Hepworth's Progeny: Generations of Women in Sculpture in Britain – Lives, Work, Careers and Social Change 1960-2021 | A Report

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Introduction

> *There is a deep prejudice against women in art. Many people – most people still, I imagine – think that women should not involve themselves in the act of creation except on its more trivial fringes. They still think of sculpture as a male occupation: because, I suppose, they have a misconception of what sculpture involves. There is this cliché, you see, a sculptor is a muscular brute bashing at an inert lump of stone, but sculpture is not rape. No good form is hacked. Stone never surrenders to force.*[1]

From September 2021 to March 2023, The Hepworth Wakefield hosted the research project *Hepworth's Progeny* in collaboration with art historian Griselda Pollock and sculptor Lorna Green. The research was funded by a donation from the Holberg Prize awarded to Griselda Pollock in 2020 for her work in feminist studies in the visual arts and art history, and to foster extended research in this field. The project was guided by an Advisory Board of Griselda Pollock and Lorna Green alongside The Hepworth Wakefield's Senior Curator Eleanor Clayton, sculptors Sokari Douglas Camp and Jill McKnight, and independent art historian Dr. Alice Correia.

We were appointed to lead the study by revisiting and taking forward Lorna Green's earlier study, completed in 1989, of around 250 women working in the expanding field of sculpture. Working with questionnaires submitted by the 1989 participants, we analysed these responses in order to generate a comparative study, recruiting a new cohort, through 2022, of nearly 80 contemporary women sculptors working in Britain today.

The ambition of this feminist research project, which acknowledges the entanglements of age, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, neurosensory diversity and other factors, was to study how the conditions that shape women's creative lives and aesthetic choices have shifted over the last 30 years. The research also touched on changes in the situation for funding, display and critical reception of art by women. Aiming to generate new narratives around women's experiences in art, the analysis of the 1989 and 2022 surveys informed the exhibition *If Not Now, When?* at The Hepworth Wakefield from 31 March to 24 September 2023, with a programme of associated events.

In this short report, we describe in more detail our methodology and key findings from the research project and make some recommendations with relevance to the wider visual arts sector.

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[1] 'Barbara Hepworth finally gets her due', *The Guardian,* 13 June, 2015. See https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/13/barbara-hepworth-finally-gets-her-due.

Methodology

In 1988, sculptor Lorna Green issued a survey to women asking about their lives working in sculpture. Initiated for her MPhil study, the sculptor had a straightforward idea of wanting to know more about the women working in her professional field. Her nineteen questions were a rounded address to the life-time practices of her respondents: from earliest influences, school, art college, influential tutors, other artists, the artworld of curators, critics and dealers, and the role and support of family. While appearing a simple biographical approach, her questions teased out something complex and nuanced: the role of gender in shaping (consciously or otherwise) the imaginations and ambitions of artist-women, as well as the socially and culturally inscribed biases that they had to negotiate during their careers.

Lorna Green solicited a treasury of material, supplemented by her archiving of the activities of women in sculpture by collecting magazines and journals; recording television programmes; and preserving daily clippings from *The Guardian* newspaper as and when it featured any sculptor-women, not just those taking part in her survey.

> *Have things changed for sculptor-women since her inquiry in the 1980s? What directions has sculpture taken in the last thirty years? In what ways has feminism had an impact? What are the conditions in which the majority of women have worked in sculpture since 2000?*[2]

These are the questions that prompted Griselda Pollock to return to Lorna Green's survey, instigating the *Hepworth's Progeny* research project. We engaged with Lorna Green's study through our continued questioning about what hinders or inspires artistic productivity today, blending art historical and qualitative research, and the analysis of contemporary responses to a new survey.

