Artists dying

It is now over five decades since feminism and the 1960s-70s Women’s Liberation Movement (**WLM**) began to intersect with the art world. Of the key feminist artists, writers, teachers and curators a distressing number have died. Others are now too ill to interview. Every year more are leaving us; their memories and ephemera are being lost. The stories they and subsequent generations can tell have not been systematically collated, and are vulnerable to death and memory loss.

The evidence of how ideas developed, of networks, events and even of exhibitions is often ephemeral, with evidence – letters, flyers, diaries, photos – stored in boxes in attics or corners of studios. Such material is vulnerable to being cleared out as people age.

Marginalisation

The heritage and care for art by women is structurally marginalised within Museology, Art History and arts pedagogies. It is not valued by the art market, with 0-5 works by women in lists of the 100 most expensive per year in recent sales by living artists (Freelands Foundation 2017-20). Contemporary art textbooks mention few British/Irish feminist and/or Irish artists, and have few British/Irish feminist and/or Irish authors (e.g. Foster et.al. 2004; Harrison & Wood 2003; Osborne 2002; Wood et.al. 2021).

Women today: are 65% of art school students; outperform men at BA; but are proportionately less likely to continue to PhD; are 31% of Professors; are 55% of short-term contract academics (Robinson 2021). This educational and professional disadvantage is exacerbated by the omission of the legacy of women artists, even those of their mothers’ generation, from textbooks, exhibitions, and documentation. Over fifty years history of feminist art in UK/Ireland thus is ‘hidden’ through bias or ignorance.

Art History as conventionally defined is an established academic discipline, which classifies art works and movements through categories of chronology, geography, materials and style. Exploring the art made by feminists since the 1960s, it becomes clear that there is no simple generational, geographical, material or stylistic story to tell: art informed by feminism does not adhere to geographic or chronologic location, still less does it adhere to stylistic coherence as a movement, nor to specific material practices. While there might be particular issues that are found in art by feminists, those issues do not and cannot define something called ‘Feminist Art’. We can see a far more complex picture than can be accounted for with generational influence, different geographies, or identification through materials or imagery and style.

Art by feminists and histories of their work cannot be contained by geography, chronology, materials, and style: they are necessarily fragmented, contingent and non-containable as movements and disciplines. Why? Precisely because as Lisa Tickner stated in 1988, ‘feminism is a politics, not a methodology’.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is a political movement from theory through to activism, and not an art style nor an academic discipline.:

Undisciplined.

Necessarily, British/Irish feminist histories, and Irish histories of art, work against the grain of established Art History, museology, and related disciplines, which have canons and pedagogies formed predominantly by male scholars in the colonial ethos of the C19th. Our aim is to discover and preserve what histories we can from those still able to tell them.

Studio art practices, Art History, museology and curating, and the teaching of these subject areas are informed by discipline-specific discourses, shaped by canonicity, and perpetuated by the transmission of a specific professional habitus through generations of scholars. Feminism was inevitably always antagonistic to these established disciplines, shaped as they were overwhelmingly by male scholars and which excluded women from the very possibility of greatness as artists. This was confirmed in the best-selling books for teaching undergraduate Art History (Gombrich; Janson) which in multiple editions by the 1960s-70s included no women artists in the hundreds of artists they named. Such Art History confirmed masculine terms of approbation and definitions of genius, which were in opposition to the representations of women/femininity in dominant schools of art. While the WLM and later feminist scholarship prompted the inclusion of token women in these books, and developed elsewhere analysis of the gendered structures of the disciplines and of representations of femininity in artworks, the fundamental exclusionary structures of Art History remained intact and continue to be taught.

Additionally, the impact of feminism in the artworld was seen as peripheral or as a subject for ‘special’ exhibitions: major surveys of feminist art like *WACK!* (L.A. 2007), *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Bilbao 2007), *elles@centrepompidou* (Paris 2009) in c. 45 cities from Los Angeles to Bilbao, Tokyo to Melbourne, Rio de Janeiro to Reykjavik leave basic structures of the artworld fundamentally intact, with hosting museums not noticeably altering their curation of modern and contemporary art exhibitions. However, such exhibitions have not happened Ireland, nor until two weeks ago, in the UK. – *Women in Revolt* – Tate.

