

Chains of interruption: Political pedagogies of representation in women's and gender museums

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My interest over the past two decades has been the gendered nature, politics, and pedagogies of museum practices or representation. Practices of representation consist of language and symbols as well as visuals and objects. They are important because they are pervasive and resilient; we are embedded in and propagate multiple forms of representation on a daily basis. Practices of representation do not simply reflect the world; they shape and bring it into being. They are how we make meaning and sense of and articulate differences in environments, cultural traditions, communities, and other people. In particular, representations are how we forge our own identities and sense of place in the world (Hall, 2013; Kidd, 2015).

In 1949, Simon de Beauvoir described the gendered nature of representation “as the work of men who describe the world from their point of view” (cited in Blair, 1986, p. 150). Findings from my researches show that museum representations for the most part continue actively to maintain and mobilise a hidden curriculum of universalised and universalising gender binary of “common sense”. Through pervasive and persistent representations of masculine deeds, innovations, and contributions – what I call telling masculine tales -- museums on one hand cement patriarchal authority, power, and superiority and on the other, whitewash centuries of privilege, control, and violence. Through exclusion, objectification, demonisation and other forms of misrepresentation museums disappear from public view women's diverse and valuable knowledges, social and cultural contributions and with that, the “ability to learn from, expand on and continue the [legacies] that were forged (Olufemi, 2020, p. 11).

Yet my researches also show this is not the entire story of museum representations. Across the globe is a rising tide of feminist pedagogical strategies aimed at (re)representing the lives of women in all their diversity and making visible and complex, our classifications of gender. While this is occurring throughout the museum sector, I focus in this article on the work of women's and gender museums. Established worldwide, their practices of (re)representation are intentionally pedagogical and feminist, meaning they aim to challenge the public to think more

critically and creatively about history and the present in the interests of a more just future for everyone.

As I work in the museum sector, I chose to curate this article as a mini exhibition of images and stories from women's and gender museums across the globe. My exhibition is framed through a broad curatorial statement that introduces women's and gender museums. Each of the six themed galleries has an introductory statement and then two visuals with their labels. The visuals come from museum websites or my visits to these institutions. Labels are written from my perspective as the curator but are true to each museum's work and intent. This exhibition aims to be neither exhaustive nor to analyse these feminist practices of representation. Rather, my intent is to showcase the work as important feminist community education that is responding in diverse and highly imaginative ways to the complex gender issues of our time.

By weaving them together I also show that these feminist strategies are not simply, to borrow from Foucault (1972), 'small, isolated islands of resistance' but rather 'chains of interruption' to the order of things in the interests of gender justice and change.

Chains of interruption: Women's and gender museums



Fig. 1: Frauenmuseum, Merano, Italy

Welcome to this exhibition which showcases a number of critical and creative pedagogical (re)representational strategies by women's and gender museums around the world. According to the International Association of Women's Museums (IAWM), there are now 97 institutions across the globe. The first was founded in Bonn, Germany in 1981 as a response to the representational gaps that feminists were seeing in public museums across Germany, Europe and beyond. But these institutions are more than just about filling gaps. Women's and gender

museums have emerged from and are therefore responsive to decades of feminist struggles for both visibility and fundamental change.

There is no single definition for women’s and gender museums as each has its own context, focus and historical trajectory. However, the IAWM suggests their mandate is to prioritise and elevate female, gender-related and/or non-binary content and narratives in ways that challenge patriarchal hegemonic traditions of representation. To this end, women’s and gender museums story and showcase women’s and gender diverse histories and their aesthetic, social, cultural and political contributions and achievements. These institutions are spaces of encounter where people can come together to learn from their stories, images and aesthetic activities about those who have been ignored, belittled, excluded and misrepresented. Women’s and gender museums operationalise the past –history -- and the present for the future.

Women’s and gender museums come in many forms. Some exist only in the virtual world as online exhibitions and/or podcasts (Fig. 2). Others exist as travelling or pop-up exhibitions, curated in other museums or public spaces. Some institutions have their own building, such as the Kvindemuseet in Denmark (Fig. 3) and the Museo de la Mujer in Mexico whilst others share space in buildings such the Frauenmuseum, Merano, Italy which occupies the attic of a disused convent.



