to be a bit strident about stuff that I would have thought would be so obvious.' Morris discussed the importance of directors and curators making conscious choices about representation in exhibitions and collections to address both conscious and unconscious bias. Her argument is that women needed to 'see' themselves in the institution and operating on larger scales, to re-evaluate the kinds of practices they can inhabit.

'I remember a colleague saying we have to have a room of Twombly, and I said "why do we have to have a room of Twombly? If we do have a room of Twombly then we won't have a room of Magdalena Abakanowicz", you know, simple as that, you have choices [...] we can do what we think is important.' (Frances Morris, Tate Modern)

However, what emerged from the interviews was that most of the galleries, even when they represented 50 per cent or more women, were unaware of their own statistics. Almost all the gallery directors stated that they chose quality over quotas, even when they were quite cognizant of gender equality. Some gallerists rejected the idea of consciously making gender-based choices. For example, Anna Kultys (seventy-five per cent women in 2016; sixty seven per cent in 2019; and down to just fifty per cent in 2022) stated that she chose her artists because they make "the best art" and made comments about society that resonated with her, not

because she was trying to achieve gender quotas. Could it be possible that her lack of interest in keeping check of quotas has in part contributed to the decline of women in her gallery?

There were two galleries with the highest levels of female representation. Bosse & Baum represented one hundred per cent in 2016; seventy-five per cent in 2019; and back up to eighty-three per cent in 2022. Arcadia Missa were eighty-eight per cent in 2016; seventy-seven per cent in 2019; and down to forty per cent female-identifying in 2022, split evenly with forty per cent male artists; with the final almost twenty artists identifying as non-binary. Bosse & Baum and Arcadia Missa were the only two galleries interviewed that stated they deliberately represented female-identifying artists. Both galleries are small, south London galleries (although Arcadia Missa has now relocated to a central London space) who would not be considered significantly profitable at the time of the interviews. The Directors of Bosse & Baum acknowledged that for many people, adopting quotas might be the only way to address gender inequality in instances where that bias is not consciously acknowledged.

'This is actually why quotas, although they're debatable, are quite good, in the sense that you're, kind of, using it as a springboard to put women at the top, so that younger women can see them in positions of power and then they're inspired by them, and they see them across the board.'

Rozsa Farkus, Director of Arcadia Missa, stated that her engagement with quotas is more specifically about gender identity (not sex), and this is what shapes her decision making. However, she is consciously aware that she finds herself more responsive to the work of female-identifying artists: 'when I'm choosing artists to work with, I'm not being like right, they're female. I just respond better to their work; I just think their work's better'. Notably, in 2022, she represents more non-binary artists than any other commercial gallery in London.

Maureen Paley, in seeing the arc of change over her forty-year career, provided valuable insights. That she only represents a small per centage of female artists (twenty-six per cent in 2016; almost thirty per cent in 2019, and just over thirty-one per cent in 2022) didn't seem particularly problematic for her as she could recall a time when galleries represented almost no women at all. Paley named several high-profile women running significant institutions and galleries in the United States and, in speaking about the art world in London, argued that:

'if we look in London about who runs London, not even to mention Maria Balshaw. You've got Frances Morris, you had Julia Peyton-Jones who was formidable, right you now have Lilliana Peel. But you have got Margot Heller, you've got Iwona Blazwick. And so, these are like major institutions.'

Paley quite rightly pointed out these women are not exceptions, but people who underpin global institutions. However, conflating women who *work* in the art world, with a high representation of female artists, continues to turn a blind eye to systemic barriers. As our data shows, it is wrong to assume that female directors will necessarily pave the way for female artists. Some major female directors continue to have very poor gender equality. In the 2022 this included Hannah Barry Gallery (twenty-four per cent); Kate McGarry (thirty-four per cent in 2022); Sadie Coles (thirty-eight per cent) and Victoria Miro (almost forty-two per cent). Quotas would help these galleries address their own unconscious bias. Even the very act of 'doing the numbers' would assist these organisations to make bias visible. These statistics are in tension with the backdrop of female art graduates who continue to make up almost seventy per cent of student cohorts (McMillan, 2020). We are therefore identifying an almost complete gender reversal from who is graduating from art school, and who is going on to achieve a successful career.

