Art + Feminism: an interview with Siân Evans

Siân Evans

(ALJ) Can you introduce yourself, your academic and professional background, and your current role as an academic art librarian?

How to answer this question? I guess I began my career as a librarian at a party. Newly possessing what I already knew was a useless (in capitalist terms, at least) MA in Art History, I had moved to New York City to be closer to my family, and to stay up all night at MisShapes parties and eat pizza at dawn. I was working in marketing for Forbes Magazine, as you do when you're 24 and need to pay the bills and have no idea what you want to do with your life. It wasn't long after the financial collapse of 2008, when job prospects were very low, that a friend of a friend who had just finished library school at Pratt handed me a drink at a party and said, 'you like writing and researching, if you don't want to be a teacher, why don't you become a librarian?'

2005–2010 was a brief moment when librarianship was *cool*, especially in New York. The now-defunct Desk Set were throwing hip, literary parties that raised money for incarcerated teens and other organizations, and the New York Times was writing about them[1]. I started library school, and during my first semester, I quickly ditched my job at Forbes for a sales position at Artstor, where I worked for six years, although I later moved into a User Support role.

During my time at Artstor, I got to interface with librarians, visual resources professionals and metadata specialists around the world. I also got increasingly involved in activist projects, like the Occupy Wallstreet Archives Working Group and later, Art + Feminism. In 2016, I took a job as the Information Literacy and Instructional Design Librarian at Maryland Institute College of Art, where I have been since. Basically, I designed and manage our Information Literacy Program, which is founded on the principles of critical librarianship and intersectional feminist pedagogy.

1. Kara Jesella, "A Hipper Crowd of Shushers", *New York Times*, July 8, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/fashion/08librarian.html

(ALJ) Can you describe Art + Feminism and the Wikipedia Edit-a-thons? What was your involvement in their creation and development?

Sure! Surveys have shown that somewhere between 8 and 16 percent of Wikipedia editors identify as cis or trans women. This gendered participation imbalance leads to missing and skewed content. In other words, the gender gap on Wikipedia is not just quantitative, but also qualitative. There is a well-known example from an article in *The New York Times*[2] that Wikipedia entries on a topic generally restricted to teenage girls, like friendship bracelets, are only a few paragraphs long while topics that are typically associated with boys, like toy soldiers or baseball cards, have multi-page entries with chronological lists and so on. A study out of MIT[3] showed that articles about women are more likely to link to articles about men than vice versa. So, this is where we're coming from. And it's important to remember that Wikipedia isn't just an encyclopedia, it's a community.

The Art + Feminism edit-a-thon itself arose out of two separate conversations between the four founding co-organizers back in the fall of 2013. Jacqueline Mabey and I had discussed arranging an event around art and feminism similar to the edit-a-thons geared towards Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) that take place every year on Ada Lovelace Day. My goal was to engage The Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA)'s Women and Art Special Interest Group to build public knowledge and address gender disparities in art research. Mabey mentioned this to Michael Mandiberg, a professor at College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center, The City University of New York, who uses Wikipedia in teaching. Mandiberg had actually had a similar conversation earlier that day with curator Laurel Ptak. At the time, Ptak was a fellow at Eyebeam, a center for art and technology, where she was doing work around cyberfeminism,

2. Noam Cohen, "Define Gender Gap? Look Up Wikipedia's Contributor List", *New York Times*, Jan. 30. 2011, http://libguides.mica.edu/prf.php?account_id=91499

3. "Computational Linguistics Reveals How Wikipedia Articles Are Biased Against Women", *MIT Technology Review*, https://www.technologyreview.com/s/534616/computational-linguistics-reveals-how-wikipedia-articles-are-biased-against-women/

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and Michael had encouraged her to hold an edit-a-thon focused on art, technology, and feminism.

