



## *Research Article*

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# **This strange flower.... Changing the past and imagining feminist futures: Letters between a museum curator and an artist**

**Thale Blix Fastvold**  
**Hilde Herming**

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### **Introduction**

In the form of letters between a women’s museum curator and an artist, we explore possible ways to collaborate by using artistic research and practice to imagine feminist futures – including what we’re calling pyrofeminist futures meaning worlds-to-come cultivated through care, passion, and one’s inner fire, that emerge from the smouldering ruins of the Anthropocene. By referring to a variety of her art projects, concepts, and artistic research, which all belong within a feminist tradition, the artist (a feminist imaginative) and the museum (represented by a museum curator) discuss how to bring new socio-environmental perspectives to the museum, in order to change the patriarchal structure which still dominates both society and its institutions. The Women’s Museum Norway is based in the childhood home of artist, writer, and pianist Dagny Juel (1867 – 1901), who is the pivotal figure – and the third voice – in this paper. With a collaborative aim towards gender justice, we ask how a museum can continue to function as platform, facilitator, and safe space for feminist adult education?

The following letters were written during summer 2023 between artist Thale Blix Fastvold and Hilde Herming, curator at The Women’s Museum in Norway. As an alternative to a conventional academic text, we chose the format of letters for our correspondence. Indigenous Samí writer Liisa-Rávná Finbog discusses the importance of a holistic approach to research and academic language, and how the academic language can be non-inclusive, inaccessible and function as a barrier to decolonial thinking (Finbog, 2020). There exists a long tradition of letter writing as a method for research, as described by Stamper (2020) in his paper *Letter writing: Life in letters – A method of qualitative inquiry*. Stamper notes that “whilst the lack of procedural norms and instruction can often be posed as a criticism to arts-based methods of research, it can also be constructed as an opportunity for creative engagement and methodological improvisation. This is particularly true of letter writing methods” (pp.181-182).

With the following correspondence, our intention is to use letter writing as a subversive contemporary feminist approach to talking about feminist art projects and, after long traditions of

feminist politics, how to further gender justice within museums today. We bring with us the voice of Dagny Juel with two of her poems (which until now have not been published in English) included in the text. As Barad (2007) writes in her book *Meeting the universe halfway* we are all deeply entangled, we (the writers) and you (the reader) are in a continuous process of changing and becoming together. Barad's theories on agential realism explain how we (humans, and quantum entanglement essentially everything else) more-than-humans and are parts of entangled systems where every action creates a cascade of possibilities or possible outcomes – with the potential of changing both the (understanding of the) past and the future. Letters and conversations are entanglements between people, times and spaces, and the conversations we have *matter* in the becoming of the world. In a gender-justice perspective, the words we use, the conversations we have and the letters we write will shape the world we are co-creating. A museum is a very different organism from an artist, and our letters illustrate and try to bridge our different positions with an aim to suggesting how to include a renewed feminist agenda in different museum education practices.

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On June 8th, 2023, at the Women's Museum in Norway, Herming and Fastvold met in the museum garden to commemorate Dagny Juel's 155th birthday. Thale Blix Fastvold and Tanja Thorjussen created the *LOCUS Bee sanctuary – Dagny Juel's garden* – an ecofeminist public art project for pollinators and humans – located at the Women's Museum from 2019 – 2023. Incorporated in the installation is the following poem *I Tusmørke (Dusk)* by Dagny Juel; her poem grows and flows between the flowers, as the project functions simultaneously as a memorial to Juel and as a buffet with specific flowers catering to such pollinators as bees, bumblebees, and butterflies.

*I Tusmørket (Dusk)*

This flower, this strange flower...

she sat down close to it and let its fine long stem caress her knee

The scent filled her with a secret happiness

She read her own longing in the flower's large, soft eyes

She found something in it, something which she herself had lost, a sound, a tone, belonging to her deepest soul

It sang an anthem she had long forgotten

Oh, it hurt as a violation when one of its big, white eyes withered and fell!