#### **4.2 The Art Market and Women's Work**

One of the interesting outcomes from the interviews was that the younger gallerists were very comfortable integrating their approach to gender equality into the way they spoke about their gallery. But then their businesses were doing less 'business' than Maureen Paley and others, and so arguably had far less at stake. The artist's they represented were less likely to be regularly showing in museums or sold on the secondary market. These galleries were far more focused on the primary agenda of exhibition making, generating audiences for their program, and helping their less established artists continue to create work.

They also had a more difficult engagement with the art market than the established galleries, and found themselves also having to navigate the invisible rules of the artworld in relation to running a business. Lisa Panting noted that:

'Like I find, actually, the whole market thing awkward and a bit awful and we're responsible for setting prices. So, you know, to get a reality check is sometimes useful amongst colleagues and they're like, oh God, that's totally fine. What are you worried about? [...] I think there's a tendency to under-price, which is not necessarily to do with the fact that someone wouldn't pay that. [...] You internalise your own sort of... Your own repression, whatever that is, or the societal kind of repression that's around you.'



Gallerists are thus required to additionally negotiate their own gender oppression. Female gallery directors may find themselves having to renegotiate the gendering of what are considered 'cultural expertise' and knowledge (Patel, 2020). This is an important point, as whilst many of these gallerists have majority female staff, the structure of the larger art world, and the kinds of skills and knowledges that are valued, have been shaped by art history which has 'structurally and actively excluded women from being able to participate [...] and from being considered an artist' (Pollock & Parker, 2020). The relationship between a highly gendered writing of art history and the structure of the art market has informed the construction of every major collection. This continues to impact and inform the nature of public displays of art. Frances Morris stated:

'one of the reasons that the art world moves very slowly in making those shifts is that a lot of money is tied up invested in works of art, so to try and tell anybody that Jackson Pollock is less important than Lee Krasner [...] It's money, you're talking about money in relation to the history of art [...] the market has invested very, very heavily in the product of male practices and North American and European practices.'

Despite attempts by various British collections in recent years to apply gender quotas to what is collected, hundreds of years of collecting practices will shape the market well into the future. In 2020, less than two per cent of the National Gallery in London is work by women (McMillan op cit). Additionally, the premium attributed to the value of painting has meant that female artists, often working with less profitable media such as traditional 'craft' and ephemeral practices such as performance and time-based media, have not been adequately invested in (Buszek, 2011). Arguably, the innovations of female artists and their ability to incorporate new modes of creative work has positioned them (albeit mostly invisibly until recently) at the forefront of most Modernist movements, as well as post 1960s practices which were largely defined by large-scale social and political change (Lippard, 1984; Deepwell, 2020). However, this has also meant that the work of female artists, particularly in non-painting practices, has been significantly under-valued (Broude & Garrard 2018). Whilst this diversity in medium made their work innovative, the work is still marginalised in the main commercial arena and auction houses which continue to be dominated by "traditional" mediums such as painting. Many of the gallerists we interviewed supported practices that are situated outside the more profitable, traditional painting and sculptural practices.

#### **4.3 Precarity, risk and barriers to diversity**

While class diversity is not directly addressed in this paper, it is logical to suggest that a lack of class diversity is related to the ability of galleries and artists to sustain themselves on very little income. As noted by Anna Kultys: 'You go to art, because you have to do it, if you want money, you will go and work somewhere else'. This sentiment proliferates the art world, privileging a small segment of artists and galleries who are more able to support themselves without sales and are far more likely to be independently wealthy or have other sources of income. Similarly, it creates barriers for the gallerists themselves. Lisa Panting discusses the issue of class and notes that:

'I'm certainly not from a remotely moneyed background, but I'm from a sort of vaguely cultural background, and it didn't occur to me, I don't think, until I was in my 30s, how influential that side of it, that kind of old network is.'

Class, particularly in Britain, is a fundamental gatekeeper in the CCIs (Brook et al., 2020). While there is evidence to suggest that gendered inequality in the CCIs follows established structures of exclusion found across the professions (Bolton and Muzio, 2008), these are arguably exacerbated by the inherent precarity of creative work (Comunian & England, 2020) which is characterized by informal, often low-paid and temporary project-based employment and network sociality (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). Class privilege enables participants to weather these structural inequalities (Scharff & Bull, 2017) more easily.

