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***What are the questions which inform and the process and values which define your practice?***

### **Origins**

Conceiving a cultural institution as an act of militancy may sound like an implausible proposition. I remember this being my gut-felt intention, at the origin of Glasgow Women's Library (GWL). That embodied sense, in the mid 1980s that there was urgent work to be done to address inequality is still motivating me in my work with this same organisation today.<sup>1</sup>

I have written much in the past few years about the germination of the Library, and the specific cultural, social and political conditions that necessitated it's coming into being.<sup>2</sup> However, this is an opportunity to think about some of the questions that have informed my personal approach to working (albeit always a process of collaboration) and to explore some of the wider values that have defined my practice.

When conditions of inequality prevail, action is required. Being an agent for change doesn't rely on being knowledgeable about leadership or having demonstrable intellectual credentials. As GWL was crystallising my understanding of structural inequality was rudimentary and I was unqualified to launch a library. This was a moment when personal and political passions ignited, a vision was galvanised that caught the imagination of others setting in motion a momentum for making a space.

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<sup>1</sup> It is there, expressed in the GWL Vision: Our Vision is of a world in which every woman is able to fulfil her potential and where women's historical, cultural and political contributions to society are fully recognised, valued and celebrated.

<sup>2</sup> I have been invited to more of this reflective work as GWL passed the quarter century milestone in 2016. See for example: Patrick, A. (2018) How Art, Activism and Feminist Agency Shaped a Ground-breaking Museum. London: Museum ID [online]. Available from: <http://museum-id.com/art-activism-feminist-agency-shaped-ground-breaking-museum/> [Accessed 8th March 2018] (2017a) Claiming Space and Being Brave: Activism, Agency and Art in the Making of a Women's Museum. In: Ashton, J. C., ed. *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*. Vol.1. 1st edition. Edinburgh and Boston: Museums etc. 184-215. (2017b) Glasgow Women's Library. In: Bultman, S. *The Yearbook of Women's History*, Atria, eds. *Gender and Archiving: Past, Present and Future*. Hilversum and Amsterdam: Verloren.

The context was baldly the hegemonic, over determined white, masculine, heteronormative cultural milieu of Glasgow. As a young woman creative, I was filled with righteous indignation; Scotland's cultural representation felt so 'stuck', so narrowly exclusive there was really nowhere to go in all senses. The need for some sort of locus for women whose lives and creative endeavours were otherwise minimised, neglected or obscured was overwhelming.

I had become politicised as a teenager by older, left wing and anarchist friends; involved in anti-racist and, to a lesser extent, feminist activism, part of the countercultural response to Thatcherism in Doncaster. On becoming an art student and moving to Glasgow I underwent an epiphany around how power is expressed and perpetuated in cultural institutions. Here was the ideology of inequality reflected in every facet: in the canonical histories of art, design and architecture; in the virtually all male and all white staff cohort; in the gendered siloing of departments (Textiles virtually all women; Architecture virtually all men...); in the vaunting of the 'New Glasgow Boys' coincident with my arrival at the Glasgow School of Art<sup>3</sup>; in the complacency around exclusionary practices and in abuses of power. My questioning of the institution quickly led to a critique of the edifice of Scotland's culture, the industries of art in Britain and the superstructure of inequalities expressed in museums, galleries, libraries locally and globally, and ultimately to imagining what alternatives could be created.

A mobilising question for me then and now is *What could a women's library, in this context, at this time in history be?*

### **Structure**

There was something of an inevitability about this became a collective endeavour. I was inspired by what I knew of feminist art organising in the Women's Building, Womanhouse and the Feministo projects.<sup>4</sup> We had forged friendships with inspirational maverick women's art librarians in Europe, but there was no blueprint for how a project could be grown, managed and governed

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<sup>3</sup> I wrote about this at the time: - (1997) Boy Trouble: Some problems resulting from 'gendered' representation of Glasgow's culture in the education of women artists and designers. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 16(1), 7-16.

<sup>4</sup> The Woman's Building (1973-1991) was a [non-profit](#) feminist arts and education centre in [Los Angeles, California](#). It served as a venue for the [women's movement](#) and was spearheaded by artist [Judy Chicago](#), [graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville](#) and [art historian Arlene Raven](#). For information on Womanhouse and House Work Castle Milk Woman House, a project linked to Womanhouse in Glasgow that was a precursor to GWL visit

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/discover-our-projects/house-work-castle-milk-woman-house/house-work-castle-milk-woman-house-interviews/>

Feministo was an influential British feminist art 'Postal Event' It began in 1975, and was founded by Kate Walker and Sally Gollop. Both women were artists and mothers and housewives and had participated in other feminist collaborations-marches and 'A Woman's Place' (influenced by the Cal Arts Womanhouse).

