



Research Article

Curating a Feminist Exhibition: Purpose, Process & Presentation

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Introduction

In January 2023, we curated an exhibition titled *Cultures of Head Coverings* in Wilfrid Johns Art Gallery, University of Victoria (and later in the Sooke Museum, British Columbia). This feminist exhibition showcased historical and contemporary stories of or by women through what they wear and have worn on their heads (see Figure 1). While this topic may seem simple, it is anything but. This reflective, practice-based article explores our curatorial process as feminist adult educators who work in the interests of gender justice and change. Specifically, we discuss its conceptualisation and planning but more in depth its data collection and process of curation into a collective story of diversity and voice from the individual narratives. We begin with a discussion of feminist exhibitions through the lens of power, pedagogy and curation. We then outline our curatorial process and our exhibition presentation through the lens of shaping the stories and diversity in our exhibition.

Figure 1: *Cultures of Head Coverings Exhibition*

Antecedents: The feminist exhibition as response

Before we explain our process of curating the *Cultures of Head Coverings* exhibition it is important to situate the exhibition. This exhibition was inspired by a similar German feminist exhibition which had used images and stories from around the world to tackle the rise of sexist xenophobia in Germany and, to show that women's wearing things on their heads was normal, although complex (Franger & Clover, 2021). We had similar aims, but we wanted to respond to Quebec's Bill 21 that had banned religious clothing/symbols such as the hijab for public servants and make a contribution to rising social controls over women's clothing and bodies (Honkatukia & Keskinen, 2018).

As noted in the introduction, although wearing or not any form of head covering may seem a simple idea or topic, or simply to be opposites, what women wear and have worn on their heads (or not worn) has always been highly political because relations of power are in play. Head coverings are about control, identity, resistance, and representation. Our exhibition was timely in terms of wading into the fray of increasing sexism on Canada and around the world but also as a response to calls for art and cultural institutions to contribute to gender justice rather than continuing to maintain the status quo of masculine privilege (Clover & Sanford, 2021). One way this is being done is through feminist exhibitions.

Feminist exhibitions: Power, pedagogy, and curation

For centuries exhibitions in art galleries have included predominantly men's artworks and through these, they have told masculine tales which have granted men a sense of genius, history, identity and agency. Through exclusion exhibitions have denied women these same senses of socio-cultural agency and dignity (Clover, 2021). Feminist exhibitions therefore matter because they disrupt the masculine order of things by telling vastly different tales by and about women. One of the powers of portraying women in exhibitions is to mark their significance as subjects, giving their lives authority and legitimacy (Bartlett, 2016). As Crane (2000) once argued, being collected and showcased means being valued and remembered and adds to the knowledge of those who see the exhibition. For Bartlett and Henderson (2013) feminist exhibitions are also

important because they advance feminist agendas to transform existing patriarchal relations of power and make women's histories and lives visible to the world.

The act of self-representation – visual and oral -- is a critical act of take back control from those who may not have women's best interests at heart.

Central to feminist exhibitions is the practice of curation (Kransy & Perry, 2023). To curate is in essence, to make and making is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as fabrication, production, preparation, doing, performance and causing something to become something. These elements are central to feminist curating as we make something become visible and audible, something perform in the public, something to be 'fabricated' that did not exist before. Through feminist curatorial

practices, value and a new sense of power is accorded to women when they see themselves portrayed, and portrayed differently when not refracted through a masculine gaze but equally when they are able to represent themselves in public by telling their own stories. The act of self-representation – visual and oral -- is a critical act of taking back control from those who may not have women's best interests at heart. We specifically aimed for the women who contributed to our exhibition to speak on their own behalf and to share their stories as they wanted them to be shared. We did edit and format the stories for aesthetic and spatial reasons, but we checked back to ensure that our editing had in no altered what the women wanted to say and to have heard.

Yet as powerful feminist exhibitions are, Barlett (2013) and Kelham (2013) remind us that working with women's issues can be messy and painful. They can be painful because firstly, no exhibition can include everything, nor can it be everything to everyone (Clover, 2021). Inevitably, something must be left out. Secondly, visuals are very powerful and open to interpretation, meaning things can go wrong. In the *Call for Contributors*, we sent out to encourage stories for the exhibition, we used an image of women and men protesting Quebec's Bill 21 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Protests in Quebec*



However, an organisation we sent the Call to, and one we had hoped to work in partnership with, redesigned the Call and included the image of a woman in a burqa. A Muslim women's group took offence firstly because the burqa is a full body covering, not simply a head covering and therefore, it did not work and secondly, because they felt it stereotyped Muslim women. We agreed with their analysis and apologies were extended. While it was not our image, we were culpable in not paying sufficient attention to the image.