Roszka Farkus notes that this precarity flows through all aspects of the gallery operation: 'working in the arts is precarious, even here I can't employ people in a way that has job security and pensions. So, everyone is self-employed and they invoice me. The art world is driven by precarious labour and precarious labour traditionally is feminized.' This is compounded by the ongoing struggle to juggle the financial costs of being in a global city like London. The concern here is for the long-term viability of smaller, more experimental galleries that support the careers of more diverse artists, lacking the class privileges that help the gallery and artists to stay afloat.

Other labour-based obstacles that emerged from the interviews were associated with the comparatively smaller studios typical of most female artists. Without the larger fabrication support and facilities of their male counterparts, it was observed that they may, or may be seen to, produce less work. Some of our interviewees noted that this could limit the likelihood of female artists being represented by larger, more affluent galleries, who require artists to be able to produce enough 'product' for the market and the ever-increasing number of art fairs. It was suggested this could also limit their capacity to take on large institutional projects. As

articulated in the following quotations, it was also suggested that the perception of risk averse approaches by women artists or a perceived lack of active entrepreneurialism and self-promotion might limit their exposure, leaving women 'behind the scenes': 'I think it feels that more blokes pursue complex studio practices with large teams and business mentality than women. [...] women are generally more, you know, behind the scenes' (Frances Morris).

'I would say that maybe men will come much more easily to a gallery and like to try to do presentations. [...] Where women will just like wait. They are more passive I would say. And they don't like challenge maybe themselves in this area. [...] while maybe men they will be like more [...] Active and more entrepreneurial maybe to the galleries. [...] It's self-promotion, maybe it's easier for men in a way. I don't know why its maybe women are not selling themselves.' (Annka Kulty's)

This highlights one of the key unspoken processes in the contemporary art world – how galleries select artists, and how artists make themselves visible. It is unlikely that any of the galleries we surveyed accept proposals from artists. This system privileges more confident, networked artists that fit the existing mould of what an artist looks like and the kind of work they make. The perception that women artists are more domestic and more risk-averse, influences the way many gallerists assess the artists they go on to support. Artists who are less precarious, and face fewer structural obstacles, are more likely to pursue greater risk-taking practices in their work, including making impactful connections with the commercial sector.

#### **4.4 Artist Mothers**

A prominent factor acknowledged by all the gallerists we interviewed was the impact of parenting. As it often occurs early in women artist's career and prevents them from a career trajectory that ultimately might result in high auction sales more quickly, our interviews underlined the trepidation that gallerists have in selecting younger women artists to represent. Interviewee Marissa Bellini noted that it was bluntly referred to as 'that kid problem' by a number of people in the art world. Speaking of female artists they worked with, and reflecting on wider discussions around parenting in the art world, the gallerists consistently noted the fears expressed by female artists over the impact of having children on their careers and how these fears then often did play out once they became mothers. As articulated by the gallerists below, this was associated with the significant overlap of child-bearing age and the early-career period when financial resources may be limited. Childcare responsibilities were also seen to reduce women's capacity to make new work, particularly within short time periods, and travel to promote their work. Concerns over productivity were also noted. From a collector or commercial gallery's perspective, any break in production could be considered a major risk. Gallerist Lisa Panting reflects on her experience working with a new parent:

'Her [a female artist] career was really affected [...] Because the amount of travel and networking that she did before that to be successful, I suppose, was so much that she just couldn't do it, and didn't want to either. But she couldn't literally be on a plane every week and she couldn't do those things where a museum curator says [...] Do you think you could, you know, pull out a solo show in like three months or four months?' (Lisa Panting)

Existing class and privilege also conflate with assumed gender roles around parenting. Interviewee, Pilar Corrias notes:

'My theory is, it's really basic, it's financial and I think that women, well, women have the children, either in their 20s or 30s and those are the years when, as an artist, you've got to be working your socks off. And it's also the years when artists are struggling because it takes a while to make it, if they make it at all. And so, to take time off and not have the financial means to have full time help is difficult.'

