



Research Article

Feminist storytelling in museums: Pedagogies of critique, possibility, and agency

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For millennia, humans have told stories to give structure, purpose and meaning to their lives and to demonstrate that their “actions and words matter and make a difference” (Jackson, 2002, p. 14). As one of society’s most democratic modes of engaging the world stories are the canvas upon which “everyone can portray and everyone can be portrayed”, inventing, reinventing and authorizing notions, both individual and collective, of who people were, are and even, might become (p. 16). Since their invention as one of society’s “premier epistemological technologies...and most powerful genres of modern fiction” museums have played an important public pedagogical role as storytellers (Preziosi & Lamoureux, 2005, p. 56). Through authoritative texts, images and other visual technologies museums story the world’s canvas with the exploits of key historical and contemporary figures and other social, political, cultural, aesthetic, and scientific events, innovations, and thinking to entertain visitors but more purposefully, to educate and enculturate them. Yet museum stories, like all other stories, are never neutral or fully factual nor do they simply mirror the world as it was or is because relations of power are always in play (Jackson, 2002). Not only do museums and their stories not only shape and mobilize worlds and ideas into consciousness but for every story told countless others have been kept silent and this silence is highly gendered. Decades of feminist research shows that most museum stories exalt and celebrate masculine words, deeds and subjectivities and exclude or misrepresent women and LGBTQ2S peoples, denying them the same sense of history, identity, and agency (e.g., Bergsdóttir, 2016; Glaser & Zenetou, 1994; Heitman, 2017; Sanford et al, 2021).

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Yet across the globe I have found evidence that different stories are being told in museums. Although relatively unknown to the field of adult education, feminists in museums are (re)educating visitors by storying voices, histories, deeds, perspectives, and experiences long denied a public audience and intellectual credibility. In this article I explore how this feminist storytelling in art and history museums and gender and women's museums across the globe operates as a practice of feminist adult education. More specifically, how do they operate as what Giroux (1988) called languages of critique and possibility? What I found was a series of critical and creative strategies including herstorying, animation, reframing, recentering, rescripting, reclaiming and revisualizing feminisms. Taken together, these practices uncover, and shatter entrenched masculine narratives, shift women and the gender diverse from the margins to the center, transform their experiences of oppression into critical insight and reposition them as knowers, agents, and actors, historically and in the present.

The power of storytelling

As long as people have been sentient, they have told stories to give purpose and meaning to their lives at individual levels, to relationships, and to wider social and political structures (Shaw et al, 2013). Telling stories is how people understand the world for themselves and make it understandable to others and how they can “transgress boundaries, such as generational or national ones. Stories can contribute to building communities and to the establishment of a shared identity and shared knowledge” (Sattler, 2019, p. 277). Stories consist of both words and images arising from lived experiences, cultural teachings, and the imagination. Feminist adult educators and other cultural scholars agree that stories can affect how people record and remember history, how they make sense of the present and what they are able to envision as and for the future (Lange, 2023; Million, 2009; Mojab & Taber, 2015; Shaw et al, 2013). Stories and storytelling are powerful cognitive and emotional educational practices that can shape, persuade, and assemble ways of seeing and knowing which in turn, influence subjectivity and action (e.g., English & Irving, 2015; Jackson, 2002; Shaw et al, 2013). They can make something real or concrete as much as they can disrupt or deny reality. Stories can also make the difference between passion and disinterest, belonging and exclusion, visibility and invisibility, power, and instability. Stories, storytelling, and storytellers are therefore never neutral; they never stand outside practices and relations of power. Moreover, for “every story that sees the light of day, untold others remain in the shadows, censored or suppressed” (Jackson, 2002, p. ii).