Hepworth's Progeny took two directions: the analysis of the 1988 surveys, employing a range of qualitative research methods including Situational Analysis, Generational Comparative Methods and Constructivist Grounded Theory; and a newly designed and issued survey that translated Green's original questions for the present moment, paying attention to intersectionality and broadening the invitation to both women and non-binary people.[3] Our reissued questions addressed the

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[2] Griselda Pollock, unpublished extract from essay for *If Not Now, When?* newspaper, March 2023.

[3] Constructivist Grounded Theory method makes possible new and unpredictable interpretations from the source material. For Kathy Charmaz, Grounded Theory methods '...consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves'. Charmaz, K., *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2014), p.1.Charmaz, K., *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2014), p.1. Situational Analysis, 'engage[s] the dense complexities of real-world situations...[and] braids together Strauss's ecological social worlds/arena theory, Foucault's discourse analysis, and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes and assemblages'. Clarke, A. E., Friese, C., Washburn, R. S., *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Interpretive Turn,* (London: Sage, 2018), p.xxiv. Generational Studies is a broad field of research methods that considers the validity and use of the idea of 'generation' and 'generational cohorts' in research studies and marketing. See: Urwin, P.J. and Parry, E., *The evidence-base for generational differences: where do we go from here?* , https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/f9124d9430b69b3df89f8a631919e4a5679

complex entanglements of life and sculptural practice with age, class, ethnicity, gender, neoliberal economics, and the further commercialisation and centralisation of contemporary art since the 1980s. The new survey responses solicited in 2022 were then also quantitatively and qualitatively analysed.

In their meaning, Lorna Green's original questions were still generally apposite and relevant today. However, in the three decades between the original survey and the second, the immeasurable advances in women's legal and social equality, coupled with the impact that emerging ideas regarding sexuality and gender are having across all aspects of society and on equal opportunities policies, there were consequences for us as researchers principally invited to engage in a comparative generational study with a simple question at its core: 'What has changed in thirty years?' or even, 'Are things better now (than then)?' We identified a risk associated with simply reissuing Lorna Green's questions to a contemporary audience: that potentially participants might be put-off responding on the basis of certain terms and assumptions at work in the original survey.

The reframing of the questions for artist-women working today was achieved through a process combining situational analysis, close thematic reading of the original 1988 survey responses and historical research.[4] In this way we identified re-occurring life-cycle events, moments, incidents, topics, and political and social events experienced by many women, and this led to thinking around Lorna Green's original questions, and what she was trying to uncover about women's lives and sculptural practice beyond the obvious.

This might appear, for some readers, a methodological diversion. But it is, we believe, what enabled us to generate a set of survey questions that have not only been commended by the 2022 applicants as speaking to their lived realities, but which enabled us to identify connections rather than differences across the two cohorts of survey respondents, which in turn has prompted us to focus not on 'what is better' in 2022 compared to 1989, but what is both similar *and* different, and then to ask what this might mean.

Our new set of questions was issued in January 2022. While Lorna Green's survey was issued on paper, gained visibility via an editorial in the influential journal *Artists Newsletter* and was live for nearly two years, the new survey was launched on social media, using a dedicated online survey accessed via The Hepworth Wakefield website and ran for eight weeks. Lorna Green further distributed her survey through her own professional networks, and the new survey was similarly distributed by the researchers and *Hepworth's Progeny* Advisory Group. Certain 'clusters' of respondents emerged across both surveys, for example geographically within Yorkshire (2022) and following distribution patterns for Artists Newsletter (1989), as well as through networks including members of the Royal Society of Sculptors. The situation, of these huge differences in communication form, distribution and duration, that determined who took part and how, in part led to our critique of the very notion of there being two comparative 'generational cohorts', and was one of

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5e04cde20a95d33139865d2bcba21/200052/Generations%20paper%20for%20WAR%20v4%20241116.pdf. Accessed: 5.12.21

[4] Through the thematic analysis method as outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, we identified re-occurring life-cycle events, moments, incidents, topics, and political and social events, see: 'Thematic Analysis: a practical guide', (London: Sage, 2021).