This project also came on the heels of a very public debate about the potential for structural sexism on Wikipedia. Writer Amanda Filipacchi wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times*[4] on a problematic editorial practice being implemented by a Wikipedia editor: women were being removed from the 'American Novelists' category and moved into a subcategory for 'American Women Novelists.' Filipacchi's piece generated a maelstrom of discussion about gender issues on Facebook and other social media platforms. At the same time, Wikipedians were having a conversation about the subcategorization on Wikipedia's talk pages. While the topic was the same, the tenor and content of these conversations were worlds apart. A goal of the Art + Feminism edit-a-thon was to give art researchers and enthusiasts the tools to engage in these debates on Wikipedia, which is an open source platform.

This all just gets at the founding of Art + Feminism, which is such a small part of the story, because we continue to grow and change daily.

4. Amanda Filippacchi, "Wikipedia's Sexism Toward Female Novelists", *New York Times*, April 24, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/opinion/sunday/wikipedias-sexism-toward-female-novelists.html

(ALJ) You have written about the goals of the project ("Editing for Equality: The Outcomes of the Art + Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thons"), primarily 'to close the gender gap in both content and participation on Wikipedia.' Looking back to 2013 from 2019, how do you measure its impact? What are your future plans?

So, in our first year, we hosted an event at Eyebeam and had roughly 150 participants, plus we surprised ourselves by going global (we really thought we'd have to bribe 10 of our friends to come!). These are the stats[5] from our first edit-a-thon, which took place in March of 2014:

31 locations
6 Countries (USA, Canada, Australia, Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom)
600 participants (Approximated)
At least 101 new articles created
At least 90 articles improved

5. "Outcomes", *Art + Feminism*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/ArtAndFeminism/Outcomes

Compare that to our numbers from 2018[6]:

275 locations all over the world
3,800 participants

6. "Final Report 2017/18", *Art + Feminism User Group*, https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Art%2BFeminism_User_Group/Reporting/FinalReport2017-2018#Metrics

Created or improved over 43,000 content pages (22,500 articles, 18,000 wikidata items, over 2,500 images to Wikimedia Commons)

But this project is about a lot more than just numbers. It's really about building and sustaining an intersectional feminist, social justice-focused community working within the Wikimedia movement.

To that end, we've also grown enormously. We've received almost $450,000 in grant funding from the Wikimedia Foundation and have been able to expand our team. In 2017, we brought on McKensie Mack as our Program Coordinator. They brought over 10 years of experience working in anti-oppression, anti-racism and social justice work to the project and have immensely expanded our intersectional focus and sharpened our voice. This year, we promoted McKensie to Director of Art + Feminism and brought on 1 new lead co-organizer in Peru (to join McKensie, Michael, Jackie and me on the core organizing team) and 13 Regional Ambassadors all over the world, from Arizona to Ghana to Taiwan. It's been amazing to watch the project expand outwards to living rooms, artist-run centers, museums, libraries, and universities all over the world. And, for me, personally, I'm so excited to bring two more librarians (Amanda Meeks and Linden How) into the core organizing team! Librarians have always been a large part of the Art + Feminism community, but it'll be wonderful to have more librarians' perspectives on the organizing collective.

As for our future plans, this year we're focusing on gender and the non-binary. We want to continue to build our global reach and uplift the voices that remain/are most marginalized. This takes many forms of course: challenging Wikipedia's notability guidelines (which reproduce structural sexism and racism), partnering

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with community organizations already doing the work, and building our organizing team through an intersectional feminist lens.

(ALJ) Art + Feminism's work is closely connected to important professional concerns, from Open Access to accessibility of information and information literacy. How important is it for students and others to know how to act as creators of information or knowledge, as well as consumers?

I mean, anyone who tweets or 'grams is creating information, right? I think we've long left behind the image of the passive information consumer. So, I think it's fundamentally important for students and other library patrons to be critical of not only the information they consume, but also that which they're producing. The people who use our libraries face privacy concerns when producing online content, and librarians are at the fore in addressing these, through amazing organizations like the Library Freedom Project (https://libraryfreedomproject.org/). But, we also have to think critically (read: intersectionally!) about the impact of the knowledge we produce.

