

Feminist Leadership: how naming and claiming the F word can lead the cultural sector out of equalities 'stuckness'.

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The cultural sector is in protracted throes of change, thirty years into a digital revolution, three generations on from the germination of equalities campaigns in Britain and with seismic political and financial churn nationally and globally. The sector, from museums to the film industry, book, art and music Biennials and festivals, from commercial galleries and theatres to 'the Nationals' have been forced into a period of often reactive introspection, debate and action confronting challenges along the fault lines of representation, reinvention and relevance.

Taking the temperature of the museums sector, R.R. Janes, one of the growing number of theorists advocating activism as response to institutional 'stuckness' and the febrile nature of contemporary culture has written:

*The here and now for museums is paradoxical- replete with opportunity and constraints; freedoms and danger; clarity and chaos- contradictions born of external issues that push, pull and batter. These paradoxes are, in turn, accompanied by a host of internal museum issues that hinder organisational courage, foresight and empathy.*¹

The sector seems rudderless, the Establishment hopelessly out of kilter, with little demonstrable evidence of impact with disengaged 'easy to ignore' communities. Mainstream cultural institutions appear to be polarising against a rapidly proliferating swathe of equalities focussed independent resources, online platforms and networks including maverick museums, archives, libraries and cultural lobby groups. In the realm of museums alone a revolution is underway with Museum of Homelessness and Museum Detox to the Museum of Muck and #MuseumsarenotNeutral being just a few of the initiatives challenging the status quo.

Cynicism as well as dynamism abounds in the counter-culture. Criticism is focussed on the old order's problematic relationship with capitalism and a weddedness (belied by any gloss of inclusivity) to the 'pale, male, stale'. Creatives, commentators and communities alike are articulating their intolerance with an outmoded cultural leadership that has placed its faith in 'starchitecture', investment in 'museums as malls' and Gallery 'Blockbusters'² and it's reluctant to shed its cosiness with corporate scions. The art market industry is critiqued for unedifying profligacy in

¹ R.R Janes, Museums and a paradox of change, 2013

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/25/blockbuster-art-good-or-bad>

age of adversity and for its culpability in the 'art-washing' of inequalities.³ Cultural leaders seem unable to comprehend the consequent social media 'pile-ons' at every turn.⁴

The inertia and 'stuckness' that characterises the mainstream and the divergence of radical practices away from the mainstream could not be less helpful at a time when innovation, rapid responsiveness and radical relevance is needed to address social need, alienation and austerity. A paradigm shift is overdue. Cultural institutions such as museums, broadcasters and libraries that have had what Mercy McCann has dubbed the 'power to convene' have a critical role to play when there is a widespread need for debate on how truth and histories are being denied and, or misrepresented. As my Clore Leadership Fellowship concludes, I can think of no large-scale cultural institution in the UK that has rigorously integrated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and therefore is fit for purpose to be convening discussions that empower communities and fuel active citizenship.

What is to be done?

As a feminist who has been working over the past three decades across academia, as a creative, with/in cultural organisations trying to navigate their ways into being fit for future purpose and as a co-founder of a museum rooted in equalities I read the 'stuckness' of the cultural sector as having reached a critical *impasse*. Many mainstream organisations are facing the challenge of seismic organisational change to salvage the vestiges of trust by communities they are funded to represent or are facing terminal irrelevance.⁵

For those of us grounded in EDI work, this is also a watershed period, with huge opportunities for the sector. Transformation is possible for those at that start of their own road map to integrated EDI but they face the often daunting prospect of wholesale reinvention tackling the 'stuck' in recruitment, programming,⁶ communications, governance and (in the museums sector) collections.

³ When not fending off criticisms for being out of touch with social and political realities the public and private galleries are facing existential crises linked to relevance. See for example: <https://www.ft.com/content/3fc09f1c-162b-11e8-9c33-02f893d608c2>

See also the vexed connection between art and the super rich here

<https://lithub.com/the-art-world-doesnt-want-us-to-ask-where-the-money-comes-from>

⁴ See for example the recent storm caused by Tristram Hunt's defence of disgraced corporate culture donors, the Sacklers.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/10/v-and-a-boss-tristram-hunt-sacklers-family-funding>

⁵ Notwithstanding the febrile global landscape, the political and social expectation in the UK is still at least technically, is for there to be evidence of incremental step changes towards EDI in all publicly funded bodies.