**Another prompt for FAMH is that** A ‘common-sense’ history of feminist art has emerged in published Anglophone materials, through citation of particular articles and re-publication of particular artworks. This has produced a ‘history of feminist art’, which can be traced from New York and California, to London, then spread to other countries in Europe and then beyond. Ireland and the UK beyond London, scarcely figure in such accounts of feminist art. We challenge this narrative as researchers **informed by our own biographies, professional, political and cultural networks**: we have lived in and maintain networks in the Republic of Ireland, southern England, northern England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Our first-hand knowledge confirms potential for historiographic methods and narratives more complex and nuanced than the established USA/London-centric diffusion through publishing and curating.

**There is an historical logic** for this project covering both the UK and Ireland. As the WLM was rising in the mid to late 1960s, so too were ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. It is impossible to consider British political and cultural history of the 1960s onwards without paying careful attention to NI; it is impossible to consider the sexual politics, higher education, art practices and culture of NI without considering the Republic of Ireland (RoI). Even more so, given the colonial history and causes of ‘the Troubles,’ as well as the porosity of the border, it is impossible to consider cultural and sexual politics, history, Art History, art practices and higher education in the RoI without considering NI and the UK.

That these categories do not mirror each other indicates the imbalance of political power and of art world visibility between the entities.

While our focus is not specifically on the relationship between feminist art in the UK and Ireland, we are consciously de-centring the hegemonic relationships and the dominant centre in the narratives of feminist art in these islands: vis., London, which has overwhelmingly dominated histories of feminist art that are not (in turn) centred upon the USA (e.g. Battista, 2013; Chadwick 2007; Deepwell & Jakubowska, 2018; Parker & Pollock, 1987; Wilson, 2015).

Even within anglophone cultures, linked by language, we cannot assume that there has been transparency, communication, interest, inclusion, or even shared basic knowledge. I know from my own experience, for example, of living as an adult in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the USA and now back in England, how little travels, is registered, or is mutually acknowledged between those four geographical and cultural entities. Virtually nothing is known or understood of feminist politics, art and art-writing from the island of Ireland in geographic Britain, let alone further afield.

**Emerging from this set of problems, we have the following research questions:  
1)** What is the hidden history of the encounter between feminism and art in the UK and Ireland – who was doing what, where, and why?

**2)** What is the heritage and legacy of this encounter, with its dynamics of movement of people, artworks, and ideas between and within the geographic islands of Ireland and Britain, and the political entities of the Republic of Ireland and the component parts of the United Kingdom?

**3)** What methodologies, processes and policies can be developed (honouring and enacting feminist thinking, practices, and critiques of disciplinary canons) to address issues of privacy, ethics, copyright, which will emerge from this work? How do these processes inform/transform digital art history methods and curation?

**4)** Utilising such methodologies to critique disciplinary structures, how can this research then be positioned to make an impact upon the development of Digital Humanities? How can feminist methods of discipline-building be integral, rather than marginal issues of ‘accessibility’, ‘add-ons’, ‘special interest’, or even ‘inclusion’ in exclusionary structures?

**5)** What constitutes feminist practice in **FAMH**: in methods; curating; portal; access to archive?

**Aim**

The overarching aim of is to collect, curate and create an archive of oral histories and ephemera of the of the encounter between feminism and the art world in the UK and Ireland from the 1970s onwards, and then to make them accessible; to thus preserve histories and memories that are presently being lost; and further, to allow the uncovering of a much richer history of over 50 years of women artists and feminist thinking on these two islands than is presently visible.

We will place those hidden voices of the feminist art movement between the two locations of DH and histories of art. We aim to create a pathway for this heritage to be taken up by digital methods in the future as perhaps the only way to analyse and interpret these complex interactions and movements. Housed in perpetuity in the Digital Repository of Ireland, provided with DOIs, to provide unlimited access in the future. Issues of accessibility and searchability by other researchers and users are at the centre of our mission. And the DOI’s means that we can provide links through the DRI in order to build an appropriate online context; or link the archive with further institutional repositories. This will allow for future activity and geographic fluidity between the UK and Ireland.