Museums are masters of storytelling as well as light and shadow. On one hand they render visible and enlighten whilst on the other they obscure and deny. Both of these practices have not only maintained but mobilized our problematic system of gendered discrimination (Heitman, 2017; McCormack, 2021; Sanford et al, 2021). Through powerful, authoritative, and immersive stories museums operationalize an educational and enculturating agenda that has taught hundreds of visitors consciously and unconsciously that masculine words, deeds, histories, subjectivities, and ways of knowing are worthy of preserving, showing, and telling. Conversely, they have taught these same visitors that women's and others oppressed by gender norms have little historical or subjective import. This embedded masculine/masculinizing agenda not only distorts and biases but whitewashes centuries of patriarchal privilege, control, and violence. The exclusion and misrepresentation of women's and the stories of others who have been oppressed based by gender norms denies them a similar sense of history and agency. As a result, we have not only lost valuable knowledge and experiences but the opportunity to learn from and continue their legacies (e.g.,

Bergsdóttir, 2016; Olufemi, 2020). Yet storytelling is also a critical form of civic engagement and an empowering pedagogical tool of reflection, exploration, and imagination.

Over the years feminist adult education scholars have explored the potential of storytelling to bring to light embedded socio-historical mechanisms of gender oppression and exclusion. English and Irving's (2015) study, for example, found that by using "embroidery as narrative" women in South Africa were able to depict their experiences "of both repression and resistance against apartheid" (p. 47). The storytelling space itself was also powerful in that it provided "a safe forum [to share] experiences which had been buried for years" (p. 47). Collaborating with Iranian women, Mojab and Taber (2015) explored the power of feminist storytelling to expose "the state as a patriarchal, racist, and authoritarian institution" but equally importantly "to dream for a better world" (p. 38). Dreaming is a powerful act of imagination, and the imagination is highly consequential because "control over the imagination is control over the future" (Helmore, 2021, p. n/p). Butterwick and Selman's (2003) findings illustrate the role feminist storytelling played in promoting 'deep listening' across intersectional differences in a group of women. Allowing differences to be voiced was key to building solidarity for a 'collective imagination' of the future. Wading into the world of museums, Desmoulins's (2019) found that one visit to a feminist exhibition that storied representationally the murder and disappearance of 100s of Indigenous women in Canada was the best learning experience for students to understand historical impacts of colonialism on Indigenous women and its lingering effects but also, Indigenous women's powerful acts of resistance and cultural resilience. Bartlett (2016)

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investigated the power of a feminist exhibition of women's activism and protest in Australia as a site of remembrance of feminist cultural histories and women's material and intellectual legacies. She argues that these types of exhibitions offer "tangible global positioning with longitude and latitude, somewhere to drop out Google maps pin, but also more ephemeral locations of intangible heritage" (p. 314).

Discussing her experiences of curating an exhibition entitled *Pride and Prejudice*, Low (2019) shares how these stories of struggle and achievement not only inspired others to chart their own histories but helped to mark "a period of reform in Queensland in terms of gay rights [by putting] LGBTQ history on the civic and community maps" (p. 235).

These studies are important because they provide an in depth look into specific contexts of feminist storytelling. Manicom and Walters (2012) remind us, however, that given the difficulty and complexity of bringing about change in a deeply gendered world, it is necessary that we understand better the diverse and intentional processes of education and knowledge production aimed at claiming agency and expanding perspective in more transnational contexts.

Analytical framework

My study responds to Manicom and Walters by exploring a diversity of intentional storytelling strategies used by feminists in museums across the globe. I grounded my study in theorizations of critique and possibility. Giroux (1988) sets the stage with his theory of the 'languages' which he argued were imperative to critical pedagogy. The first is the language of critique which Castro Nito (2019) defined succinctly as the "ability to identify and critique the inequities within social structures" (p. 2). The language of critique both identifies and analyzes practices of oppression and silencing. For feminists Manicom

and Walters (2012) to be useful as a feminist tool the language of critique must both unearth and consider how gendered dynamics, relations and agendas have silenced and marginalised both women and the gender diverse and the impacts this has had over the centuries. The second Giroux (1988) calls the language of possibility. Central to this is critical hope which is realized through the instillation of “the intellectual skills and civic courage needed to struggle for a self-determined, thoughtful and democratic life” (p. 136). Manicom and Walters (2012) add that possibility must also include “that which is yet to be imagined, that which might become thinkable and actionable when prevailing relations of power are made visible, when understandings shake loose from normative perspectives and generate new knowledge and possibilities for engagement” (p. 4).