⁶ That is, is modelling what GWL calls The Holistic Museum.

https://womenslibrary.org.uk/gwl_wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EiP-Report-Research-from-a-Grassroots-Museum-180615.pdf

Feminists have consistently campaigned for change across these terrains; calling out abuses of power, the strategies used for 'blocking' of equalities and the widespread complacency around intersectional inequities in mainstream culture for at least half a century.⁷ I am proposing that it is high time to recognise that not only has feminism the radical chops to bring to the crisis represented by the stalled state of the equalities agenda in the cultural sector but that *feminist leadership*, needs to be acknowledged, named and claimed in the process.

Just as there is reluctance by cultural leaders to acknowledge their role in perpetuating structural inequalities (shoring up outmoded hierarchical, and command and control structures that stall progress on equalities), there is a parallel reticence by those active as change-makers to claim to be a *feminist leader*. This is not just the case in the mainstream, where the consequences for challenging patriarchy are still significant enough to ensure that feminists keep the F out of their professional profiles and stated change making approaches, but for complex historical and political reasons the name Feminist Leader is hard to spot even within feminist organisations.⁸

Since October 2018 I have been undertaking a Clore Leadership Fellowship, exploring this surprisingly uncharted terrain of Feminist Leadership. The Fellowship has enabled me to ask what this is, what it has meant and means at Glasgow Women's Library (GWL)⁹, an organisation I co founded in 1991, and its applications in wider contemporary culture. Through reflection, research, study visits, discussions, interviews, training, coaching and a secondment, I have been better able to understand and redefine my own relationship to feminist leadership and explore this in relation to the array of leadership models, feminist and otherwise, at play in the sector.

⁷ An element of my Fellowship focussed on reading and researching feminist leadership and 'detoxing' of the cultural institution. An early museum and gallery intervention is Griselda Pollock's 'A Feminist looks round the city Art Gallery', January 1987. This classic 'alternative guide' for the then Manchester City Art Gallery published some 40 years before the recently launched 'ground-breaking' LGBT tour at the British Museum is rarely cited.
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jul/04/british-museum-launches-guided-tour-s-of-lgbtq-treasures>

⁸ CREA (Creating Resources In Action) is cultivating feminist leadership in the development sector where the concept of Feminist leadership seems to be most readily adopted. According to CREA, feminist leaders "will strive to make the practice of power visible, democratic, legitimate and accountable, at all levels, and in both private and public realms." CREA believes that it is a process through which women assert their rights by continually evaluating relevant experiences, questioning their roles in society, challenging power structures, and effectively catalysing social change.
https://creaworld.org/what_we_do/Initiatives/strengthen-feminist-leadership

⁹ Feminist Leadership is for some a contradiction in terms and a concept I have had ambivalent feelings about in the past. I am a co-manager at GWL, the sole accredited museum dedicated to women's history in the UK and a Recognised Collection of National Significance. GWL grew from the grass roots and has increasingly been seen as an influential, change-making organisation in the museums and wider cultural sector.

Activists associated with European and Anglo-American ‘Second Wave’ feminism (from 1960s) demanded strategic, institutional and attitudinal changes in the cultural sector to address deep-seated inequalities.¹⁰

Fifty years on, the embers of the debates on representation and discrimination have reignited with the sector now under acute scrutiny; where resistance to a rigorous embedding of Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) risks exposure to censure. Public and (social) media criticism is proliferating but many cultural organisations appear ill equipped or unwilling to navigate change. Others acknowledge that reform is needed but equate equalities as a choice, and a pressure on diminishing budgets. My Fellowship journey has led me to visit arts, heritage, performance and collections institutions from Sao Paulo to Venice; in the mainstream sector adopting a can-do, ‘out’ feminist approach is simply not part of the conversation.

For the past decade, GWL has been defining itself with increasing confidence as a museum and learning more about how museums as anchor institutions are at the same time the distillation of cultural exclusivity for many, symbolising what Sumaya Kassim has dubbed ‘the Master’s House’.¹¹ As the Museum Association’s Museums Change Lives Report (2013) highlighted, equality and social justice are to say the least, not the specialisms of most museums, however much the public might expect and increasingly demand.¹²

Equality and social justice *is* our specialism at GWL and we have done much to identify and address inequalities and barriers both at GWL and with others from Museums Galleries Scotland to the Edinburgh International Book Festival through training. We read issues of access to and participation in culture as symptomatic of wider structural inequalities experienced by people with protected characteristics and try to work in an innovative feminist intersectional way.¹³

My belief, brought into vivid and sharp focus during the Fellowship journey is that, managed well, the thorough embedding of EDI and an acknowledgement of the agency of an unequivocal feminist leadership approach has the potential to revolutionise the sector, driving innovation and enterprise, make us acutely relevant to communities, enable independence from and a reconfiguring of over-determined relationships with corporate and political influencers and a revisioning of our agency as trusted anchor organisations.