A focus on diversity

In feminist exhibitions diversity is valued and therefore, we aimed to have as many different types of stories as space would allow. We wanted to showcase diversity as a series of opposites and dynamic tensions yet create through the exhibition a sense of community and belonging (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). By bringing the stories together but allowing them to stay in dynamic tension rather than smoothing them out, different visitors were able to resonate with different stories, to see themselves and their complexities. When this happens, they are better able to accept stories or points of view that are quite different. What creates problems we have found is not showcasing opposites but rather, excluding stories that are ‘different’ to what we might want to see. However, we recognized that an exhibition showing women’s stories or histories without challenging the dominant social order would not be a feminist exhibition. In addition to tackling socio-political issues, our exhibition also challenged normative notions of women’s head coverings as simple acts of choice.

Our Curatorial Process

As a team of curators, we worked collaboratively and focused on collective decision-making throughout the curation process. For Richter (2022), a key element of feminist curatorial work is to speak as both a group and as feminists keen on challenging the status quo. Through the process of creating the exhibition, we challenged the notions of ownership by working together on the project, coming together through our shared passion for telling stories of women that have been absent or misrepresented in history. Neoliberal and capitalist ideas place a higher emphasis on competition, comparison, and individual accomplishments over collaborative work. Given this, the notion of people coming together, joined by a common cause and ideology, collectively working towards the curation process could indeed be referred to as a “radical feminist event” (p. 310).

An essential aspect of feminist exhibitions as adult education spaces is the active participation of the women who represent themselves through their own stories (Marshment, 1993). To develop the exhibition, we asked women to write their own stories, or we interviewed them and then transcribed. The stories were edited for aesthetic symmetry and reviewed by the women for final approval. We made suggestions for titles for some, and other contributors selected their own. The stories were theirs to tell while our role was to create the exhibition for these stories to be told in a coherent and accessible way. The relationship that we shared with our collaborators was informed by a sense of curatorial responsibility which placed emphasis on their agency to tell their stories the way they deemed appropriate and using words they thought would best describe their experiences.

The process of an excellent learning as we were delving deeply women and challenging our women’s head coverings women approached us to hair and pieces of cloth, ranged from colonialism to male professions we

The process of feminist curation was also an excellent learning experience for us as curators as we were delving deeply into the lives of these women and challenging our own assumptions about women’s head coverings and uncoverings.

feminist curation was also experience for us as curators into the lives of these own assumptions about and uncoverings. As more tell their stories about their they wear on their head that surviving in predominantly became aware of the deep

roots that patriarchy takes in different women’s lives around the world. It also became clearer that women’s head coverings and uncoverings were about so many things that ranged from utility, beauty, control, resistance, identity and more. We also learned more about the process of curation where dialogue, collective decision making, and flexibility was essential to the act of curating.

What marks feminist thought are the paradoxes that exist within a discussion or topic and

approaching them through varied lenses (Krasny, 2015). Without settling on a linear or singular approach to an exhibition we brought stories from varying standpoints. Additionally, a central strategy of feminist adult education is knowledge creation. The reflecting, questioning, and knowledge co-creation, as evident in feminist thought, is central to curating a feminist exhibition (Krasny, 2015). Feminist Ahmed (2017) argues that “we need to tell other feminist stories” (p. 4) which points to the sense of responsibility that feminist curators have in representing histories and stories accurately by having varied narratives on display.

The sense of responsibility of co-curators is evident in the way that feminist exhibitions are planned and executed with care and additional work that is taken on in the process (Horne et. al., 2016). Additionally, as co-curators who might have different expertise and interests, the ideation of an exhibition that is rooted in overlapping beliefs is important to feminist curation work. We worked to address the gaps by hearing diverse stories about women’s experiences with head coverings/uncoverings and including multiple venues for collecting and displaying the exhibition. For example, we connected with the Italian Culture Centre in Vancouver, the Doukhobors on the lower mainland of British Columbia, Royal British Columbia Museum and Point Ellice House in Victoria. We were keen that the stories reach as many people as possible, and this involved talking to galleries and museums across the region to showcase the exhibition and few were able to come through. The central library, for example, was very keen to have the exhibition but, in the end, they lacked the type of space necessary to curate it.

The presentation

Our exhibition was curated to create a space to tell stories of diverse women’s head coverings and uncoverings which was displayed based on various themes, such as women’s hair and its relationship with identity, resistance and discrimination; the hijab through the lens of resilience, control, choice and patriarchy; resistance and challenge to ageism and colonialism through raging granny’s hats, and Indigenous women’s hair. The exhibition also included stories of women’s head coverings for utility purpose, such as those worn by women in the market; and in professions that were predominantly occupied by men. The exhibition connected stories within these themes as they presented varying views within each sub-category (<https://www.emaze.com/@ALRZQZRTF/cultures-of-headcoverings>). We expanded our themes based on the diverse women we met and the stories they told.

Shaping the stories

One example of inclusion and expansion of theme came through stories of women’s hair and its relationship to identity. One story highlights the vulnerability of losing parts of one’s identity as a Black woman who moved to Canada, struggling to find people who could work with her hair. Another story tells of Indigenous women cutting their hair as a tribute to their father who went to residential school. A third story relates painful experiences of harassment through having ‘red’ hair which was evident in her begging “to stay home from school on Kick-a-Ginger Day.” Another describes a decision of a woman to shave off her hair when she revealed her true sexual identity which was easier as she had job security that “allowed the freedom to have a hairstyle of choice.”