And she thought of all the broken, fragrant flowers of her life

She felt them fluttering around, like many-winged, thousand-colored birds

All the songs they had sung, all the colors they had spun over her night and day

But this one, single flower, which she had never seen before,

which one morning stood in her living room immeasurably and thoughtfully,

with a wreath of shining stars about its head,

sang the colour and longing of her soul

And when a wave of its sweet breath reached her,

she felt herself shivering and becoming hot with happiness

Excerpt from poem *I Tusmørket* by Dagny Juel (Juel, 1900)

For us, this installation is an alternative museum space, a public outdoor space accessible to all and free of charge. As a space both for individuals and collective groups, as well as more-than-human beings, it invites visitors to reflect upon and imagine Dagny Juel's life and work from different perspectives. The garden functions as a cyclic, organic memorial to honour Dagny Juel, which changes its appearance with the changing seasons. Through our following letters, our aim is to shed light upon how our artistic imagination and research methods and museum practices as feminist

educators can work together to change dominant patriarchal narratives. In conclusion we suggest a possible model for how institutions and artists can collaborate.

Figure 1:



*LOCUS Bee Sanctuary – Dagny Juel’s garden*, art project by Thale Blix Fastvold & Tanja Thorjussen at The Women’s Museum in Norway, photo: Ellinor Maurstad, 2023.

June 15, Kongsvinger

Dear Thale,

It was lovely meeting you in the museum garden the other day. I am excited about how this garden opens for possible conversations in our community – and also between us, regarding challenging established versions of the past, exploring new paths and futures through a variety of artistic feminist practices. I am intrigued by your artistic research and production methods, and I look forward to hearing more about your thoughts on ecofeminism and speculative storytelling.

As a women’s museum, itself a platform for feminist adult education, our collection and exhibitions are related to objects and stories in relation to women, whilst simultaneously aiming at exposing the patriarchal structures that have prevented these stories to be collected, told or shared.

The Women’s Museum opened in 1995, in the childhood home of Dagny Juel (1867-1901) who lived a short and intense life amongst the bohemians at the last fin de siècle. She was an educated pianist, and began writing when she was 26 years old, mainly plays and poems. She also worked as a translator and curator for many other artists of her time – such as Edvard Munch and Swedish writer August Strindberg. She was married to Polish writer Stanislaw Przybyszewski; they had two children before her life ended tragically when she was murdered by a family friend on a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, where she is buried.

According to my colleagues Mona Holm and Thea Aarbakke, the museum was founded with the purpose of collecting, studying and mediating the history and culture of Norwegian women. The founders were influenced by emerging academic fields of women's history (now: women's and gender history) and interdisciplinary women's studies (now: gender studies) whose early goal was to increase women's visibility and status. The Women's Museum soon gained status as a national museum, giving visitors the possibility of learning an alternative version of history (Holm & Aarbakke, 2020).

Today the museum offers these semipermanent exhibitions; *Your Dagny* about Dagny Juel, *The Public "I": Stories from Norwegian women's struggle for a place in the public sphere*, *Playing for life – childhood and gender*, *Shh...! Stories about abortion and sexuality* – a collaboration with the International Association of Women's Museums (IAWM) and Swedish feminist artist group OTALT and *The Ice Breaker – a tribute to Monica Kristensen* - the first woman to lead an expedition to the south pole in 1986.

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As in most museums, we keep an archive of artifacts, letters and various documents, and objects – mainly donations – and we often acquire objects when we organize exhibitions. Sometimes we are more interested in the people and the stories behind the objects than the objects themselves. This means that we are looking for the contexts,

at least this is central to our Norwegian museum. Because the objects become the means of telling the story/biography of the objects' former owner – sometimes the story of a woman whose life was otherwise not recorded.

If we return to Dagny Juel, the museum's aim is to present her as a multidimensional individual and artist, adding new material, stories, and facts to challenge the dominant narrative created in the late 1800s. Juel's unconventional behaviour challenged societal norms of her time, and this defiance could have contributed to the lasting perception of her as a 'loose woman'. Today we would likely see her as independent and 'sexually liberated' – celebrating a woman's right to express herself freely. So I would like to ask you – from your practice – how can art work as a catalyst to change this discourse of the past into narratives more relevant for the future? I look forward to hearing back from you,