the first signs that the situation was 'different' today. Not better nor worse but offering different possibilities than before. Both the 1988 and 2022 surveys demonstrated the deep commitment of participants to sharing intimate and often moving details of their lived experiences as artists, caregivers, parents and partners.[5]

Sensitizing concept:[6] *Tumbling Through Time,*[7]

The collected 320 or so responses were taken through a series of quantitative evaluations regarding age range, place of birth, location of applicant and art school education. A distinct pattern emerged across both surveys that the age range of the majority of respondents was approximately mid 40 years through to mid-60s. This corroborates what many generation studies scholars suggest that a more significant means of identifying cohorts is not by age per se, but by 'life cycle'. That is, identifying points of relevance in 'lived experience'. This, we propose, is significant, and became a foundational sensitizing concept that structured our research picture.

While recent graduates and those within the first 10 years post-graduation did contribute to both surveys, artists who were aged 40 years and above - with fifteen to twenty years of post-graduation practice - were the majority. Why might this be so?

Our analysis of the surveys using grounded theory method leads us to propose that women hold within themselves – consciously or not – as 'sense' of 'life-cycle' and their position in and through 'time'. 'Time' is, we suggest, a particularly forceful concept for women.[8] Many of the respondents conveyed that they felt they were, as Liliane Lijn has so aptly phrased, *tumbling through time*.[9]

Life cycle then is significant. It shapes, we argue, the ambitions of artistic practice. Moreover, it effects *actual* career possibilities and trajectories. Even among younger respondents in their 20s, the concept of the 'body clock' and the apparent inevitability of having to choose between artistic practice and having children, remains stubbornly ingrained.

For numerous respondents, negotiating between caregiving responsibilities (for children, partners and ageing parents), paid work and their artistic practice was constant. It shaped the arc of respondents' artistic commitments with many

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[5] If we had concerns that artists would not commit to this new (unpaid) survey, given the deluge of surveys now directed to artists on many subjects including the deep impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on artists' livelihoods, we need not have feared. We extend our deepest gratitude to all those who generously gave their time to respond.

[6] Sociologist Kathy Charmaz identifies sensitizing concepts as background ideas that inform the overall research problem. 'Sensitising concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience'. See: Bowen, G. A., *Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts*, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/160940690600500304. Accessed: 3.2.21.

[7] Lijn, L., 'A Goddess and A Dwarf' (1971), in *Cosmic Dramas* (Middlesbrough: mima/Museums & Galleries Middlesbrough, 2013), p.16.

[8] 'Time' in various guises, emerged as a significant feature of many of the survey respondents and determined the curatorial framework for the exhibition *'If Not Now When?: Generations of Women and Sculpture, 1960 – 2022', The Hepworth Wakefield,* 31 March – 24 September 2023 that derived from *Hepworth's Progeny.* It is important, however, that our notion of 'women and/in time' is not the same as arguing an essentialist position of women and biological determinism.

[9] Lijn, L. *ibid*

returning to or even commencing their artistic practice after or between their roles as carers. Some felt out-of-step with the pace and changing fashions of an art world – that they in effect make the 'wrong' work for their times, and possibly had always done so – or that they had 'missed the boat' in an art world focused on the new and emerging youth.

There are complex implications for artist-women in ageing that are, perhaps, shared with women across many social and cultural sectors. It brings with it cultural prejudice that leads to pervasive feelings of invisibility and irrelevance. Of having not 'made it'. Moreover, ageing – or more specifically the post-fertility years - brings with it menopause that for some respondents has had significant mental health repercussion that has affected their practice, as has also been the case with post-natal depression.[10]

Practice versus Career: 'I've been emerging and drowning all my life'.[11]

Despite this, notions of duration and personal endurance emerged forcefully: the deep commitment of so many women to their sculptural practice across the decades, even into their 70s and beyond, led us to appreciate a differentiated understanding of 'practice' and 'career'. These are not, we propose, the same thing. 'Practice' endures as a kind of beat of living and emphasises what artists are 'doing'. Whereas the notion of 'artistic career' to which the 'artworld' (i.e. curators, critics, dealers, and even educators and public sector funders) subscribes is value-driven, implies professionalism (over amateurism), moving forward constantly towards a goal and artistic 'progress' (that is, perpetual artistic innovation) that is rewarded by notoriety, exhibitions, sales and commissioning.[12] This model of 'career', we argue is particularly challenging, and indeed can be damaging, for many artist-women.