**FAMH** requires a website which will act as a portal through which people can access the archive. How this should materialise is a response to our research questions on accessibility and method. We are exploring appropriate formats. This website will also act as a space for creative interpretation of the materials,

a website as,

**Work elsewhere**

We know of only two projects in this field, both in the USA (Gardner-Huggett; Moravec); both work from existing material that has not been rigorously collated, archived and made accessible.

There are two related extant oral histories of which we are aware, both housed at the British Library. *Sisterhood and after* was a 3-year Sussex University project, interviewing 60 people from the WLM, producing accessible recordings. However, only one artist, one disability artist- advocate, and one documentary photographer were recorded.

*Artists Lives* is a set of biography- based interviews. The current list is of 368 artists, 100 of whom are women, and possibly 12 might identify as engage with feminism; none are Irish. The aims of *Artists Lives* is clearly biographical and links between the artists identified, whereas our aim is to trace a movement through identifying key events, participants, networks and ideas, a methodology more akin to *Sisterhood and After*, but with a specific focus on feminist art making, historiographies, exhibitions and pedagogies.

Two books of interviews with British women artists (Fortnum, 2008) and Irish women artists (Deepwell, 2005) exist; the printed interviews approximate to under 1 hour’s conversation each.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

**Feminist methodologies and methods are central to this project** because structures of power and privilege can be reproduced through digital tools and computational systems. We will collect oral histories and ephemera in a digital collection as an act of witnessing and bearing witness to such histories which have been marginalised.

The inclusion of occluded narratives and objects in a digital format provokes deliberation on how archives are constructed, used and disseminated, what the purpose of an archive is and what kind of canons the archive reproduces. We have to consider: how the dataset is formed; how it will be made available as raw data (in a repository); and how our research findings may be presented (online, in papers, in exhibitions).

Therefore, a **feminist** Digital Humanities project asks us to “examine the canon that we, as digital humanists, are constructing, a canon that skews towards traditional texts and excludes work by women” (Smith, 2007). In this we will both learn from, and provide a model for, other research negotiating structural exclusions: feminism is not a matter of simply adding women, but on considering structures of knowledge and its transmission.

Is a digital archive feminist because the content is of women or by women or because the modes of production of that archive are feminist, because the technologies are feminist or are used to feminist ends?

The feminist methodological approaches that we are using include:

Collaborative interviewing

Open-ended Questioning

Standpoint Theory

‘history from below’

Interviewees are active participants, selected not as representatives, but because of key roles they played in the development of ideas and politico-aesthetic practices in as-yet poorly documented histories. We have agonised about who to select and how they are selected; we have been deeply disappointed when some have said no; and delighted when some magic serendipity has happened, as did just a couple of weeks ago, where we found ourselves about to carry out an interview unexpectedly.

**We are hosting workshops to bring together as many interviewee participants as possible.** Shortly, when many of the interviews are completed and we are reflecting on what is emerging from them, we will gather the participants for inter-generational, trans-national workshops. Recognising that some participants will have close links and some will not have met each other or not seen each other for many years, we will structure some encounter/discussions on particular questions or events that emerge from the interviews, and allow time for personal memory-building as well as to reflect on themes arising from the research process

proposal for maybe two **books**: one of extracts from the interviews, public facing, trade publisher; and one more academic, focussed upon the methods used, and analysis of the findings.

**To summarise**, a feminist, emancipatory methodological approach to this research project introduces a reflective, reflexive and performative gathering of data. Feminist analysis and method is not added to the digital and technological gathering of data but is central to the collection, curating and generation of data and the construction of the resulting archive.

A feminist method of research for an oral history project draws from feminist knowledge-building: consciousness-raising: practices of active listening; equity of participants in discussions; not judging others’ experiences; thereafter collectively analysing and drawing out the threads to draw political, cultural and social conclusions.

Feminism is not an academic discipline, but a rich and diverse resource for analysing the world, its cultures and politics. Not monolithic or unitary, it acts as a place of discourse from which we will be able to begin drawing the threads between, e.g., experiences of teaching in an art school; how a particular exhibition was curated; the terminologies of Art History; and the digital interface for an archive.

Right now, the data sets, the material, simply do not exist. We are structuring FAMH as the creation of a primary data resource; Further, while focused on UK/Ireland, FAMH will serve as a model of practice for researchers elsewhere.

1. Lisa Tickner, ‘Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference’, *Genders* n.3, Fall 1988, pp92-128; p.92. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)