

When You Expose a Problem

by Anne Dymond

“When you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away”

~ Sara Ahmed

Gammon's photograph *9 minutes, University of Victoria, Maltwood Vault, Untitled (Basket), Alice Paul (Hesquiaht) 2023-01-23, T 1:16-1:25* exposes a problem that just will not go away. The left third of the image is marked by strong horizontals created by storage drawers, their tidy linearity contrasted by a jumble of plastic bags, exhibition posters, and electrical fittings above. Most visually significant here is the illumination that comes from an inexpensive desk lamp, shining on nothing but a blank wall. In contrast to the busy left side, the right third of the image is mostly white space, a simple plinth in the foreground contrasted by a series of verticals above. Seated in the center is a blurred figure, Gammon, her thighs seemingly solid, resolved, but the shoulders and head indistinct. In trying to resolve the blur of the artist's head, the object of her focus rises to awareness: a small basket, barely visible, atop the plinth. The photograph poses problems about how we see and understand works of art.

When considered as part of the series *Intervening in the Collections Vaults: The University of Victoria* and the other works in the exhibition *Latent*, the photograph also poses problems about the archive, the collection, and the possibilities and impossibilities of the construction of knowledge. Any system of organization and collection imposes an order that allows us to access information: the collection captures a record of the valued, limiting what can be considered. There are nearly 500 female artists on the list Butler Palmer and Gammon constructed from the Legacy Art Gallery collection database. As with this list, collections often overwhelm with a sense of totality; but that illusion of completeness disappears with close examination. Collections and archives are always fragmentary and fractured. Moreover, their organization inevitably directs and shapes our ability to access what's contained within. They shine light on some aspects, yet other components remain indistinct.

Central among these occlusions is the presence of women. Despite our wishes that the problem would go away, gender remains a potent and intersectional category of exclusion, in both historic and contemporary art collections. Significant work in the last few decades has made our public art collections more inclusive and more representative records of art production in this country; importantly, this means they become more truthful records. Yet, there is often a belief that gender has been posed as a problem and that we can stop talking about it, because there are more pressing ways to think about inclusion, accessibility, and equity. Yet the facts make clear that women's work - and even contemporary women's work - has been, and continues to be, under-represented in art collections. These issues are intersectional, and any social progress needs to factor gender as an important axis of inclusion. The equity gap is especially true at major galleries. At the NGC, just over 20% of solo exhibitions of living artists went to female artists in the 1980s, the decade when women artists surpassed 50% of the Canadian artist population. In the 1990s, the ratio rose to 31%. Any acclaim for this progress has to reconcile it with the fact that in the early 1800s, the most prestigious art exhibits in the world were the French Royal Academy's annual Salons, where female artists usually ranged between 20- 30% of exhibitors. If this perturbs our notions of progress, how much more must the fact that in the 2000s, the percentage of solo contemporary exhibitions of female artists at the NGC slid backwards, lower in the 2000s than it had been in the 1980s, despite increasing numbers and seniority of female artists. In the 2010s, the percentage rebounded, rising to its highest record ever: 38% of contemporary solo exhibitions went to artists gendered female. Given the history, this is something to applaud, but it also still falls far short of equity, and the backsliding in the previous decade suggests we need to remain vigilant.

While exhibitions are the public face of institutions, collections are the base from which our future histories are written. People often assume that the bias towards white male artists is a historical fact, no longer actively shaping our current acquisitions. But research on the NGC's acquisitions of works by living Canadian artists from 2008 - 2010 showed that only 30% of the works acquired were by female artists. This percentage remains somewhat of a sticking point: acquisitions of works by living artists comprised slightly more than 70% male artists in 2015 - 2016, both in terms of the number of artists and the number of works. Significant changes at the NGC in the last 6 years show some promise: in 2021-2022 the NGC acquired the work of more female artists than male artists, and the work of more racialized artists than white artists. However, even in their most equitable year as assessed by the number of artists whose work was purchased, the total number of works was still significantly inequitable. Indeed, in 2021-2022, more than 70% of the works acquired were still by male-identified artists. There is progress, but it is too early to celebrate.

Gammon's exhibition eloquently poses a series of problems. I keep returning to the illuminated back wall in *9 minutes*, *University of Victoria, Maltwood Vault, Untitled (Basket), Alice Paul (Hesquiaht) 2023-01-23, T 1:16-1:25*. In an archive, sometimes what is most brightly illuminated is not the focal point I seek. Instead, the areas that remain indistinct are the call to action. Gammon sits with the problems, refusing to go away and illuminating the work of women artists, their lack of visibility in collections, and how the very structures of knowledge used in archives make the work of women difficult to focus on.