Moving to the storytelling sphere Blaisdell (2021) takes up the languages of critique and possibility in his idea of ‘counternarratives’. He positions counternarratives as a broad methodology and collective narrative although critical within this are counter stories, which he defines as individual stories. According to Blaisdell there are three tenets of counternarratives. The first is to deconstruct majoritarian narratives of the world as a cure for silencing and oppression. For Giroux (2004) this includes “blasting history open, rupturing its silences, highlighting its detours, acknowledging the events [and contexts] of its transmission, and organising its limits within an open and honest concern with human suffering, values and the legacy of the often unrepresentable or misrepresented” (p. 68). Feminist Hemmings (2011) adds that we deepen understandings when we “shuttle back and forth between past and present” because this is how we can “imagine a future that is not already known” (p. 3). The second is to provide new and often untold stories to understand power. For feminists, as suggested in the studies outlined above, this must include women telling their own individual but also, collective stories as a means both to understand and disrupt power. The third tenet is fostering activism. Jackson (2002) argues, however, that for stories to foster activism they must encourage a sense of agency, the critical precursor to agency itself. He adds that stories do this when they bring new and different words, deeds, and experiences out of the shadows to make them visible, tangible, and thus actionable.

Drawing on the above, the questions that guided my analysis of feminist storytelling in the museums and websites were:

- 1) What diverse storytelling practices are being used? What do they make thinkable and imaginable?
- 2) What structures, relations and dynamics of power do they make visible?
- 3) What new knowledge/known possibilities and perspectives do they offer?
- 4) How do they ‘blast history open’ and connect it to the present?
- 5) How do they convey or reposition agency?
- 6) How does feminist storytelling honour individuals and acknowledge collective experience?
- 7) What words, deeds and experiences are made visible?
- 8) How do they employ the imagination?

Methods

As a feminist researcher, it is important to begin by situating myself. I have been studying museums worldwide for almost 20 years. I was Co-President of heritage site for eight years and I am the co-convenor the research group of the International Association of Women’s Museums. I drew the data for this study from both public art and history museums and women’s and gender museums. I chose the former because they are

ubiquitous knowledge producers that have enjoyed a long, relatively uninterrupted history of perpetuating gender injustice (e.g., Bergsdottir, 2016; Sanford et al, 2021). To attempt to change these institutions is a difficult task as they often have both the funding and political support with which to fight back meaning they are quite able at maintaining the status quo whilst pretending to be about change. I focus on women's and gender museums because they are proliferating across the globe both physically and online and therefore, becoming more visited and thus influential (e.g., Hazirlyanlar, 2019; Schönweger & Clover, 2020). They are by their intentional feminist sites although the going is not easy either. They have been subject to government interferences, received bomb threats and curators have been jailed for daring to tell the stories that challenge the status quo.

One method I used to gather the data was to visit museums and their exhibitions. Specifically, I visited the Dulwich Picture Gallery on London (reframing) the Manchester Art Gallery (rescripting) and the Kvindemuseet in Denmark (reclaiming) on a number of occasions. I kept written notes of my reflections and observations on my visits and took photographs of images, objects, labels, and curatorial statements. The photographs proved to be the best method as they brought what I had been seeing and reading back. Secondly, I analyzed exhibitions and curatorial statements on museum websites in Zambia, Korea, Japan, Germany, Argentina, and India. I chose websites not simply because they allowed me to go further afield but also because they are critical communication and education tools for organisations such as museums and therefore, regularly updated. These sites include images, curatorial statements, educational activities and often, reflections from visitors or further thoughts by exhibiting artists or curators (e.g., Kabassi, 2017). As exhibitions come and go online researching means visiting and revisiting the museum websites over a period of time. One of my searches was of their archives to find past exhibitions. Even when an exhibition concludes, it remains accessible for months as living histories. Secondly, I searched for exhibitions that were either on or upcoming and sometimes they were both. For example, when I opened the website to the Indian museum (see below), the exhibition was unfolding in real time so I was able to watch both it and the educational activities being added.