Some respondents had once enjoyed artistic recognition with regular exhibitions and commissions. However, by the 1990s, artists who particularly identified with feminism, leftist art discourses, and social and political urgencies found the increasingly centralised and globalised artworld scene, with its shifting political, cultural and artistic priorities, often enmeshed in neo-liberal agendas, and the disintegration of networks of spaces and curators active in the promotion of critically engaged artistic practices detrimental to the distribution of their work.

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[10] Indeed, Barbara Hepworth wrote to her friend political activist Margaret Gardiner that she was struggling with menopause and its was affecting her ability to work. See: Clayton, E., Barbara Hepworth: Art & Live, Thames and Hudson, London, 2021 p.151

[11] A comment artist Michelle Howarth made in our studio visit.

[12] Definitions of 'career' include a sense of 'a person's course or progress in life' (Oxford English Dictionary), however it also is used with a more value laden idea of 'career success', that refers to the extent and ways in which an individual can be described as successful in their working life so far. This linear model of progress and success, premised on an understanding that careers take place within the context of stable, organizational structures to which Individuals move forward and up 'the organization's hierarchy seeking greater extrinsic rewards', is one that is implicit in how art curators, funders and policy makes persistently evaluate artists. We argue this model, that has its origins in American psychologist Donald Super's influential 'career stage model' of the 1950s, is inappropriate for all artists, but particularly has negative effects for women. See: *Super, Donald E. (1953). 'A theory of vocational development', American Psychologist. 8 (5): 185 190. doi:10.1037/h0056046. ISSN 0003-066X.*

Nonetheless, artists were throughout these subsequent decades working artists who continued to 'practice'. For others, 'practice' has been directed towards commercial sales, in the genres of portrait commissioning, both human and animal; private commissions for interior and exterior domestic spaces, as well as public art.

That our majority 1989 and 2022 respondents were of similar stages in their 'life cycle' (ages between early 40s to late 60s) explains, we believe, why so many were prompted to write fulsomely and with great intimacy and openness. This depth of engagement is, we propose, motivated by a need to 'speak out' that is connected to Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero's concept of 'the narratable self', with its links to 'consciousness-raising'.[13]

A Chorus of Voices: Key findings[14]

What are these women, therefore 'consciousness-raising' about? What has analysing these survey submissions brought into focus?

Support

Our survey respondents communicate how structures of support have changed since the 1960s. In the 1989 cohort, women in their 50s, who had graduated from art school in the post-war era (1950s and 1960s), had principally been expected to marry. It is well documented that women at art school were discriminated against on the grounds that as a consequence they would not take the 'career' of being an 'Artist' seriously, and indeed that they should 'stand aside' and let men take up these roles. Artist-women in 1989, described marriages and partnerships with supportive husbands/partners, many of whom financially enabled them to practice their art, though commonly alongside family duties! A rare few women had financial means of their own, often the consequence of family inheritances. Others, however, spoke of conflict and disharmony arising from their need to have their own time to practice, jealousies at their artistic successes – particularly in having an artist partner – and consequently divorce.

However, the emancipation of women legally, the restructuring of domestic family life and the questioning of gendered roles has brought alternative challenges for artist-women. How do they support their practice financially? In the 1989 survey, younger artists referred to a range of state support systems that supported their immediate post-graduation years that are now no longer available: the Enterprise Allowance Scheme of the early 1980s and 'the dole'.[15] Today, women speak about the difficulties of juggling portfolio careers in which they integrate paid

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[13] We are grateful to Catherine Grant and her referencing of Adrianna Caravero's work. See: Grant, C., 'Responding to Women and Creativity', *UAL publications*, London, 2022.