A number of feminist researchers have addressed how class shapes the gendered expectations that appear in the personal and professional lives of female artists and subsequently hinder their career development (Stalp, 2016). Flisbäck's (2013: 462) study of artists in Sweden argues that both a lack of economic resources and symbolic structures which 'present creative work as difficult to combine with everyday domestic work' positions the pursuit of an artistic career and starting a family in direct tension with each other. Here class can be seen as a compounding factor as those from wealthier backgrounds may have access to support or capital (economic and social) that enable them to manage this tension better (Dent, 2019). Freney (2020: 157) also reflects on how 'patriarchal institutions of motherhood and the art world' combine with the 'physical realities of mothering' and domestic labour to prevent female artists from pursuing professional creative practices. This is supported by Judah's (2019) essay which charts the multiple stages and ways in which women artists are affected by motherhood. Judah's reference to Cyril Connolly's 1938 assertion that, 'there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall' (ibid, p. 17) continues to inflect the value placed on female artists who are also mothers. These well-established biases reflect the history of female artists.

'The insistence upon a modest, proficient, self-demeaning level of amateurism as a "suitable accomplishment" for the well-brought-up young woman, who naturally would want to direct her major attention to the welfare of others —family and husband— that militated, and still militates, against any real accomplishment on the part of women.' (Nochlin, 1971)

Perceptions of motherhood in the arts also impact the gallerists themselves. In some cases, these personal experiences appeared to shape gallerists responses to working with artist mothers and pregnant artists; gallery director Pilar Corrias, as a single mother, had witnessed the strain on the female artists she represents, most of whom are at child-bearing age. She therefore saw childcare as simply another cost associated with supporting artists and a way for galleries to ensure their investment is looked after. While Corrias has supported several artists after childbirth, these artists had usually already achieved early career success, which made this sort of gallery support financially justifiable. Corrias explains:

'when she did have her baby, I had no new work to sell, and it definitely affected my inventory. However, she's very successful so she can travel business class and take her child with her. She's kind of adapted her time, in a way that she can have a child because she has the privilege of being able to do that. She made the money herself, it's fine, she started very young but she's a totally unusual case because she was selling, having sell-out shows at the age of twenty-six. She's thirty-five so, she's been doing it for nine years, most artists don't have that situation.'

Where artists have not been so financially successful, Corrias has assisted with childcare costs, in the same way that a gallerist assists with storage, accountancy and studio management. Corrias was however the only director interviewed who was able and willing to do this, but this was not necessarily reflected in support of salaried staff who were also mothers. Other smaller galleries recognised the additional pressures on artists with young families but were simply not able to offer support in the way larger galleries could. In speaking about one of their artists who recently become a mother, Bosse & Baume director Alex said that 'she's had a baby and with her it's basically a budget issue. So, if the funding was there [for childcare] she could have put these shows out there, I think, without really it being much of an issue'. Acknowledging the importance childcare support would make, Lisa Panting notes:

'this comes down to numbers, doesn't it, I suppose? Because we're not on that level, in terms of turnover, like we can't support artists to that level. If somebody were, like, the complete cash cow to the gallery, I can see that maybe you would, or you would have to. But, yes, I guess that just goes back to how we relate to the artists and what they produce.'

In facing these challenges, women artists may seek to underplay the importance of family in their lives or feel unable to speak openly about their status as parents. Others may question maternity and feel they must make a choice between starting a family and their career. While artists (of any gender) should not be judged on their parental status, by ignoring the maternity and childcare needs of female artists, it is unlikely that the support structures required to address this barrier to career development will be addressed. Gallerist, Bellani reflects that:

'at Sotheby's they asked me this: [...] Do you choose men over women thinking that maybe women can get pregnant and their career would stop? And I said, no. [...] But the reality is that some people do think of that, so my artist, a woman artist, is herself putting maternity into question because she's expected to be either a mother or an artist.'