Feminist museum storytelling

I allocate my findings below under eight strategies: herstorying, animating, rescripting, recentering, reframing, remembering, gender bending and revisualizing. While not exhaustive, they capture the essence of work taking place around the world.

Herstorying

For feminist Haraway (2016), focusing on history matters because “it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas” (p. 12). History helps us to understand “the ideas, forces, choices, and circumstances that brought us to our current situation” (Little, 2020, n/p).

Feminist historicising (2020) calls ‘herstories’, have been ignored or herstorying is central to museums, I have selected Women’s Active Peace (WAM) in both of its critique and possibility dimensions.

Feminist historicising gives us what Botte (2020) calls ‘herstories’, the tales of women that have been ignored or obscured.

gives us what Botte the tales of women that obscured. While everything feminists do in the example of the Museums of War and Korea and Japan because

Despite government backlashes both WAMs bring out from the shadows the silenced stories of hundreds of ‘Comfort women’ held prisoner for the sexual gratification of the Japanese military during the Second World War. One aim of these museums is to provide a safe and supportive space for individual Comfort Women like Grandma Gil Won-ok in Korea to tell aloud her story, a story that for decades, these women had been shamed into silence or disbelieved. The second goal was to create a tapestry of individual stories to show how this was a strategic political act across Asia and not simply individual traumas.

In WAM Japan, Watanabe (2019) writes, “I was met with the 179 faces of Comfort Women survivors as soon as I entered the museum (p. 256). The images are accompanied by ‘testimonial panels’ “written in the first person...to give visitors the feeling that they listening to the women’s testimony” (p. 256). These testimonies are juxtaposed “with the accounts of Japanese soldiers” (p. 256). As a practice of ‘testimonial justice making’, juxtaposing contest nationalistic revisionisms in official documents that speak only of ‘honourable soldiers’ by repositioning what had been out of bounds and disqualified within this dominant historical discursive regime as untrue (not within the bounds of permissible truth-values), illegitimate, crazy, ineffective, dangerous, or delusional (Fricker, 2007). In this case, feminist storytelling as a practice of ‘testimonial justice’ in the authoritative context of the museum transfers ‘sayability’ onto the sensibility of the visual of a credible history of sexual slavery.

The WAMs also use experiential and embodied storytelling methods and impact or is captured by Wimmer (2021) and her feelings of being ‘overwhelmed’ in the Korean WAM by “ear-deafening noises of “marching soldiers and cannon fire” (para. 2). She describes moving.

along a gravel road path that leads them deeper into the painful history of the comfort women...of painted girls, their heads bent, moving forward like shadows without knowing where they will end up – young women on their way into their future lives as sex slaves. From the opposite side faces of elder ‘comfort women’ are looking at the newcomers. What would they tell them...Should they shout or whisper?” (para. 2).

WAM Korea has also designed a dark basement of cells to replicate the military brothels known as ‘comfort stations’, where the abducted, coerced, and forced in sexual labour were kept. As the comfort station envelops the visitor in its aura of isolation, fear, and helplessness, it aims to be what Million (2009) calls “felt knowledge...[for] thinking and problematizing nuances of truth” for this violent history without reproducing the violence on the bodies and minds of survivors or other women who have experienced sexual trauma. To borrow from Olufemi (2020), felt knowledge asks us to practise a radical compassion that refuses “to ignore the pain of others” (p. 5). The exhibition is a platform to facilitate other public storytelling activities such talks, performances and collective music making workshops. As the past is never actually the past, these activities make links with current sexual violence and practices of sexual enslavement and trafficking.