Stories told by the Raging Grannies, a group of older women activists known for their ‘ridiculous’ hats and protest songs, resist discrimination and challenge ageism; these stories were told through a display of hats and accompanying stories. The hijab was another artifact that raised stories – of resistance, resilience, and control. Participants shared stories of choice – to retain or remove

their hijab, based on religious conviction, social norms, and identity. A Libyan woman chose to wear her hijab, while another woman, from Iran, chose to resist by determining not to wear a hijab as according to her, “from every angle I see men involved.” Other head coverings, such as the nun’s habit, offered comfort and protection from a patriarchal world. Utilitarian head coverings, such as scarves and hats, enabled women to protect themselves from weather, and enabled them to be identified as legitimate members of predominantly male professions and fit into a ‘man’s world’ through military caps, berets, and hardhats. These head coverings elicited stories of survival, gender bias, and struggle.

Through the lens of understanding the historical and contemporary head coverings and uncoverings of women, the exhibition decolonized the colonial narratives of head coverings by telling stories from an intersectional lens of race, gender, age, ethnicity, and religion. Through their stories they offered counter-narratives for exhibition visitors to consider. The story of Indigenous women cutting their hair as a tribute to their father who went to residential schools raises issues of racism embedded within the history of Canada. All these narratives serve as examples of how women are challenging colonial patriarchy through diverse notions of what qualifies as a head covering – hijab, hats, or hair -- as it illustrates the plurality to gender justice work.

The discourse offered through our exhibition stories shifts the attention away from the individual curator to discussions between curators and contributors along with the stories that are being told, creating a contemporary discourse that centres the narratives and people telling the stories (O’Neill, 2016). The multiple stories with varied stances towards a concept are evidence of the diverse feminist perspectives so important to our exhibition. Without offering one linear or singular approach to any facet of the exhibition, our exhibition space offered stories from varied standpoints that left the interpretation to the readers. This reflecting, questioning, and knowledge co-creation, as evident in feminist thought, was central to the presentation structure of our exhibition.

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Our exhibition was first shared in the University of Victoria gallery. This university-located exhibition was significant and powerful, offering a site for multiple visitors from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Location was significant for gathering feedback. The space invited people from different backgrounds to engage with the stories and share their own experiences or thoughts on the exhibition, thus making it participatory and accessible to multiple communities. We left comment cards (see Figure 3) on the exhibition sites for people to reflect on their experiences with the stories and take-aways from engagement with the exhibition. This created a feedback loop that is essential to a feminist exhibition that aims to encourage curatorial praxis. Our exhibition also provided space for the women who contributed their stories to ‘come alive’ when they were also invited to attend the exhibition and speak to the visitors (graduate students, ongoing visitors) to create a space for questioning, reflecting, dialogue, exchanging ideas and movement.

Dimitrakaki and Perry (2013) ask what happens to political subjects when they are displayed in normative spaces and institutions. The question can be reframed to ask, what happens to neo-liberal colonial institutions, such as a university, when political subjects are showcased? These interventions are important to challenging institutional hierarchy and disrupting heteropatriarchal practices. Feminist interventionist content, interactive spaces and activities, multiple voices to respond and add to our exhibition stories, all serve to offer an alternative exhibition approach.

Figure 3: *Comment Cards to Gather Visitors' Feedback*



Conclusion

As an inherently political pedagogical tool, feminist exhibitions have the potential to become agents of social transformation on multiple fronts through analysis and action (Largo, 2021). As an exhibition that showcased issues of patriarchy's control of women's lives but also acts of self-identity through what women wear or do not wear on their heads, *Cultures of Head Coverings* exhibit was rooted in feminist curatorial praxis and critical feminist theories (Wing, 1997). The feminist curation, in our case, included a feminist lens to the purpose, process and presentation. Our exhibition came at a time in history when countries around the world were grappling with issues of controlling women's choices. The process of curating a feminist adult education exhibition call into question conventional museum practices that have historically catered to the elite and have either never told women's stories or misrepresented them (Barlett, 2013). Our process of curation was centred around women telling their own stories using their own words and images. Additionally, feminist curation is "unabashedly subjective, messy, contradictory and provocative" (Porter, 2006, p. 112) which is reflected in the process and presentation of ideas and stories through the exhibit that challenges the linearity of conventional museum practices. Additionally, by bringing our exhibition into the colonial university institution to tell otherwise absent narratives of intersectionally marginalized women served to alter the exhibition model and what Barlett (2016) refers to as "an audacious choice" (p. 312). By telling diverse stories from different perspectives, our educational aim was to allow interpretation by visitors, enabling them to see themselves represented through the stories on the walls or to better understand the lives of women and how critical issues can be made concrete through some so simple, yet so complex, as what women wear or do not wear on their heads.

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