Figure 2: Virtual Women’s Museum, Turkey; Figure 4: Physical Kvindemuseet, Aarhus, Denmark

Different from the normative focus on collection and preservation and the pretext to objectivity of many public museums, women’s and gender museums are activist sites, intentionally and unapologetically (re)educating the public through a feminist lens in order to change the world (Bard, 2020). On its website, the *Zambian Women’s Museum* (2019, n/p) refers to this as ‘deep learning’ about the past and the present with future intent. Similar to most museums, the primary means of representation and education is the exhibition. For them, to make a feminist exhibition is to create a storied representational structure through which people can see our problematically gendered world, look through to the other side to gain a new and expanded perspective of the world.

To augment the educational potential of their exhibitions, women’s and gender museums facilitate arts-based workshops or host alterative heritage tours (see Fig. 4). They organise seminars, webinars and conferences, teach adult literacy classes and offer formal gender, art and history courses in collaboration with universities. Women’s and gender museums produce a diversity of academic and practical teaching resources that range from scholarly texts about feminism or the work of women artists to videos, zines and puzzles (Fig. 5).



Figure 4: Alternative Heritage Walks, Glasgow Women’s Library and Museum



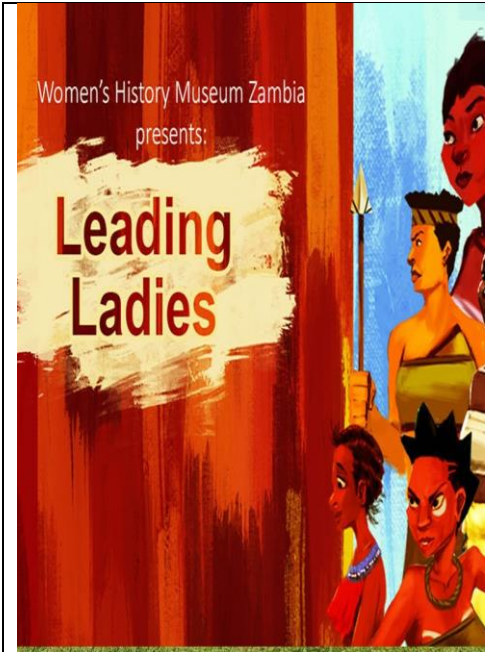
Figure 5: ‘Well behaved women seldom make history’ puzzle, Museo de la Mujer, Spain

One of the challenges women's and gender museums face is a lack of funding and therefore, some are able to be more active than others. A second is access to women's histories. Infrequently collected or preserved women's and gender museums must assemble experiences and contributions from oral histories, archives, paintings, ancient texts or women's personal collections. Many works on display including entire exhibitions have been commissioned or created collectively through workshops. What this means is that central to reclaiming history and curating the present are collectivity, creativity and the imagination. Practices of 'creative nonfiction' not only stand in for what is missing, they bring it into being. A third major challenge is threats and backlashes. As you view the stories in this exhibition, keep in mind that highly visual and critical representational work means being noticed. Women's and gender museums have been subject to everything from political interference to bomb threats. Curators and artists have been imprisoned and forced into exile for daring to say and show what the powers that be wish to keep hidden from view.

No single exhibition can cover every aspect of a topic, particularly one that is global and multifaceted. This exhibition is no exception. Curatorial decisions were made. As you walk through the galleries consider the themes, issues and practices represented, the histories of women with whom you are familiar or should be and what your feminist exhibition would include.

Gallery One: Rehistoricising

History matters, Little (2020) argues, because "it plays a fundamental role in human thought" (n/p). Looking back to women's history, what feminists call 'herstorying', can provide access to the multifaceted trajectories that have been ignored, to ways in which women operated as 'agents' of change and resistance. Re-historcising creates new ideas of seeing and knowing women in the present as well because we see the forces, choices, and circumstances that brought them to their current situations. This gallery showcases two different ways 'herstorical' recovery is being taken up and practised.