Animating

Building on the above, not all women’s histories are easily accessible not only because they not been collected but because the women are no longer alive. In this case, museums use other storytelling practices and one of these is animation. To animate

means to give life, zest, and energy to something. Facing what they call a “dearth of documented knowledge and information in mainstream historical narratives of African women and from an African woman’s perspective” the Women’s History Museum Zambia (WHMZ) has curated a permanent animated podcast called *Leading Ladies* (<https://www.whmzambia.org/about>, para. 3).

This imaginative podcast animates into being tales of African women from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries whose deeds and contributions were in danger of being lost and forgotten and as such, would have no influence on future generations. As few if any actual images of these women existed, animation was critical to providing visual representations of the women, bringing them to life as ‘characters’ based on factual stories which feminists call ‘creative non-fiction’ reality shared through imaginative expressive forms where inconsequential facts are removed to accommodate the narrative, create an image or engage emotions but accuracy is kept, in this case, in terms of the areas and roles these women played (e.g., Taber 2021). The virtual, or non-visible but real, qualities of the visual are what enable the visible characters to become agentic.

Building on this, one pedagogical aim of *Leading Ladies* was to challenge “the idea that historically, women were not capable of being leaders” (para. 2). The podcast showcases real historical figures in animated form, who were in fact everything from military generals, to feminists, to warriors, to politicians, to peacemakers, to diplomats and more. The second educational aim was to mine the tales of the ‘herstorians’, the women who had kept the stories alive by passing them down through the generations and make it public living knowledge. Thirdly and linked, the podcast aims to instil a new memory of and for African women by mapping the past and giving them possible futures. As Selby (2013) notes, animation is powerful because it has such a profound effect on people, etching images and messages deeply into their minds in ways that make them highly memorable. *Leadings Ladies* as an animated “artful protest” is also intended to “heal data gaps and cultural wounds through present day creation” (para. 5).

Rescripting

For Hall (2013) a primary way social and cultural meaning produced and circulated is through language, through the words we use to describe the world. Museums have for decades presented claims about people and objects as ‘objective’ and ‘certain’ which places them above the public realm of debate and insulates them from accountability. For feminists it is critical to interrogate this objective certainty for “the blatant and the subtle means by which an edifice of male supremacy [is] assembled” (Spender, 1980, p. x). This is exactly what feminists at the Manchester Art Gallery have done. Through a series of *Feminist Revisions* feminists have deconstructed and rescripted the decades of bias of the ‘god voice’ of authority, objectivity, and universality in museum curatorial statements. For example, the original curatorial statement titled *Grand Tour and Grand Style: The Influence of Travel* tells the story of

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became almost obligatory for young gentlemen. Grand Tourists were led across Europe by tutors to study art, history, and politics for two or three years.

The *Feminist Revision* fleshes this out to tell a broader tale:

A particularly significant influence was the Grand Tour, which became an almost obligatory part of any (rich), young fella's education. Grand Tourists were led across Europe by tutors (who were all men). Only in the later parts of the 1800s did it become (acceptable) fashionable for (barely any) young women and even then, only when chaperoned by a spinster aunt, or some other 'safe' and socially undesirable female. Divorced women were allowed on the Grand Tour!

Importantly, both statements are permanent giving the rescripted stories equal legitimacy and authority. The old curatorial statements remain at eye level, large and easy to read whereas the alternative statements are below and much smaller forcing visitors to bend to read them. While this could be a problem, on my many visits I have witnessed most visitors making the effort to stoop and read which to me, speaks to the veracity of Lawler's (2008) assertion that "in general, people have high levels of tolerance for a diversity of interpretations and hence, narratives" (p. 37).

The revisions offer not only a new perspective on the time and gender but challenge the trust visitors may have had in the museum's original story by calling into question the legitimacy of its stories. While *Feminists Revisions* looks at first to be "simply a small, isolated island of resistance", to borrow from Foucault (1972, p. 18), it is in fact a linked chain of interruption to the musicalizing order of things. For Jackson (2002) storytelling is a strategy that involves making words stand in for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's experience of the world. By constructing and sharing stories, people contrive to restore viability to their relationship with others, redressing a bias toward autonomy when it has been lost, and affirming collective ideals in the face of disparate experiences.