kind regards,

Hilde

June 21, Oslo

Dear Hilde,

To me, writing – letters and other texts – weave spells of intentions, telling stories that transcend time and space. The experience of writing and reading will always be a collaboration between the writer, the text, and the reader, with all our various contexts and backgrounds. As with all spells, the starting point is important and this letter-spell to you was ignited on an auspicious date, Midsummer, June 21, the lightest day in the Northern hemisphere, also international Indigenous people's day, and the moon is new. In Oslo, we have had a severe drought for weeks, but today, finally the rain arrived, pouring down, soaking me and the rest of nature. I'm standing in the rain, letting my shirt – white cotton with traditional embroidery of past times, which I found at a vintage market in Florence many years ago – become dripping wet. It clings to my body, as I imagine is has to other women's bodies before, their memories hidden in the feeling of the sheerness of the worn

fabric. The rain is warm, the winds caressing me, telling stories of softness.

Some summers ago, in Skagen, Denmark, where the winds are more insistent, I was reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer, 2000) where she writes about how the native Indigenous languages local to her region have ways of describing nature and the world that are different from my native Norwegian, or from English. She writes about how the river is 'rivering', the ocean is 'oceaning' in so many various ways, the fjord is 'fjording' – and how this more active language describes all these co-entities as more alive, with more identity and agency than we do here in English. As an artist, I have for a long time now collaborated with water, oceans, rivers, and lakes, recently with *Locus Bee Sanctuary – Dagny Juels's Garden*, the performance series *River Sisters* (a ten-year performance series on the occasion of UN Ocean Decade) and my short film *I am Hydra*. Each exemplifies my work with eco/hydrofeminism, time and trans-temporality.

I have great faith in imagination – art, literature, music, and film – as a catalyst for change in society. When making a new project we artists are creating something from nothing, or rather from all the stories, meetings, conversations, feelings, and other somethings we ever encountered up until then. We're connecting threads and thoughts, to focus on, letting their flow pour through us, staying with it until it's there, the new something that was not before. I keep coming back to the author Octavia Butler's quotation from her visionary novel *Parable of the Sower* "All that you touch you change, all that you change changes you, the only constant truth is change" (Butler, 1993, 3). And how can we relate to time as memory? The writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa (2002) puts it this way:

That the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps us retain our memories and to be aware of its presence. What is behind us (the future) cannot be seen and is liable to be forgotten readily. What is ahead of us (the past) cannot be forgotten so readily or ignored, for it is in front of our minds' eyes, always reminding us of its presence. The past is alive in us, so in more than a metaphorical sense the dead are alive – we are our history (p. 460).

How we understand the past shapes how we see the future. Thinking from a feminist point of view within a museum context – which is always ultimately in flux – I see that by changing the stories of the past we will make room for other potential futures. By retelling, and changing the words that we use, we change the memories within people, the understanding of the past and thereby enable new radical imaginations to develop. Museums and collections around the world are crucial in this collective storytelling, and particularly from a feminist pedagogical point of view – what is selected for the collections, how we read the stories of these objects, how this is translated into exhibitions, and how these stories are conveyed to the visitors can shape and adjust their understanding of our past. In doing the work of including and rewriting the stories of women and of others than those who have traditionally, "naturally" and "objectively" been included in *The History of Man* – specifically we need to include herstories, theirstories, ourstories – it gives us all the occasion to imagine ourselves as transtemporal witches and communicate and collaborate actively with our ancestors and foremothers (like Dagny Juel!), while at the same time keeping our children and their kids in mind, to make new memories by including new stories, and as the writer Hallie Iglehart recently said "create new myths for our descendants to look back at" (Iglehart, 2023), and thereby create the possibilities for the imagining of other – not yet thought of – futures. Artists can do this as well as curators.

As an artist, I always collaborate with other people, and with oceans and rivers, trees, plants, and insects – and at the *Locus Bee Sanctuary* we want to honour and remember both the woman Dagny Juel and her poetry, which was daring ecologically and radically erotic for her time. In her poems she takes charge of her sexuality and writes about her desires in an intensely expressive way while still using the flowery language specific for the late 1890s. By showing her portrait as part of

the installation and her poem in another way than how it has traditionally been conveyed by earlier publications and texts, we want to find a new way for people (and pollinators) to enjoy her poetry.