¹⁰ The complex relationship of Black feminism, ‘white feminism’, European Feminism and US feminism and the global array of feminist movements, feminist leadership approaches and museums is a terrain I am exploring in a post fellowship research project and specifically in discussions with sister organisations including Book Bunk, an ambitious, innovative and inspiring Nairobi based Library project with whom GWL are currently collaborating.

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<https://medium.com/@sumayakassim/the-museum-is-the-masters-house-an-open-letter-to-tristram-hunt-e72d75a891c8>

¹² <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1001738>

¹³ The term intersectional first theorised by Kimberle Crenshaw requires that all aspects of a person’s lived experiences can impact on the ways in which discrimination impacts and is explored in her 2019 text, *On Intersectionality: essential writings*.

The challenges? First, a tenacious reluctance in some institutions to relinquish privilege and address basic injustices. I have witnessed and researched how power is wielded and access policed in all strata of the (typically hierarchical) frameworks of museums, academia and wider cultural institutions. The 'stuckness' of inequality can be seen and felt both within institutions and in the systems of patronage and 'guardianship' of culture. Second, a deficit of knowledge in impactful equalities methods in those ready to lead. The perfect storm of expectation from Government/s and other funders and a diverse and vocal public exercised by inequalities means that there is now no hiding place for cultural leaders who for whatever reason have postponed grappling with what inequality means and have no blueprints.

Through naming and claiming feminist leadership, drawing on decades of expertise and global models, progress can be made on operations, strategy and structure, enabling a shift from the stuck to sustainability.

To reiterate, cultural organisations who are perceived as failing to make progress in their active welcoming, recruitment or governance or worse are perceived as exacerbating inequalities, now risk facing public and press 'pile-ons'.¹⁴ Museums and heritage organisations of every stripe from the most august to popular heritage tourist attractions have come under fire in a now characteristic ripple of bad news originating in the merciless, gimlet eye of social media then back and forth across print and broadcast media platforms.¹⁵

Over the course of the Fellowship, in interviews with feminist leaders (whether they disavow or embrace the term) such as those driving the exciting grass roots Women's Centre for Creative Work in LA¹⁶, reading inspirational Black feminist leaders such as Adrienne Maree Brown¹⁷, learning more about the dynamic landscape of feminist leadership in India¹⁸ and in excavating the histories of remarkably resilient path finding feminist organisations founded from the 1970s on such the European women's libraries movement, I have begun to capture the characteristics of feminist intersectional working: dialogistic, empathetic, brave,

¹⁴ The perfect storm being the critique of museum's relationship with the discredited Sackler family.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/nan-goldin-leads-a-protest-at-the-guggenheim-against-the-sackler-family>

¹⁵ For example, *V and A chief apologises to breastfeeding woman asked to cover up*, Guardian August 5 2017, *British Museum sorry for labeling row*, BBC website, 13 September 2017, *London Dungeon apologises for 'dead prostitute' Valentine's Day joke*, Telegraph, 15 February, 2017

¹⁶ <https://womenscenterforcreativework.com>

¹⁷ <http://adriennemareebrown.net>

¹⁸ For example the groundbreaking women's publishing house Zubaan

<https://zubaanbooks.com> or the newly created Sister Library

<https://twitter.com/SisterLibrary>

open, values focussed, collaborative and inclusive, innovative and organically developing coaching culture.¹⁹

In contrast to the monolithic and 'stuck', the calcified, unfit for purpose hierarchical models that still characterise the mainstream, feminist led organisations are mobile, heterogeneous in makeup, are to be found in an array of manifestations and forms across the world, are tailored to specific contexts cultures, communities and constituencies mobilised as bell hooks has described representing 'an organised strategy to take action against patriarchy.'²⁰ This clear focus on resilience and shared purpose has given rise to spectacular models of sustainability and impact.²¹ Across an array of feminist organisational ecosystems I have discovered a will to 'to explore differences and to empower the construction of more just futures'.²²

In recent years GWL has become more deeply conscious about its focus, ethics, relevance and values. It has moved from the early 'tyranny of structurelessness',²³ period, through a loosely held shared notion of feminist working (respect, active welcoming, activism, inclusion) to an increasingly systematised, defined and explicit statement of organisational values and purpose. This process is self-reflexive, discursive and dynamic, engendering a whole organisation dialogue internally and externally about how we work.