Re-Centering

When Anderson and Winkworth (2018) state that "a lifetime's washing and cooking leaves no monuments" (p.130) they are drawing attention to what Mohanty (1991) called "the politics of everyday life" (p. 39), marooning women's daily lived experiences in an ineffable darkness of unexceptionally and triviality which has informed everything from gender relations to economic practices.

The aim of the storytelling work at the Frauenkultur Regional-International Museum in Germany is to centre the critical epistemic resources contained in women's everyday experiences by taking "seriously them seriously and "making them worth seeing again and again" (<https://www.frauenindereinenwelt.de>, para. 2). Specifically, the exhibition examines the relationship between women's self-identities and knowledges and the performance of domestic work. Walking through the exhibition provides the visitor with an embodied experience of personal lives as it constructs and reconstructs visually often hidden everyday experiences and makes them cultural and socially meaningful. Because the everyday comes to light only in the details, the exhibition meticulously showcases practices such as sewing, cooking, mothering, and other domestic pursuits to convey the intricacies, complexities and time pressures which challenge widespread cultural assumptions of simplicity and

mindlessness. The rhythms of women's everyday lives are storied through artworks (images), objects, poetry as well as dreams women have for their futures as they go about their daily tasks. The exhibition is not only immersive but transnational in scope, skilfully linking similar stories of women across countries and cultures. The so-called 'unspectacular' everyday life of women, which is otherwise "not worth mentioning", as the curatorial statement notes, is transformed into a monument to women's critical life sustaining work.

The exhibition has three additional inter-connected goals. One is to draw attention to the often more cooperative relationship between men and women in the domestic sphere than is normally portrayed. The second is to make clear that home can be a place of isolation, confinement, and violence for women. Thirdly, the exhibition renders visible women's practices of subversion and resistance through everything from embroidery to acts of domestic sabotage. As the exhibition takes what has been presumed to be uninteresting and mundane and makes it extraordinary, it repositions "society from the inside out ... [making the] domestic sphere...central to the functioning of society, rather than as peripheral to the main stage (Anderson & Winkworth, 2014, p. 29).

Reframing

Framing is a device that has been used by artists for centuries. Frames, wittingly or otherwise, provide a cognitive viewing structure, a mental window or threshold. Harden and Whiteside (2009) define framing as "the process in which a 'point of view' on a given issue or event is used to interpret and present 'reality' - magnifying or shrinking aspects of that issue or event to make it more or less salient" (p. 312). Framing, like other storytelling practices has been used to "reinforce gender-related myths" (p. 312).

Re-framed: The woman in the window was a multimedia exhibition curated by feminist curators at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, England. The exhibition consisted of three different types of storytelling. The first stories focussed on works by male artists who had taken up what is called 'the woman in the window' framing. The curatorial statement describes how this "enigmatic and provocative artistic motif that used for over 3,000 years" framed women by men, for men, in contexts of "idealisation, protection, and confinement". The exhibition also reminds us of the veracity of Wolff's (1929) assertion that "for most of the time in history 'Anonymous' is a woman" (p. 28). Part Two, the second gallery, includes works by female artists who have taken up the composition of the frame to explore female identity, sexuality, and social expectations through very different eyes. Here we see everything from acts of defiance to deep frustrations. Part Three, the final gallery, includes works by feminist artists who were commissioned to take up the frame to tell stories of lock down experiences during the coronavirus pandemic. Works explored how door and window frames on one hand gave women access to the outside world whilst on the other, confined them to rising acts of domestic violence offering only tantalizing glimpses of escape and safety. Through the exhibition is another important element: the integration of stories and responses by visitors under the heading *Another Perspective*.

Pedagogically, this practice of framing and reframing fashions a gap in the order of things by illustrating that visitor interpretations are as valid as those of the artists and curators, rendering visible a hidden curricula of ideological assumptions and values that lie behind 'beautiful' paintings, providing new frameworks through which the gendered world can be both interrupted and interpreted.