Currently in the UK there is no mandate for publicly funded institutions to offer childcare or cover costs associated with it. Artists are not able to write these costs into grant applications, nor are they tax deductible. This often makes it impossible for artist mothers to maintain their practices, or pursue significant career opportunities such as residencies, commissions or solo exhibitions. Hettie Judah writes about these obstacles in her essay 'Full, Messy and Beautiful' where she describes the moment of childbirth as 'a parting of fortunes for men and women' (2020, p.14). Additionally, the crucial networking period of gallery openings and dinners occurs at a time when artist mothers are unlikely to be able to participate.

In conclusion, the support required to assist female artists who are mothers is often only possible for larger, more established galleries. Given galleries that fall into this category are far less likely to represent substantial numbers of women (especially early-career women), female artists often remain unsupported at this important time in their career. It is likely that this is a period when women artists leave the sector.

Crucially, it is clear that if we want to ensure the stories of female artists are represented in our museums and collections, and given the role of the commercial sector in lubricating relationships within the wider artworld, we need to address the systemic lack of support for female artists in their early and mid-careers.

## 5. Conclusion

Our research has examined the percentage of female artists represented by London commercial galleries between 2016, 2019 and 2022. It finds that of the 111 commercial galleries in London surveyed in 2016, only twenty (eighteen per cent) showed fifty per cent or more female artists. In 2019, it had increased to twenty-five galleries. In 2022, of the 87 galleries surveyed, only thirty-four per cent of the artists were women. The overall shifts amounted to tiny annual increments from twenty-eight per cent of female artists in 2016, to thirty-one per cent in 2019, and thirty-four in 2022 – less than a one per cent over six years. According to this rate of change, it would take a further thirty years for galleries to represent the same ratio of women graduating from art school.

The interviews with female gallerists from across the visual arts ecology explored why change has been so slow, despite recent significant emphasis on gender inequality in the art world and society more broadly. The outcomes of the qualitative research, contextualised with current and historic literature, highlight the challenges faced by female artists, and artist mothers. Our research shows that obstacles in the sector are not only historical, but ongoing lived realities for young women today who continue to find themselves having to make a choice – between financial security or precarity, between being an artist and being a mother. The barriers were intersectional, and from our interviews we found that class significantly determined the ability to weather precarity, particularly during early career. While racial barriers were not addressed directly by our interviewees, it is important to acknowledge that the contemporary art canon not only prioritises male artists, it is also dominated by whiteness and Eurocentric narratives (Chalmers, 2019). The barriers experienced by women artists – particularly in relation to the art market – are therefore likely to be intensified for black and brown women artists, whose art and expertise may not be recognised or valued as highly as white women artists (Patel, 2020), let alone that of (white) men.

Many artists are working to fight and overcome these barriers but ultimately, like the small galleries trying to change the art world, how many female artists can maintain the energy to make work, *and* change the system at the same time? Our research showed that gallery directors were often aware of these barriers, but either unable or unwilling to introduce quotas or other initiatives to counteract systemic bias. We also found that many female-led galleries had low ratios of female artists, and that the presence of high-profile women in the art world, did not always translate to more opportunities for female artists.

The literature and the interviews underlined that the art market is less interested in merit, and more interested in certainty and maintaining unchallenged assumptions about genius that lead more directly to profit. Our research found that the larger and more profitable the commercial gallery, the less likely they were to have gender equity in the artists they represented. The weight of art history on the market means that collecting the work of women artists is still considered a financial risk.

The limitations of this research include the exclusion of other global art centres where commercial galleries are concentrated, such as New York, Berlin and Paris. This makes it difficult to understand if there are any cultural factors which influence the bias against women artists in London. Further research could focus on interviews with women artists to understand the stories of exclusion that sit behind this data. Finally, more research is needed on best practice which could be used to leverage change in the sector.

In conclusion, the relationship between the art market and women's work has significant implications for public institutions. As funding for the sector continues to dwindle, public institutions in the UK are turning towards the American model of philanthropy. Tate for example, is now required to raise more than seventy per cent of its income (Tate, 2019). Our findings reinforced the concern noted by one institutional director, that without commercial backing, some projects may not be viable. Furthermore, commercial galleries invest in 'writing around' the careers of artists that they represent; they broker deals with museums, they publish monographs on their work, they manage connections with the right curators and collectors, and ensure that the marketing and publicity around their work is strategic. Commercial galleries assist in situating their artists in collecting institutions, reinforcing their place in the art history canon. This is what drives the value of the artist's work for the gallery and their collectors. The increasing power of the 'mega galleries' in the United States and in London, such as Gagosian (Halperin, 2015), typify the stronghold of commercial galleries on the sector as a whole. If commercial galleries are not representing female artists, then the gender bias in the commercial sector becomes further embedded throughout the visual arts ecology undermining individual attempts at change.