Animating inspiration

One of the key pedagogical missions of the Zambian Women’s Museum is “to set an agenda of how African history on women is learned, how it is consumed and functionalised”. To this end, they developed an animated podcast titled *Leading Ladies*, which acts out stories of African women between the 17th and 19th centuries. Characters range from military generals to science innovators, warriors to feminists, politicians to diplomats, and peacemakers to power brokers. This project was necessitated by the dearth of documented knowledge about African women in mainstream narratives; the lack of stories told from women’s perspectives; the realisation that most information existed only in oral form and would soon be lost; the need for an historical memory of women role models as sources of inspiration for the future.

<https://www.whmzambia.org>



The extraordinary everyday

Responding to that fact that women’s everyday lives have been either excluded or noteworthy or described in dismissive ways The Frauenkultur Regional-International in Germany has designed an exhibition that gives these everyday lives an exalted historic positioning. The emphasis is to bring to life and making meaningful, the everyday practices which have in fact sustained and shaped the world in powerful ways. As the exhibition re-represents what was presumed to be uninteresting and mundane and makes it complex and extraordinary, it repositions the domestic sphere as a life sustaining force in society, rather than peripheral to the main stage of counts.

<https://inklusionvekadinmuzeleri.wordpress.com/2017/06/12/museum-frauenkultur-regional-international/>
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Gallery Two: (Re)membering

Naming is an act of power and identity-making. It is a practice of inheriting what lives on in memory as well as being responsible for making live on what has been disappeared from

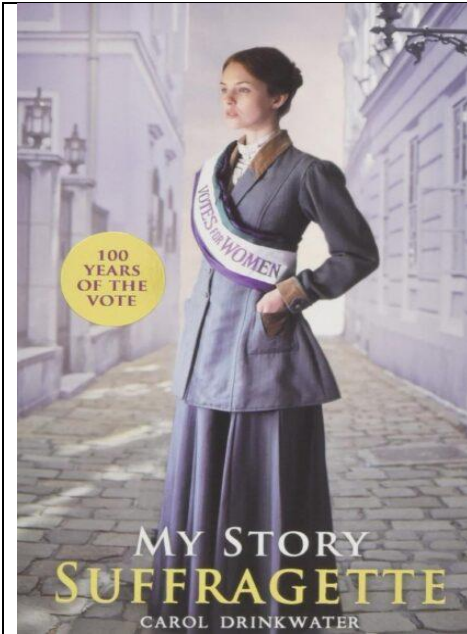
history. Although many ways exist, in this gallery you will find how naming, as an act of remembering and memory reconstruction, is being taken up by women's and gender museums. For Pickering (2006) remembering is critical because it endows women's lives with meaning and communicative currency.



Statistics elsewhere

Worldwide women experience acts of violence that are often fatal. As the media fixates on the perpetrators, the murdered women go unnamed and disappear into statistics of femicide. What needs to live on from the violent loss of so many women? A mask making workshop and exhibition the Museo de la Mujer in Argentina sought to give names to women who died in domestic violence by creating a striking and affecting visual statistic. The activity individualised and honoured the women by embroidering their names and ages onto each mask. Covering an entire wall, the mask exhibition is stunning visual graphic of violence. As violence is such a critical topic, the masks have been central to major public anti-femicide mobilisations such as *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Less).

<https://www.museodelamujer.org.ar>



Her story, our story

One aim of the Glasgow Women’s Library and Museum (GWL) is to provide spaces for people to learn the names of women activists from Scotland and other parts of the world, such as the women who stormed the Egyptian Parliament demanding equal rights. Their work was triggered by the deep silence met when they posed the simple question: Can you name a Scottish Suffragette or female activist? Through exhibitions, workshops, literacy classes and an animated web resource the GWL names as a means to remember and celebrate the thousands of women who were imprisoned, force-fed, sexually assaulted, verbally abused, and otherwise vilified for standing up for their right to be properly represented. All historical education work brings learners into future with the question: Who is continuing the global struggle today? Can you ‘name’ her?

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk>

Gallery Three: Risky Business

For feminist adult educator Ceballos (2006) to take risks is to have a stake in social change as “a presence that transforms reality and makes possible another world” (p. 319). Women’s and gender museums are institutions are taking many, speaking aloud what is meant to remain unspoken and exhibiting what is meant to remain hidden from view. This gallery showcases two practices works that tackle what the Korean Women’s Museum calls ‘taboo’ subjects.



