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HUM346 Introduction to Digital Humanities

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Museum Salary Transparency: A Data Biography

In 2019, a group of museum and arts organization workers set out to collect a dataset titled "Arts + All Museums Salary Transparency 2019." Seeing the taboo in talking about their salaries with one another, the group decided to crowdsource data about their colleagues' salaries to increase transparency and worker solidarity in the field on the heels of several labor unionization efforts at art institutions and the success of similar salary surveys.[1] Members of the group, which would later be the organization "Arts + Museum Transparency," shared an editable Google spreadsheet, most using social media platforms, inviting museum and arts organization workers to input their data starting on May 31, 2019. On June 2, 2019, some data was accidently deleted off the editable spreadsheet and a Google Form was created for submissions, especially useful as the spreadsheet gained traction. The submission portal remained open until December 31, 2019, when Art + Museum Transparency chose to close the spreadsheet to prevent the salary information from becoming out-of-date.

The survey collected data from 3323 museum and arts workers from around the world. Participants inputted the name of their organization (or region or number of employees at that museum), role, department, city, country, starting salary, year of starting, current salary, whether their salary is hourly or permanent, whether they are part-time, benefits, year the inputted salary

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[1] 2019: The Year According to Art + Museum Transparency. (n.d.). Retrieved February 21, 2024, from https://walkerart.org/magazine/2019-the-year-according-to-art-museum-transparency

was current, years of experience, parental leave policy at the organization, gender, race, degrees required for their position at the time of hire, and visa sponsorship is if provided. Participants were encouraged to fill out what they felt comfortable sharing. There is a second tab to the spreadsheet called "Salaries Top Staff," which collects data on the salaries of high-level staff at 24 organizations that are on 990s, a public form that includes information about a non-profit organization. This tab of the spreadsheet contains: the name of the institution, a link to the institution's 2017 990, the base compensation of the top salary, the total compensation of the top salary, the role associated with the salary, the base and total compensation of institution's tenth highest salary, the staff title associated with the tenth highest salary, and a space for notes.

After the publication of the final dataset on January 1, 2020, the anonymous group of museum and arts workers behind the spreadsheet officially founded Art + Museum Transparency, which aims to increase openness in the field to encourage solidarity among workers and prompt change for fairer treatment and compensation, creating a more inclusive opportunities in the museum and art world.[2] To that end, Art + Museum Transparency outlines uses for their museum salary transparency spreadsheet, both on the Google Sheet itself and in published news articles. For example, they suggest using the "Top Salaries" tab to understand discrepancies between top staff salaries and other employees' compensation. The intended research questions, or questions that could be answered with the help of this data, may include: What discrepancies exist among the compensation of different roles in the museum and art world? How does geographic location affect pay in museums? What are conditions and benefits

[2] Art + Museum Transparency (2019, December 9). A 20/20 Vision for Art + Museum Transparency for 2020: Sharing, Analyzing, Moving Forward. Medium. https://medium.com/@artandmuseumtransparency/a-20-20-vision-for-art-museum-transparency-for-2020-sharing-analyzing-moving-forward-3eef299cdea0

like for front-of-house staff at museums?[3] What does parental leave look like at museum institutions? How does gender or race relate to salary in the art world? While additional support would be needed to answer these questions, the data in the dataset provides an accurate glimpse into the compensation of arts workers in the context of their work experience and individual identities.

The data may be used for educational or not-for-profit purposes with permission from Art + Museum Transparency, and analysis of the data must be publicly shared. The dataset is accessible from their website, but I accessed it from the HUM348 class website's list of datasets. Since the dataset is fairly inconsistent, containing, for example, many blank cells and inconsistencies in the titles given to identical roles, users of the data must clean the data. From Art + Museum Transparency, the only processing, to my knowledge, occurred in setting up the Google Form to transfer responses to the spreadsheet format. However, several people have processed the data independently and are listed on a tab of the spreadsheet titled "Analysis Information." Sarah Laursen, a professor of art history at Middlebury College, cleaned and analyzed the data with her course "Digital Methodologies for Art Historians" in Spring 2020. In another instance, Alana Shaffer, a master's student in Public History at Temple University, used the data in the context of unionization efforts at museums for her May 2020 thesis.[4] According to an article Art + Museum Transparency published on walkerart.org, individuals used the data in

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[3] Transparency, A. + M. (2019, July 24). We are the group of art workers and museum workers who initiated the crowd-sourced salary and…. Medium. https://medium.com/@artandmuseumtransparency/we-are-the-group-of-art-workers-and-museum-workers-who-initiated-the-crowd-sourced-salary-and-a8a388aeba32

[4] Art + All Museums Salary Transparency 2019. (2019). [dataset]. https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14_cn3afoas7NhKvHWaFKqQGkaZS5rvL6DFxzGqXQa6o/edit#gid=0

the spreadsheet to negotiate the salaries and museum departments who used the data to reconsider their workers' compensations.[5]

Though the data is enormously useful in providing honest, quantitative information about salary, the dataset contains several limitations and potential biases. In addition to the lack of standardization among responses, participants were not required to input information they did not feel comfortable sharing, perhaps skewing analysis regarding gender or race. While the dataset reached many institutions and is geographically diverse, perhaps the distribution of the spreadsheet, which occurred though friend and colleague networks on social media, did not reach certain segments of the workforce, including those without social media or not connected via social media with fellow art or museum workers. Lastly, since participants could, for some time, edit the spreadsheet themselves, there appears to be no way to authenticate the data. Also, many people may not have felt comfortable giving their salary information to the dataset at all, for fear of retaliation.

"Arts + All Museums Transparency" continues to provide data to remove the taboo of discussing salaries in the art world, which hinders the possibility of progressing towards fairer conditions and compensation. In the story of labor and the art world, the spreadsheet is both a tool for the analysis of hard data in the museum field and a symbol of the power of crowdsourcing to induce collective action. As writers from "Art + Museum Transparency" note, the spreadsheet is a powerful tool for developing unity and inclusivity in the field, and one that is relatively accessible to many arts workers.

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[5] 2019: The Year According to Art + Museum Transparency, n.d.

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This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

/s/ Talia Goldman