A good example from our organization's own history is around crowdsourcing. When we started, we had a space on our Meetup Page for a crowdsourced list of articles to be edited at edit-a-thons. Can you guess what happened? As people added to the lists without guidance, they came to reflect white feminism: they were largely lists of white women artists. As Astra Taylor reminds us, 'open' does not always mean 'equal.'[7] In producing something as simple as a list, it's very easy to reproduce structural oppressions. But I shouldn't have to tell this to a bunch of librarians!

Needless to say, we took the lists down and started to be very intentional about our messaging around intersectionality and antiracism. I think, initially, we were afraid to define our feminism for our community and I really attribute our insistence on communicating our own values and ethics to McKensie, who pushed us to articulate our own positionality as organizers. We're constantly negotiating this, it's always a work in progress, as we grow and expand our reach.

7. Astra Taylor, "Open systems or glass ceilings", *Guernica*, April 11, 2014, https://www.guernicamag.com/astra-taylor-open-systems-and-glass-ceilings/

(ALJ) In an online environment which often replicates or even magnifies existing inequalities and its dominated by commercially owned content and tools, how easy or hard it is to produce significant change?

I think it's interesting that at Wikipedia's 18th birthday, it hasn't failed but it also hasn't been some kind of harbinger of a brighter, more open future for the internet. It is still the 5th most visited website worldwide. As of January, 2019 it has almost 6,000,000 articles. It's a project rooted in the Commons, in collectivism. So, in many ways, it's an idealistic project. But, as my colleague and friend (and Art + Feminism co-founder), has pointed out: it's one that is far from perfect. It has largely failed to deal with larger structural issues of sexism and racism that plague the web.[8]

That said, it's still open. So, there are so many projects doing work like ours on Wikipedia: AfroCROWD, Black Lunch Table, Wiki Loves Pride, WikiDonne, Women in Red, Whose Knowledge, and so many more. They're all doing amazing work to add marginalized voices and stories to the world's largest encyclopedia.

8. Michael Mandiberg, "The Affective Labor of Wikipedia: GamerGate, Harassment, and Peer Production", *Social Text Online*, https://socialtextjournal.org/affective-labor-of-wikipedia-gamergate/

(ALJ) On your website you write that librarianship is information activism, do you consider Art + Feminism part of that?

I think it's really important that we trouble the myth that if you're not in the streets, you're not an activist, for many reasons, including the fact that protesting in the streets is simply not an option for many people -- people who are ill, disabled, undocumented, etc. Activism can be about using the skills you have for social justice ends. At the Art + Feminism panel at MoMA last March, Sydette Harry called for 'more radical accountants' and that's real. In many ways, that's what is needed.[9]

I think Art + Feminism is activism because what is and isn't on Wikipedia is literally shaping the way we understand the world around us and our histories, and our project is troubling the white supremacist hetero-patriarchal narratives that get told over and over again. Plus, Wikipedia is, of course, an open source

9. "Art + Feminism: Careful with Each Other, Dangerous Together", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHcd1IfZ4ws

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project. Open source communities are notoriously toxic and Wikipedia is no exception. As Bryce Pearce has written, 'there is an ethical dimension to subjecting people historically marginalized by symbolic violence to that very same symbolic violence in order to further the enterprise of "making Wikipedia better." Fixing Wikipedia, to bring these threads together, will fix the gender gap; throwing women into the gender gap will not fix Wikipedia.'[10] To that point, we're not just about 'adding cis and trans women, and non binary folks to Wikipedia' (although that is a part of our mission), we're also doing good old fashioned community organizing. For the past six years, we have systematically been challenging the Wikimedia movement to be more inclusive using largely grassroots tactics: organizing, documenting, fundraising, challenging policy, building community. What is that, if not activism?

10. Bryce Pearce, "WP: THREATENING2MEN: Misogynist Infopolitics and the Hegemony of the Asshole Consensus on English Wikipedia", *Ada: A journal of gender, new media & technology*, n.7, https://adanewmedia.org/2015/04/issue7-peake/

(ALJ) Would you use the term critical librarianship, or radical librarianship to describe your practice?