[14] The chorus in ancient Greek plays represents, on stage, the general population of that particular story, in contrast with many of the themes of the plays which tended to be about individual heroes, gods, and goddesses. Choruses commented on themes and acted as 'the ideal spectator'. It would seem that choruses represented women far more than groups of men. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_chorus

[15] The Enterprise Allowance Scheme was an initiative set up by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government which gave a guaranteed income of £40 per week to unemployed people who set up their own business. Many artists 'stretched' the definition of 'business' and used the £40 to live on, including Cornelia Parker and Tracy Emin.

work in gallery education, community, and socially engaged work, public art commissioning, teaching, and technician positions in order to support artistic practice, and to contribute to household budgets that have increased exponentially since the 1980s.

Educational expectations

By 2022, the structural sexism of art education, that so many women in the 1989 survey speak of as severely damaging to their ambitions is absent from accounts.[16] As has been noted, women now make up the majority of students in art schools across the country.[17] Our 2022 respondents report that by the millennium, when they are going through art education, women art tutors and women technicians are commonplace as role models. And generally, there is a sense that sculptural technologies and materials are 'gender neutral' and available to them should they wish to take them up; this is in sharp contrast to many of our 1989 testimonies.[18] Indeed, for some contemporary artists, the historical notion of gendered materials and processes comes to form the basis of their artistic practices of re-appropriation, in which they blur distinctions between domestic craft and fine art, collide different registers of materials, and are doing to no longer as artists operating from the 'fringes' of feminism.

Recommendations for policy makers and collections

One of the founding principles of the Grounded Theory method is its 'real world' application. From our research findings we therefore offer four principle areas of recommendation with relevance for those working in the wider visual arts sphere, particularly educators, curators, commissioners and collections managers:

- Problematising age, continuing' rather than 'emerging' practice:
  The artistic and cultural sector's historic assumptions that 'emerging' artists are young in years, or the imposition of age limits on certain funding, commissioning, prize-giving and professional development opportunities, has presented challenges for artist women in particular. The partial erosion and redefinition over recent years of what constitutes 'emerging' and 'established' career stages for artists is to be welcomed.[19] We suggest that this trend needs to continue. Even where funders have now recognised the complexities and diversity of how artists' careers unfold, the concept that artists

[16] See: Robinson, H., 'Women, feminism, and art schools: The UK experience', *Women's Studies International Forum,* 2021.

[17] 2020 and 2021 Freelands Foundation Report statistics on men and women attending art school see between 67-65% of places taken up now by women. See: 'Representation of Women Artists in the UK', https://freelandsfoundation.co.uk/research-and-publications/women-artists-report. Accessed 1.3.23. Why should this be the case is not understood.

[18] The gendering of materials and sculptural technologies, that precluded women accessing sculptural departments, has long been reported by artist-women.

[19] For example, the Turner Prize removed its age limit in 2017, enabling previously excluded artists over the age of 50 to be eligible for nomination. See https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/mar/29/turner-prize-artists-over-50-now-eligible-anish-kapoor.

nevertheless emerge as a cohort or generation – overtaking the previous one chronologically - remains ingrained.[20] How might these professional opportunities work more effectively for artist women in particular if they were reframed around the lived experience of 'life cycle' and the realities of women's generally greater caring responsibilities? We would like to see a greater emphasis on support for 'continuing' rather than 'emerging' practice that recognises the often-elongated structure of artist-women's careers, negotiated over a longer period of time between and after caring responsibilities.