Our origin story is as a museum, library, archive, arts and community space borne in response to a need and desire, to bring women and other excluded groups into the frame of Scottish culture. Our feminist aims have resulted in enable a wide sense of ownership, accessibility and relevance for our users and audiences. Coupled with our rising confidence and strategic aim to be change making, we have felt the

¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the mainstream, responding to the market for training in new leadership models benchmarks of effective leadership methods cited as the most sustainable and award-winning organisational settings including high impact non-profits read as reminiscent of *feminist* approaches:

Crutchfield and Grant , who undertook a deep and extensive study of non-profit organisations, discovered that 'greatness' had nothing to do with marketing and strategic planning but everything to do with how they worked outside their own boundaries (in productive and positive partnerships) and how they managed their internal operations. Crutchfield and Grant, *Forces for Good: the six practices of high impact non profits*, 2007

²⁰ bell hooks, *All about love: new passions*, 2000

²¹ One inspiring study visit during the Clore Fellowship was to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York. This organization has been steadily working and developing as a volunteer led initiative uninterrupted for 45 years without any state or government funding.

²² From the introduction to *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice, Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies and Projections*, edited by Schalk, Maze, Kristinasson and Fanni, 2007

²³ This hugely cited and influential paper critiquing aspirations to Structurelessness in feminist collective working was written by Jo Freeman aka Joreen. The earliest version of this article was given as a talk at a conference called by the Southern Female Rights Union, held in Beulah, Mississippi in May 1970. "Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a structureless group. Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion."

responsibility to try to express our internal dynamic, behaviourally, conceptually and diagrammatically.²⁴

Discovering more about feminist organisations in Europe and North America that incubated new museological and cultural access approaches such as the Women's Building in LA, Biblioteca della Donne in Bologna (part of the wider Orlando feminist group) and the New Museum in New York has sharpened my appetite for discussions about what feminist and radical organigrams of the museums and cultural organisations of the future will look like.

I have discovered that keeping the focus pulled on values and clarity of commitment to equality characterises the most profoundly impactful and most successful museums and cultural organisations; it is the dynamic that drives all our work and has led to seismic changes and positive impetus.

Recently, a colleague spoke about the enervating workload they faced as a leader dealing with divisional thinking in a large mainstream institution (an issue they had successfully addressed with values focussed strategies). It evoked the redundant, dispiriting combative nature of Westminster. In the cultural world, from academia to the cultural behemoths flows the subterranean critiques from the casualties of unreconstructed systems; a tide of anecdotes of emotional labour, or encountering injustice and power wielded in enervating ways. This is eloquently and powerfully expressed in the writings of Sara Ahmed.²⁵ The story is still emphatically one of brick walls and glass ceilings, of micro aggressions and 'stuckness' encountered as colleagues make efforts to positively radicalise institutions.

Part of the effectiveness of GWL, working on a tiny budget with a small staff team (we have only 1 museum curator, only 1 part time librarian and no reception staff) is that the vast majority of our time is spent in solution focussed activities with a shared vision and with space for all to speak and be heard and for change to be made. A key task of feminist leadership is to shepherd such a dynamic. Our aim is to be a model for properly thought through diversity working with respect for each other and a shared ownership of our vision.

My own earlier reticence to claim a feminist leadership role has shifted to a commitment to make explicit the ways myself and other feminists are working in cultural institutions. The process of trying to sustain and nurture, safeguard and risk-take, has been a complex, often fear inducing but deeply rewarding experience. Leadership in the corporate and political not to say patriarchal world is so often characterised as individuals affecting organisational change. I see the growth and changes in GWL as an alchemical process where the complex amalgam of multiple imaginations, different resources and conditions of operation result from discussions, dissonance, passion and recognition of need and through the process we are all changed.

²⁴ The structuring of organisations, expressed in their organigrams has become one of my chief interests in the Clore Fellowship.

²⁵ Sarah Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*, 2017

In contrast to the monolithic, mainstream cultural institutions GWL remains beautifully and evocatively liminal, a place where I have witnessed and experienced a million instances of joy, profound inspiration and politicisation. Critically, the GWL 'community' remains heterogeneous; learning and knowledge sharing is taking place continually in unstructured encounters and serendipitous connections by the widest array of people; leadership has the space to show itself and be recognised in an array of constantly shifting settings. We have created the space, the culture, the institution, and a heterotopia from *our* imaginations.