<http://moorewomenartists.org/feministo-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-housewife/>

in our locale. Having no professional expertise enabled us to be visionary. Our navigation of the processes of creating and running spaces, developing 'programming', recruiting and 'managing' volunteers and deciding how we would focus our energies was destined to be radically different as we were a community of people that had little of the privileges or experiences that prevailed in the cultural mainstream.

Alongside railing against the 'pale, male and stale', I felt strongly about the classed nature of culture. I knew from experience that both mainstream and feminist cultural organisations could exclude on the basis of class, and the founding group of GWL (and its precursor Women in Profile) were committed, however naively to a nascent notion of intersectionality.

In deciding to make a space, and specifically one that would grow and be sustainable, (this wasn't a 'project' or a career stepping stone) myself and the other co-founders were saying that not only were the existing institutions unrepresentative and exclusionary, but they were not ripe for the sort of structural changes required.

The diverse and evolving GWL community, all volunteers for the first decade, moved forward in a state that some historians of feminism would recognise as the Tyranny of Structurelessness<sup>5</sup>. There was no precedent for us, no mentoring, no big sister resource to emulate, and we were chary of (or perhaps too busy to be) discussing leadership.

### **Collectivity and leadership**

Notwithstanding its ambiguous structure, the Library grew with a purposeful dynamic, learning often painfully from the mechanics of exclusion and evolving accordingly, keeping the values of our 'community led' approach (where we are both of and for the community) live. Another abiding question then, *How can we get closer to the goal of dismantling the systems of inequality in culture through every aspect of the different work we do?* This has necessarily led to questions of governance.

GWL suffered existential growing pains in its evolving governance (recruiting staff, becoming a charity, taking on more and more onerous responsibilities including capital grants, having a Board...) with episodes of deep challenge for those who were trying to steer or respond to necessary change.

In the past I considered 'feminist leadership' a contradiction in terms. Nearly thirty years on I am open to reflection on my navigation of this contested terrain and have started to define my approaches to working, the synergies between my own and the organisation's values and framing this explicitly as forms of feminist leadership.

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

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>

institutions. The process of trying to sustain and nurture, safeguard and risk-take, has been a complex, often fear inducing and deeply rewarding experience. It has been critical to try to keep open to all answers to the founding question as the organisation and the context in which we are working has developed. Leadership in the corporate and political world is so often characterised as individuals affecting organisational change. I see the 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.

The 'women's library' made manifest the desires for gathering ground (conceptually and literally) for the hopes and dreams of others and myself. Trained as an artist, at intervals I have asked myself, is GWL a collective perpetual artwork? Is it an activist intervention? In contrast to the monolithic, mainstream sectorally fixed cultural institutions it remains beautifully and evocatively liminal, a place where I have witnessed and experienced a million instances of joy, profound inspiration and politicisation. Critically, 'the community' remains heterogeneous; learning and knowledge sharing is taking place continually in unstructured encounters and serendipitous connections by the widest array of people. We have created the space, the culture, the institution, and a heterotopia from *our* imaginations.

GWL is authentically 'owned' by a community. It is our/their books that sit on the shelves (everything we have accumulated is donated) we/they salvaged items of furniture, we/they read their first book with us or uncovered ideas that changed our/their lives, it is our/their food shared round the table at the weekly Story Café, we/they deposited their queer campaigning materials in the archive, we/they delivered the programmes on our/feet/their bikes/their skateboards in our/their local community.

This deeply felt and widely shared sense of ownership,<sup>6</sup> gives me optimism for the future when I will not be a live part of the organism. I have played a role in GWL's history but many others have also created its facets. How could we conceive 'community succession planning' with this understanding of shared ownership? GWL's institutional knowledge is shared across staff, board, volunteers and users past and present. How can this be used to vitally re/vision the next phases whilst safeguarding the deep-rooted nature of the founding question and core values?