- Collections, archives, and acquisitions:
  A number of women in our study had experienced work being purchased and entering collections, including the Arts Council Collection, during the 1980s. The status of this work is not now clear to them and there is often a lack of transparency between collections and artists as to the current conservation status of the work, and where and when it has been shown. This impacts on artist-women in specific ways: while they may have been visible to public institutions during an earlier period in their careers, either falling out of fashion or needing to take career breaks for the reasons described above, has the effect of rendering them to some degree invisible. In turn this means that work held in collections is no longer requested on loan, meaning that it further slips outside the scope of limited conservation and digitisation budgets. As a result, such work has often not been photographed since it entered a collection and is, therefore, not presented at its best amid contemporary high-quality digital representations of other artists' work. This then has major implications on, for example, search engine algorithms which produce and reproduce the same 'names' to the detriment of women working beyond an established 'canon'. This is, in effect, a downward spiral that encourages the notion that such women were 'forgotten,' or ceased to practice when in reality many have remained highly active and committed to their artistic practice in the intervening decades. How might collections rethink their responsibilities to artists whose work they hold? As a minimum, artists need to understand where and when such works are being shown in order to continue building an active exhibitions CV that can gain them traction within the circuits of contemporary galleries, curators, funders and commissioners. We suggest that collections managers need to work hard to escape the determinacy of established narratives when approaching public presentations of their holdings and to shift towards proactively surfacing new narratives on women and sculpture, a project to which the recent touring survey exhibition *Breaking The Mould*, drawn from the Arts Council

[20] Jerwood Arts, for example, seeks to support 'early career' artists, but while recognising the difficulties of defining this, also maintains a focus on a core mission, 'to identify and support the next generation of exceptional artists'. See https://jerwoodarts.org/programme/jerwood-developing-artists-fund/developing-artists-fund-faq/.

Collection, made a significant contribution.[21] Rather than seeing themselves primarily as custodians and conservators of historical material, such collections could do more to create new and meaningful connections with living artists – a point with obvious relevance beyond the field of sculpture.

- Re-visioning ideas of cultural and artistic value:
  Our study has revealed widespread frustrations among many artist-women regarding what they perceive as a lack of visibility within circuits of the artworld. This is often a question of blunt ageism against women who are only really getting going in their artistic careers once the restrictions of family, caring responsibilities and other paid work become lesser during middle age and beyond. By this time, however, many feel that they are 'too late' and the artworld has passed them by. Our recommendation is that revisioning is not about letting one or two more names into the fine art canon. Re-visioning requires longitudinal research that, like this project *Hepworth's Progeny*, looks to generate alternative curatorial methods that challenge current concepts of artistic value. Our recommendation here takes the form of an encouragement to researchers to dig deeper into the vast territories of artist-women working beyond the relatively narrow range of metropolitan institutions and strictly policed understandings of who and what holds value.

- Life-long learning
  Finally, art education needs to recognise that for many women, the impact of life cycle means that possibilities for learning and for developing artistic careers are differently shaped and negotiated over a much more extended period of time. As an example, some younger women in our study, aged early- to mid-twenties felt that they were facing a critical decision of whether or not to start a family almost immediately after graduation, and that this was not compatible with consolidating their artistic practice. Art education needs to challenge this either/or approach to negotiating life and work, and to provide viable alternatives to the limiting concepts of 'making it' and the stale focus on 'emerging' as only relating to young artists just out of University. Fine Art courses could play a leading role here in reflecting the lived realities of artist-women whose careers have taken different routes and the huge possibilities for life-long commitments to artistic *practice* beyond the narrower confines of *career* as a possibly more sporadic and constrained form of artworld recognition. Additionally, we advocate that more BA Fine Art courses offer part-time study as a means of widening participation.

Dr Anna Douglas and Dr Kerry Harker, *Hepworth's Progeny* Curatorial Researchers, April 2023

[21] *Breaking The Mould: Sculpture by Women since 1945*, Arts Council Collection touring exhibition September 2021-April 2023. See https://artscouncilcollection.org.uk/exhibition/breaking-mould-sculpture-women-1945.