In her work, *Emergent Strategy*, Adrienne Maree Brown describes leadership in ways that chimes with my own intuitive work to date at GWL. For example, reflecting on the origin story at GWL I recognise this catalytic moment as one that Brown calls Visionary Fiction. It concerns the vitality of imagination, the synonymy of art with truth and justice and the drive to vision and create alternatives:

*Art is not neutral. It either upholds or disrupts the status quo, advancing or regressing justice. We are living now inside the imagination of people who thought economic disparity and environmental destruction were acceptable costs for their power. It is our right and responsibility to write ourselves into the future. All organising is science fiction. If you are shaping the future, you are a futurist. And visionary fiction is a way to practice the future in our minds, alone and together.*²⁶

Her calls to (more) action are now fuelling my own and colleagues' thinking about the future.

From this vantage point, three decades into the GWL adventure and with the demands for delivering services, space and resources never more pressing, I had been turning to questions during the Fellowship about expansion and what GWL might need to be fit for the future through a more consciously understood Feminist Leadership lens. My thinking is to resist; to return to Core Values, to consider the context, consult, listen and revision.

Could the energies that might be invested in (capital) building be diverted into nurture and support? How could specific communities who are ripe for coalescing around a vision be given agency? What could we bring to help the proliferation of sustainable, solution focussed resilient new initiatives? How could feminist leadership and knowledge be grown and shared in the process?

Brown advocates bio-mimicry as a way to refigure our visioning of fit for purpose cultural institutions and communications within and from them. A rhizomatic conceptualisation of activism, agency, leadership and leaderlessness is also promoted by feminist Rebecca Solnit. Here, thought-leadership is envisioned as subtle, iterative, morphing and adapting to locales and contexts, gentle but powerful. I am quoting her at length as she has been a north star in my thinking during this period of reflection:

²⁶ Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, 2017

*After a rain mushrooms appear on the surface of the earth as if from nowhere. Many do so from a sometimes vast underground fungus that remains invisible and largely unknown. What we call mushrooms mycologists call the fruiting body of the larger, less visible fungus. Uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organizing and groundwork — or underground work — often laid the foundation. Changes in ideas and values also result from work done by writers, scholars, public intellectuals, social activists, and participants in social media. [...] Ideas at first considered outrageous or ridiculous or extreme gradually become what people think they've always believed. How the transformation happened is rarely remembered, in part because it's compromising: it recalls the mainstream when the mainstream was, say, rabidly homophobic or racist in a way it no longer is; and it recalls that power comes from the shadows and the margins, that our hope is in the dark around the edges, not the limelight of centre stage.*²⁷

I am made hopeful by this feminist turn to anti- (monolithic, monumental) growth, to burgeoning site specific, g/local and grass roots germinations to forms of leaderships that are radically distinct from the command and control model.

As a feminist leader I am committed to distributing power and empowering. I am for example, convinced by the benefits for organisations of dual and multiple leads, seeing the ways this will help to conserve and build upon fragile and valuable institutional knowledge, this is an antidote to ego driven regime changing and careerism.

Cultural organisations should be spaces for discussion, dissonance and plurality and radically welcoming, making space for innovation and rapid response.

A GWL colleague speaking to a group of Clore Fellows on a recent study visit shared her impression of the organisation's difference to other cultural institutions. She described a sense of board, staff and volunteers sharing the same sense of time and space. I understood this as meaning everyone had a clear stake in the future (horizon scanning and being invested in the future wasn't just the prerogative of programmers, curators and Board members, and being 'on the ground and on the front line' wasn't the day to day urgent business only known or experienced by volunteers, hosts or front of house). This outcome of feminist working (and shared leadership) made for a radically shared perception of ownership across the museum.

The longitudinal life changing benefits of inclusive cultural work and feminist leadership needs to be understood to inform the processes of creating new cultural spaces and leading the sector from 'stuckness' and the equalities *impasse*. Those who have experience of exclusion should be seen as having (lived) experiences (a form of embodied research) that offers invaluable perspectives to shape what future provision should be and create truly inclusive and sustainable pathways forward. Their expertise, as the visionary leaders of the future, needs to be invested in. This idea is one I have learnt from the thought-leadership of former GWL colleague Rachel Thain-Gray.

²⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 2016

Achieving alignment and whole organisational ownership of inclusion especially at scale and when the Establishment has been centuries in the making, is undoubtedly 'a journey'. But it is one that starts and ends with active listening, being open to radical ideas, seeking and welcoming feedback and being courageous in making changes that are based on shared values.

Feminist Leadership in action.