Remembering

For Pickering (2006) remembering is a practice that gives the past both “meaning and communicative currency” (p. 176). The ‘remembering agent’ takes what is absent and makes it present as a living memory. Remembering women who have experienced fatal domestic violence is for feminists in museums an act of resistance against practices of erasure. As media leaps towards the perpetrators, the murdered women themselves are absented, forgotten, an afterthought. Remembering murdered women is central to the work of the Museo de la Mujer in Argentina. One example is the storytelling mask making workshops activity called *Mariposas* (Butterflies). Working collectively, artists and women from the community produced a series of spectacular masks to denounce male violence (murder) and pay homage to the lives of the 100s of women who have been victims of femicide from 2015 to 2022. The coronavirus pandemic with its increased rates of violence against women expanded the number of masks exponentially. Each of the masks is 20cm x20cm and individually embroidered.

One aim of the project, as alluded to above, was to disallow the murdered women to disappear into a ‘statistic’ of femicide. The exhibition brings the women back to life as a story of how they were and how they lived by individually embroidering each mask with a woman’s names. Yet the exhibition also responds to English and Irving’s (2015) belief that when one tells a story of violence against women it is critical to make it statistically significant to show that these are not just isolated/single events. The large-scale mask exhibition is an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful graphic exposition of statistics. What visitors encounter is a wall of hundreds of masks with empty eye sockets that speak to the scope of violence and its consequences.

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The museum has used the exhibition as the basis for discussion groups on violence against women, but they have also taken it to the streets. The masks have been worn in mass feminist mobilisations against violence and feminicide such as *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Less) and used in the campaign *Femicidios: Cry for Justice through Art*. For me, these actions are a critical and creative response to Janes and Sandell’s (2019) call for museums to move outside their own walls and join the struggle for change by speaking clearly and forcefully from their privileged positions as storytellers and knowledge producers.

Gender Bending

The boundaries of ‘gender’ as simply masculine and feminine are being shifted, posing a divisive challenge and a need for pedagogical expansion. While the category of ‘woman’ remains an important space of social analysis and political struggle, to examine gender more broadly is important because as Scott-Dixon (2006) reminds us “gender is never just gender...Individual gender expression is embedded in systems and structures of power” (p. 19). She argues that asking “questions about both normative and trans genders and observing how they intersect with other social relations facilitate a rich critical analysis of the gender system as a whole” (p. 19). Taking up gender more broadly is not only to enable “a

richer critical analysis of the gender system as a whole” (p.19) but to help people to accept and respect sexual differences rather than simply ‘tolerating’ them.

Addressing the broader social construction of gender and its implications is a role the Kvindemuseet (Gender Museum) in Denmark is actively playing. The museum facilitates workshops called *Gender Bender* that brought together LGBTQ and trans youth to tell their own stories of identity. Questions used to guide the storytelling workshops included: What does gender mean in our society? 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? From the stories participants produced artworks (drawings, poetry, etc.) which were curated into a permanent exhibition called *Gender Bender*. What I know from my own studies is to weave one’s personal story into an artwork that is curated into an exhibition is both an act of self-representation and a story told visually and publicly. It is also the safety of anonymity in an unsafe world (see Clover & Craig, 2009).

Using *Gender Bender*, the museum facilitates public discussions around the ongoing debates about gender. The museum has felt that Denmark lacks a quality, facilitated platform for people to debate, to learn about gender and sexual histories and to tell their own stories. Alongside this exhibition is another called *Sexual education throughout the times*. The museum uses this to teach young visitors about the history and evolution of sexual education over the past 200 years and particularly, about norms, limits, and rights for gender, body, and sexuality.