My film *I am Hydra* (2021) is a hydrofeminist spell to end the petrocapiatist age. I must admit it is a very ambitious spell! It was cast in Skagen, the very tip of Denmark, where two oceans meet, and the waves are crashing into each other from two different directions. This naturally creates an ideal location for magical thinking – which I see as being attuned to the agency of all things, including oneself, acting within an inescapable entanglement of beings where transformation is continual and multidirectional, vibrating within the shimmer of the ecosystem, ecologically, socially, politically – as the possibilities for the spell to travel in various directions, with the winds, the waves and the water, are endless. My film is shot in Norway and Denmark and juxtaposes footage from the Norwegian oil industry with the forever self-regenerating Hydra species, while referencing and retelling the story of the mythological multi-headed Hydra-creature. In my film, Hydra is cast as a woman, played by myself, as the guardian of the Underworld and a metaphor for the fluidity of time itself.

We, humans, are mostly made of water, and even though the lake Lerna in Greece, where the Hydra from mythology used to dwell, is now dried up and exists only as a mytho-memorial place, the water of Lerna is still us, meaning you, and we all are or could be, the same water that used to be the lake Lerna. Gender studies academic and writer Astrida Neimanis coined the term “hydrofeminism” in 2014, to bring together feminist, queer, and ecological sensibilities, with the foundation being that we are all bodies of water (Neimanis, 2014). I believe the realization that we are water (we are part of nature) is a good starting point for active collaborations with non-human entities, and in my art praxis these collaborations bring me great opportunities for learning, and joy!

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Using performance art as an example of an active way of communicating with the audience I would like to tell you about my work with the *River Sisters* performance series, which I presented at the conference *Waters of life – Exploring Mythos, Divinity, Beings, and Ecology*, organized by the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology in Syracuse, New York, in May 2023.

I was there to present a paper, together with the artist Tanja Thorjussen who I have been collaborating with for the last 18 years. We were bringing our long term performance project *River Sisters* to the congress – it had been accepted as ‘paper’ as this was a conventional conference setting where the rest of the program mostly consisted of lectures, panels and talks, but our lecture was actually a live performance where we brought water from Norway, the Finsevatn mountain lake, and connected it with water from Seneca River, in a water healing ritual, wearing elaborate costumes including handmade glass snakes, modelled after the drawings of ancient water goddesses – and first we had to find a location for this performance outdoors somewhere. This was a challenge as many of the participants of the congress were older and we could not expect them to walk for more than five minutes from the congress hotel, which was located right by the Destiny highway traffic machine, with no nature whatsoever and all the natural waterways had long been buried underneath the concrete.

After circling the octagon hotel, we finally found a location close by, an older parking area with some trees and birds and where it would be possible for us to connect with local nature. The performance was part of the official conference program, with the audience free to attend, and with the option to leave in the process or experience the full 30 minutes performance.

Bringing the congress participants with us during the performance we did the same walk around the hotel, and during our water healing ritual we asked the audience to imagine the roads we saw as instead being the original waterways, the ancient rivers located under the ground raising snakelike in our collective imagination. Then while we were walking back the magic happened! – a construction crew had arrived, with trucks and tools and they were starting the demolition, tearing up the concrete, digging into the road, physically unearthing what lay below. I believe performance art can function as a practical artistic research method, and in how mixing live art with more traditional and academic research methods can inspire us to work on speculating, learning, and unlearning together, which I would think is also relevant for your museum?

Best wishes,

Thale

Figure 2:



*River Sisters – Finsevatn & Seneca River*, performance by Thale Blix Fastvold & Tanja Thorjussen, Syracuse, NY, photo: Daniel Sieradski, 2023

July 5, Kongsvinger

Dear Thale,

Thank you so much for introducing me to how eco-feminism is embedded into both the *Locus Bee Sanctuary* project and the performance series *River Sisters* – the latter also interesting in terms of including time as an integrated part of the performance itself. Repeating the same performative ritual across the world and across time, tells us something about how symbolic actions can have an impact! And how performance can function as a practical method for engaging the audience. As an example, from our museum, we are actively involved on an annual basis in organising the International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, in Kongsvinger. The museum participates in the event and hosts activities in the museum space, and in this context the event can be

seen as a performative, activist repetitive action, engaging local audiences.