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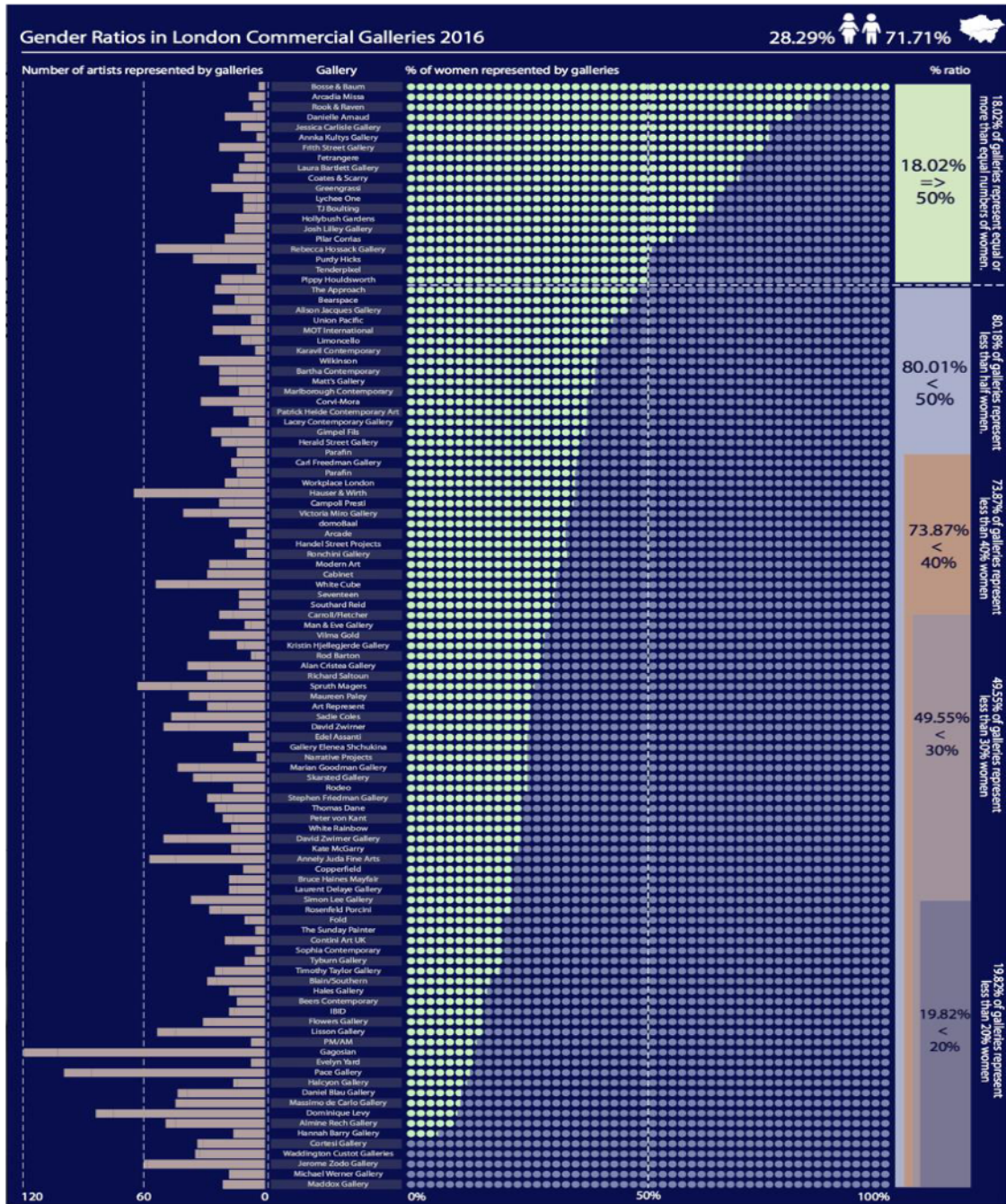
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