Revisualizing

Feminist adult educator Bierema (2003) reminds us that “taking action in the name of women’s oppression involves making the invisibility of women’s oppression visible (p. 7). Central to visibility is the issue of representation, the construction of meaning, identity and resilience and the articulation of difference. This underlies the work of feminists in the Museum of Art and Photography (MAP) in India who have curated a three-year exhibition titled *Visible / invisible: Representation of Women in Art*. The exhibition explores the representation of women through artworks in its collection to re-address preconceived notions of femininity and gender as a social construct and provide a more inclusive understanding. This exhibition, like *Reframed*, draws attention to how women have been a central theme of artistic representation, although the image builders have been predominantly male. The exhibition speaks to the little control women have had over the nature of their representation. This exhibition juxtaposes themes with counter-themes, narratives, and counter-narratives around complex ideas such as sacrifice, nourishment, aggression, abandonment, desire, and success. Under four key headings -- Goddess and Mortal, Sexuality and Desire, Power and Violence, and Struggle and Resistance – it highlights struggles and power dynamics of women on the Indian subcontinent. The exhibition is also multi-decade and multi-media including “approximately 130 artworks ranging from tenth century to contemporary including sculptures, textiles, posters, paintings and photographs by a diverse range of artists and makers” (<https://map-india.org/exhibition/visible-invisible/>, para. 3). *Visible/Invisible* also addresses physical, sexual, and emotional violence, and displays nudity and graphic imagery. Yet it is designed in such a way as to be “a safe space for everyone” to learn about the “history and role of women and gender in art” (para. 3).

Like other exhibitions highlighted in this article, MAP has designed extensive educational programming around the exhibition. Activities range from the development of publications and research papers to public talks and round table discussions aimed to encourage multiple viewpoints, questions and “to provide the tools and contexts for audiences to form their opinions and challenge existing ones” (para 4). One major activity was a workshop titled *Abolition Feminism* that invited participants “to hold space to destabilise carceral, disposability and dispossession logics, and build an embodied abolitionist feminist praxis in all aspects of our work and lives...[and] to explore [abolition feminism] as a framework and strategy for imagining alternative futures and praxis” by collectively unravelling what abolition, embodiment and feminism mean...[and] how they can interrelate to help us build our own everyday practices towards liberation (para. 1). It’s a safe space where one is allowed to share their vulnerabilities and be open to navigating conversations and uncomfortable with. also includes performances that from how women violent world, can and create their resist the existing different create a

Exhibition programming also includes feminist theatre performances that explore questions ranging from how women cope with a binary and violent world, can trace their own histories, and create their stories to claim space and resist the existing regime, and can a different create a future.

ideas that one might be Exhibition programming feminist theatre explore questions ranging cope with a binary and trace their own histories, stories to claim space and regime, and can a future.

Final thoughts

Storytelling is a powerful age-old practice that has been used to give purpose, sense and meaning to people’s lives, to enculturate and educate and to provide a blueprint to envision and imagine the future. For feminist Wånggren (2016) women’s stories matter. When we limit, misrepresent, or exclude stories, as museums worldwide have done for centuries, we lose valuable historical, social, cultural, and epistemic resources. To transform this problematically gendered world, all our stories need to be told, seen, heard and equally importantly, taken seriously. Women and others excluded by gender norms must be able to see and critique oppressions that hide in plain sight. Equally, they must be able to look back to look forward, to be remembered and to create new memories, and to feel a sense of agency about their pasts if they are to bring about “futures [they] cannot grasp yet” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 11).

What I have shown in this article is how feminist storytelling in museums operates as both a language of critique and possibility. Using counternarratives and counter stories of critique feminists are interrupting established mechanisms of power to make visible how language maintains myths of neutrality, framing controls perspective, historical truths of masculine heroism have silenced and further victimized, violence creates deadly absences and restrictive binaries have inhibited self-expression and identity. By exposing hidden ideologies and sabotaging investments in maintaining ignorance feminist storytelling teaches visitors to look harder and more closely at how power and injustice operate both overtly and covertly. As a language of possibility, feminist storytelling changes the audible and visible landscapes of history, making words, deeds, and knowledge once denied a public audience and intellectual credibility visible, imaginable, memorable, and the chance to become actionable. What feminists in museums also teach us is that there are multiple stories that need to be told and that telling can be done in critical but equally creative ways.

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