Handicrafting (In)Justice

From Evin with Love is a travelling exhibition conceived by the Iranian Women's Movement Museum (IRWMM), first shown in The Hague, Netherlands and then curated across Europe. The exhibition showcases handicrafts made by women's rights activists imprisoned in Evin Prison over the past ten years. The stories and imaginaries represented through the handicrafts make them more than simply objects. Each handicraft tells a story about the woman who made it -- her struggle for justice, her passionate activism and the pain of injustice both within and outside the prison walls. Educational activities organised around this exhibition have included workshops, seminars, musical performances and sound installations. (<https://www.irwmm.org>)

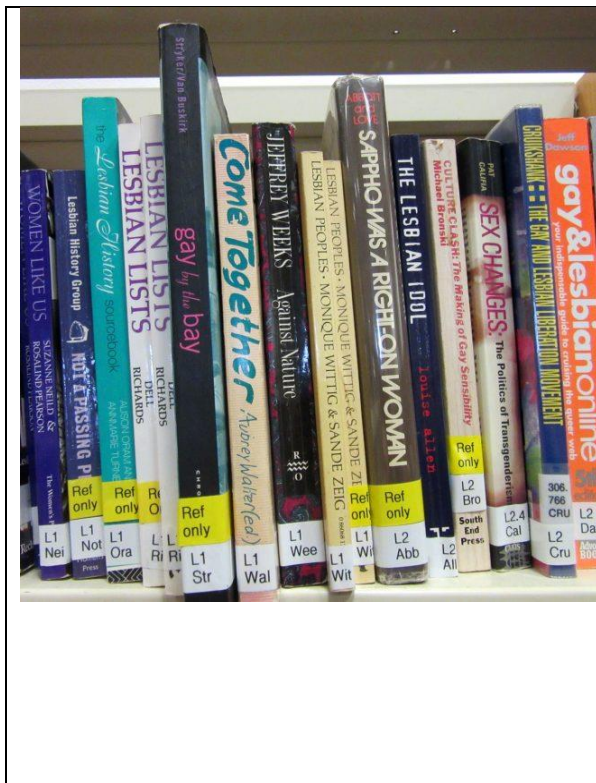


A Global Echo of Whispers

Abortion is a universal female experience. Yet no one is alike. How do women speak about these experiences in their own words? *SHHH! Stories about abortion and sexuality* is a response that was initiated by Kvinnemuseet (Women's Museum) Norway. The exhibition on one hand is an anonymised space for women worldwide to tell their own stories about abortion. It also highlights how laws on abortion affect women collectively. It shows visitors that women have always found ways to terminate unwanted pregnancies, and they always will. But often, their lives at stake. As *SHHH* breaks silences and crushes myths it makes room for the personal yet universal experience that abortion is. (<https://kvinnemuseet.no/en>)

Gallery Four: Taking Gender

To examine gender is not only to see how norms are constructed into hierarchies but to develop “richer critical analysis of the gender system as a whole” (Scott-Dixon, 2016, p.19). The perception of how gender means in society, how gender differences are perceived and talked about (or not) as well as people’s own self-perceptions is becoming integral to the work of some women’s and gender museums, as showcased in the gallery. Addressing broader issues of gender is not always possible for women’s and gender museums particularly in countries where homosexuality is outlawed, and responses are quick and can be deadly.



Touching the past

To increase the visibility of lesbian, bi and queer women, the Glasgow Women’s Library and Museum offers a selection of events that engage with their stories. For the GWL it is very difficult to see a future when we cannot easily touch upon the records of our pasts because non-binary women still lack both historical and current representation. The project seeks to undo some of that imbalance by caring for and presenting the rich variety of lesbian materials which is also a vital record of the collective organising done by these women – covering not only homophobia and sexism but also racism, class consciousness, disability activism and the need for childcare to enable mothers to attend events.

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk>



Becoming Wise

Although we have come a long way in terms of gender equality, gender is still a current parameter in our behaviour. *Becoming Wise* was a series of arts-based workshops culminating into an exhibition about gender at the Kvindemuseet, (Gender Museum) Denmark. Participants addressed questions such as: Why do I play with dolls and not cars? What does it mean to be transgender? What is normal? How am I doing with my body? What is equality? What does it really mean if I was born a boy - or if I was born a girl? The aims were to encourage a deeper knowledge of the importance of gender not only in terms of social and self - awareness, but quality of life, and health and to produce visual stories that could engage visitors in conversation about cultural histories of the sexes and changes in gender conditions.