In her work, *Emergent Strategy*, Adrienne Maree Brown describes leadership in ways that I recognise in my own intuitive work to date at GWL. Her calls to

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<sup>6</sup> This can be characterised in our communities' response to sector our nomination (and failure to win) Art Fund's Museum of the Year in 2018.  
<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/?s=dossier>

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

**What shifts in approach would you like to see from colleagues, commissioners, artists, funders etc.?**

As I write the world feels rudderless; in a Climate Emergency, the global political landscape is febrile with escalating polarisation and right wing and religious radicalism, with risks to liberties and the loss of hard won gains by campaigners for civil liberties and equalities of earlier Waves. My sense is that now is not the time for individuals working within unfit for purpose, rigidly hierarchical 'command and control' cultural institutions to be focussing their energy on personal career advancement and individuated struggles for recognition. Rather, I think the conditions demand deep, structural change and collective ways of addressing of systemic abuses of power that perpetuate exclusion. The case for equalities has been made; inclusion is not optional. Now is the time to see what can be achieved in art and culture when institutions relinquish power to unleash the potential of creatives, staff, board and volunteer cohorts that are truly representative. The structures of institutions and the cultural sector require root and branch revisioning. Progress, if it is happening at all, still seems sluggishly incremental. There can be no social benefit when individuals carry the burden of inclusivity in largely unreconstructed institutions, where creatives are making work that serves to 'window-dress' a sector and where 'widened access' merely snaps back to a default model of power with no institutional learning when agents for change move on or programmes cease.

A paradigm shift is overdue. Public institutions such as museums, broadcasters and libraries that have what Mercy McCann has dubbed the 'power to convene' have never been more needed where truth and histories are denied and, or misrepresented; and yet I can think of no large-scale museum institution that has rigorously integrated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), or is a model of what GWL calls The Holistic Museum.<sup>8</sup>

New forms of dynamic leadership, and I would argue feminist intersectional leadership, is required. *But what would this look like?*

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<sup>7</sup> 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, 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.* Adrienne Maree Brown, Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, 2017

<sup>8</sup> <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/discover-our-projects/equality-in-progress/eipreport/>.

## **Leadership, some Visionary Fictions**

Shared ownership of Mission and Vision across organisations. Everyone feeling they understand their role and responsibilities in relation to it. Cultures and ethics of care for staff teams, as well as for the audiences, visitors, creatives and users of resources. Dialogistic organisational cultures, on-going discussion, active listening and accelerating shifts towards full equality and inclusion.

Institutions seeking out, listening to and responding to 'go to' people who represent those most impacted upon by inequalities.

Vigilance against siloed, divisional and specialism-specific thinking. Discussions on-going across and beyond the cultural sector and continual Core Values Checking In.

Shared Responsibility across the sector for reanimating terms like Learning, Impact and Equality. How can these be made meaningful again to workers, volunteers and audiences after they have been tarnished through political and institutional misuse?

The radical use of organograms!<sup>9</sup> How do organograms describe power, what does it say, what could it say? How could it be a catalyst for visioning change?

Above all, settings that bring together artists, creatives, cultural workers, volunteers, funders and audiences need to be in continual meaningful solution focussed and honest dialogue that recognises the intersecting politics of the g/local.

### **If you were to design a cultural space from scratch what attributes might it have?**

Having had the daunting and exhilarating experience of co-creating a cultural space I have learnt how terrifying and life-changing this can be. My antidote? To convene with others to think wildly, feel unfettered and to keep visioning beyond the imagination of the dominant and without consideration of enervating lack of resources.

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 about expansion and conceptualising what cultural spaces might be fit for the future. My thinking is to resist. To return to Core Values, to consider the context 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

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<sup>9</sup> Organisational structural diagrams are largely viewed as the preserve of HR, as a functional schematic. They frequently illustrate the 'stuck' nature and outmoded thinking around management and leadership.

proliferation of sustainable, solution focussed resilient new initiatives? How could feminist leadership and knowledge be grown in the process?

Brown advocates bio-mimicry as a way to refigure our visioning of fit for purpose institutions and communications within and from them. A Rhizomatic conceptualisation of activism and agency is also promoted by Rebecca Solnit<sup>10</sup> and I am made hopeful by this turn to anti- (monolithic, monumental) anti-growth, to burgeoning site specific, g/local and grass roots germinations.

Any new cultural space must be emphatically green. I am visioning off grid resources, spaces that generate energy that can benefit its neighbours and understanding of the detrimental environmental impacts of unfettered digital growth by the 'creative industries'.

I am committed to the idea of dual and multiple leads in organisations, and am convinced 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.

New spaces and the communities they generate and reflect require new formulas for funding, before during and after they are conceived. Funders need to follow the lead of the most tuned in equalities focussed organisations and fully understand why equalities work costs more. Funders should champion the

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<sup>10</sup> *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. It seems insignificant or peripheral until very different outcomes emerge from transformed assumptions about who and what matters, who should be heard and believed, who has rights [...] 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. Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities, 2016*

productive intersections and relationships of culture to all aspects of local and national government departments, to health, education and the environment.

The longitudinal life changing benefits of inclusive cultural work and feminist leadership need to be understood to inform the processes of creating new cultural spaces. 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. Their expertise, as visionary leaders needs to be invested in.