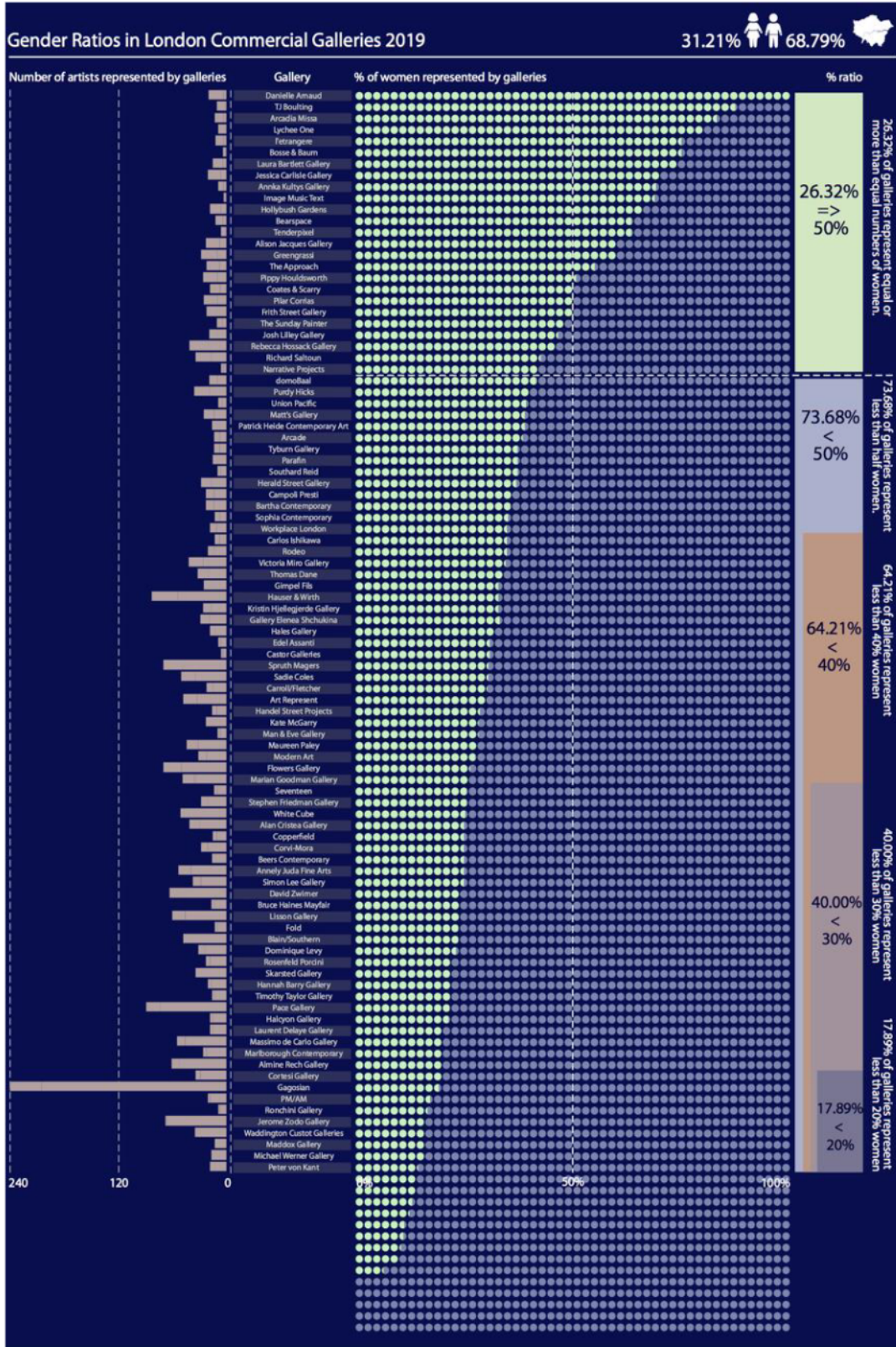
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**Appendix one: 2016 Data**



Appendix two: 2019 Data



Appendix three: 2022 Data