If I'm totally honest, I'm not entirely sure how to answer this question. I often say something like 'my librarianship is guided by the principles of critical librarianship' rather that 'my librarianship is critical librarianship.' And now I find myself questioning why.

I've written elsewhere about myself as a 'reluctant librarian' and I think that might be part of it. While I'm guided by principles of critical librarianship, my feminist politics and my attempt to 'live a feminist life' (to borrow a phrase from Sara Ahmed), is at the core of my being, more so than my identity as a librarian. I'm always reading feminist theory and feminist literature, and my practice (as a librarian *and* as a human) is informed by the writings of bell hooks, Judith Butler, the Combahee River Collective, Maggie Nelson, Roxane Gay, Silvia Federici, Gayatri Spivak, and the list could go on...

I think it's also important to note that critical librarianship (or #critlib) has sustained important critiques from librarians of color. In the words of Jennifer Brown, Jennifer Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa Méndez-Brady (worth quoting in full here): 'Many librarians of color have already felt unwelcome because the movement regularly highlights the work of white librarians without recognizing that librarians of color have been doing this work without calling it "theory." Did the critical work that librarians of color have done and are continuing to do in these areas not matter? Why isn't their work being highlighted more frequently, and why aren't librarians of color being seen as experts on these issues? It has begun to feel like another way in which our work and culture are being appropriated to fit into white cultural structures. In many ways, #critlib plays the same performative role that general "diversity and inclusion" language does. On the surface, it seems to be addressing the problems of racial inequity, but probing more deeply reveals that more has to be done to enact meaningful change.'[11] Their thoughtful commentary highlights how far we have to go as a field in enacting our supposed politics. And because I come from a feminist background based in a theory of lived practice, I'm more interested in *what we do* than *what we say we do*.

11. Jennifer Brown et al., "We Here: Speaking Our Truth," *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (October 25, 2018): 163–81, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0031

As for whether or not I identify as a 'radical librarian,' the term 'radical' has always felt so slippery to me. Like, to my Dad I might seem radical, but I'm not radical in comparison to a member of the black bloc or that Catholic Nun who broke into a nuclear plant or, you know, Angela Davis. I have trouble owning that term, as a self-avowed socialist feminist. We live in an age in which anyone with a Twitter account is claiming that they would punch a Nazi but the reality is that very few people actually do.

(ALJ) You have written on archiving activist practices ("'Why archive?' and Other Important Questions Asked by Occupiers"). In your experience, how compatible is political activism with working as academic librarian in an institutional environment? What are the limits and conflicts between roles?

As I mentioned above, I think we need to really think about what we mean when we say 'activism.' But, yes, I agree that community organizing/activism can be at odds with institutions. Higher Ed -- especially in the era of the neoliberal

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university -- is no exception. The context of our comments in the book chapter you mention is that we were talking about Occupy activists, who had distinctly anti-capitalist politics, not wanting their archive to be housed at New York University, an institution that a.) required government ID to enter (which goes against a lot of anarchist politics) and b.) has been criticized for playing a role in the gentrification of Lower Manhattan.

MICA has taken explicitly political and social justice-oriented positions in recent years, and makes attempts to engage with the local community in Baltimore, which is not something that can be said for all Higher Education institutions or museums. I consider myself lucky to work at an institution that (while far from perfect) does allow me to express political views and doesn't force me into a false position of neutrality. My colleague, Jennifer Ferretti, has written and presented extensively about the damaging ways myths of neutrality function in academic librarianship.[12] I'm grateful that the work that Jenny has done around information activism and the 2015 Baltimore Uprising has been largely supported and, at the very least, not censored. I also had the opportunity to talk to all MICA freshmen last year about neutrality as an oppressive myth and libraries' role in upholding it.[13] But, while MICA does not have the complicated legacy of gentrification in Baltimore that, say, Johns Hopkins does, we can't pretend that it isn't an institution founded on and benefitting from the white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchy. In a city that is roughly 63% African American, MICA is overwhelmingly white. Plus, the type of work people do at MICA (and their compensation for it), is largely divided along race and class lines.