<https://konmuseum.dk>

Gallery Five: Where Imagination Roams

Helmore (2021) once argued that the imagination is powerful because control over it is control over the future. The imagination is something we all have individually, but to imagine in women’s and gender museums is also a collective process. Through a variety of practices, these institutions invite visitors to engage in forces of creativity and artmaking for their critical learning potential as well as pleasure, celebration and a sense of belonging.

Shout out
역사를 빛낸 여성들

Composed by: 한수정
Arranged by: 남예란

Chorus

Soprano

원 강을 세고 나와 Shout out 우리의 활의 목소리 누가 뭐래도 열대염 추지 않아

원 강을 세고 나와 Shout out 우리의 활의 목소리 누가 뭐래도 열대염 추지 않아

[A]

원 강을 세고 나와 Shout out 우리의 활의 목소리 누가 뭐래도 열대염 추지 않아

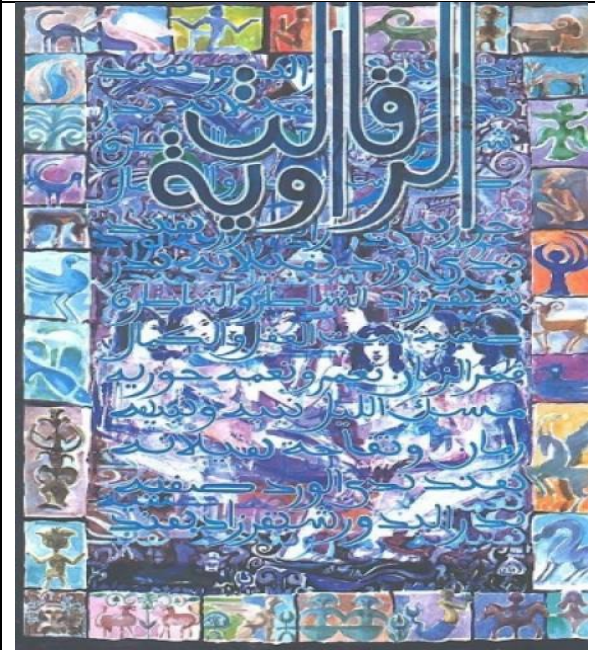
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원 강을 세고 나와 Shout out 우리의 활의 목소리 누가 뭐래도 열대염 추지 않아

Singing History into Being

Based in the belief that celebration and joy are central to creating an alternative gender culture the Gender Museum Korea combines museum exhibitions with diverse types of collectively artmaking and in particular, music. Working in collaboration with feminist university historians and group of young women, the museum researched the lives of women in history and the present who live or have lived what they call ‘fiery’ lives in terms of working toward an alternative gendered future. Through this project, they selected 100 women who have changed Korean history and story-made, composed and choreographed songs and dances about their exploits and contributions. It has begun with songs of 100 women and will continue to become songs about 1000 women and more. (website currently unavailable; revamp underway)



Telling Alternative Tales

Fairy tales across the Arab world are continually being produced, reproduced and widely disseminated. They are extremely important elements of popular culture, used to influence the consciousness of both children and adults. The challenge is that for the most part, they reflect normative patriarchal cultural and social beliefs. In recognition of the power of fairy tales and their dominant cultural as well as stereotypical views of Arab women to be a stumbling block to women’s rights and progressive change, the Women and Memory Forum Museum in Egypt (WMF) actively produces new or re-written gender-sensitive fairy tales from a feminist perspective. These practices of the (re)representation of women as positive role models is then used to empower women through a variety of storytelling events curated in the museum as well as other public venues. (<https://wmf.org/en/>)

The End: Feminist histories of the future

You have now come to the end of the exhibition. What has illustrated is a very few examples of the pedagogical politics of the work of women's and gender museums around the world. These are institutions of persistence and courage, of imagination and determination, of critique and possibility. Their practises representation are critical and creative contemporary forms of community feminist adult education. To change how we see women and our understandings of gender is central to how we change the future.

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