Of course, the activism I do with Art + Feminism is largely dependent on these types of institutions. An edit-a-thon can't function without computers and wifi and space for childcare. So, while some events take place in living rooms or more DIY spaces, the majority take place in institutions like museums and universities. We've talked a lot over the years about the oft-quoted Audre Lorde saying, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' So, in short, I have no real answer for you there. Sorry!

12. Jennifer A. Ferretti, "Neutrality is Hostility: The Impact of (False) Neutrality in Academic Librarianship", *Medium*, https://medium.com/librarieswehere/neutrality-is-hostility-the-impact-of-false-neutrality-in-academic-librarianship-c0755879fb09

13. Siân Evans, "Neutrality is an Oppressive Myth, or: Teaching Freshmen About Neutrality and Knowledge", *Medium*, https://medium.com/@sinevans/neutrality-is-an-oppressive-myth-or-teaching-freshmen-about-neutrality-and-knowledge-9e8d92d6c0c3

(ALJ) You have also written about emotional labour and staff wellbeing in academic libraries ("Pink Collar Labor and the Reluctant Librarian"), how do you see the significance of these issues in critical academic librarianship?

I'm actually in the middle of a research project for a forthcoming book on mental illness and emotional labor in libraries. I've been interviewing people for two weeks now and the resounding call is, 'please listen to us.' As Lisl Walsh has pointed out, academia is irreparably ableist.[14] This relates to critical academic librarianship in a number of ways. If our field is feminized, we should be looking critically at what that means for our labor. It's not enough to just talk about Marx (although I think we should probably be talking more about Marx given the neoliberal turn in Higher Education), we need to also be talking about Silvia Federici and Arlie Hochschild.

If, as Hochschild might suggest, our places of employment capitalize on our emotional labor, how does that disproportionately affect those of us who already struggle with our own mental health? And at what cost?

14. Lisl Walsh, "Academia is Irreparably Ableist", *Medium*, https://medium.com/@lislanna/academia-is-irreparably-ableist-925fb33721ff

(ALJ) You wrote in an article for Art Documentation *about Art + Feminism that part of your original ideas about the project were to develop it in connection with ARLIS/NA. Do you see art librarianship as a more critical librarianship than general academic librarianship? Is there a specificity to art librarianship that makes it more receptive to critical approaches? Is perhaps art librarianship critical or radical in different ways?*

In my experience, no. ARLIS/NA was relatively late to take up the #critlib mantle, and it was a number of young, new members and POC librarians (Jennifer Ferretti and Andrew Wang) who created the Critical Librarianship SIG. Outside of art librarianship, critical information literacy is over a decade old. And #critlib has been holding Twitter chats since at least 2014. So, art librarianship is really behind the curve.

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Moreover, the most radical librarians are the ones on the front lines. Prison librarians, public librarians, and (in academia) community college librarians. Academia is plagued by all kinds of hierarchies that hold it back from being a radical space, and most art librarians are academic librarians. (Not that museums are much more radical!) ARLIS/NA is no exception. But, do I think it has the potential to be radical? Sure! Art has always had the potential to be radical. But it's also always connected to power and money, which is inherently NOT radical.

(ALJ) Critical librarianship perspectives have become more influential in academic librarianship and in art librarianship theory and practice. Are we seeing a fundamental change or is this popularity temporary, in your view? Do you see critical librarianship as part of the future development of art libraries and librarians?

I truly hope it's not a fad. We live in an age of great inequity, with the top 1 percent of households owning more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined in the United States. Some argue that wealth inequality is essentially back where it was in the Robber Baron era. We also live in an age of increased hate crimes and racialized violence, and also one in which Trump supporters want a wall, and British conservatives want to Brexit, all to avoid the humanitarian crisis happening worldwide. We need all the radical and critical librarians, accountants, mothers, hackers, teachers, people we can get.

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