For me, it's also important to consider how we can use the concept of unlearning to change patriarchal narratives. We constantly work with reframing the story of Dagny Juel, from "slutty muse" to sexually liberated feminist, from revolutionary novelist to cultural icon of the Berlin Bohemian society of the 1890's.

Unlearning within a feminist context involves confronting ingrained beliefs, biases and narratives acquired over time. While values associated with or attached to women have evolved significantly since the late 1800's, historical judgements and stigmatization still cast a shadow on how Dagny Juel is remembered. By drawing inspiration from the creative arts, and by highlighting her many accomplishments and encouraging a deeper understanding through alternative narratives, we can promote a more multifaceted portrayal of her life and challenge the limiting narrative that has clouded her legacy. A lot of work has been done both by a number of academics, scholars and artists to raise awareness about Juel's artistic endeavours, and the image of her also as a feminist icon is starting to gain momentum. However, in my opinion more work needs to be done!

To give you a few examples of how male-centred and conservative values contributed to Dagny Juel's reputation – here are some quotes, selected by the exhibition curator Mona Holm on display in our exhibition *Your Dagny*:

Already as a young woman, Dagny incited curiosity. When the Juel sisters were walking in Kongsvinger, people hung out of their windows to catch a glimpse of them. At the age of 33, Dagny had already become quite the myth, and was widely known as a "fin-de-siecle-angel/demon". Her way of life, view of art and authorship titillated and fed the rumours. Not even within the bohemian circle did she escape this. August Strindberg hated Dagny, calling her a "Satan's awful woman". "Juel has chosen her handling, and seized the pen rather than the cock," her bohemian colleague Bengt Lidforss wrote in a letter when Dagny became an author. Her independence was hard to swallow for many people. During the fight to restore Rolighed (the museum building) in the 1980's, there were still those who argued that one ought to tear down the house, and "(...) forget that whore!"

One would assume that bias against women would be a thing of the past, but a new UN report from June 2023 (UN report 2023) found that almost 90% of men and women internationally hold some sort of bias against females. According to this report, the "Gender Social Norms Index" (GSNI) analysed biases in areas such as politics and education in 75 countries. In sum, the study found that there are no countries in the world with gender equality. Since the World Economic Forum published the first Gender Gap Report in 2006, Norway has been among the top five countries with the highest parity score and often referred to as "the land of gender equality" (Holm & Aarbakke, 2020, 96). But how is this reflected in museums?

In 2004 The Norwegian National Network for Women's History was established with the Women's Museum as administrator. In 2018, during the #MeToo movement, the network grasped a new opportunity to question gender equality in museums as patriarchal power structures were again on the public agenda. The network members shared their experiences with attempting to achieve gender parity within their own institutions. The feedback and answers were not uplifting. Museum professionals who raise the issue of women- and gender perspectives were frequently met with comments like "there she goes again". This phrase set up to sustain Norwegian gender democratic. The Art Council Norway,

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conducted research in three different areas: (1) Museums' strategic documents, (2) museums' practices and (3) museums' self-reflections.

The results in all areas pointed in the same direction: Despite much progress, there is still a considerable gender gap in Norwegian museums, where men are often considered as the universal subject, and women are frequently understood in narrowly gendered terms, or put into the "diversity" category. Women are often left out entirely, misplaced, or forgotten in museum exhibitions. The "self-reflection" part of the study showed that most museums are conscious of how their collections misrepresent women in the museums' collections and exhibitions, but quite a few participants in the study also said that they believed gender equality was ensured, quoting the high number of women occupying staff positions (Holm & Aarbakke, 2020,1-2, 92-103).

*There she goes again* resulted in *Museumsverktøy* (Museum tools) – methods and examples of how to make museums in Norway more aware of the lack of female representation in their exhibitions and collections, and to give them a set of tools to make it easier to include women's history and culture in museum practices. As a method for adult feminist education in museums, the museum is currently developing practical courses for museum staff to help implement women and gender perspectives in all areas of working in a museum.

I am curious to hear, more specifically, from your experiences on using feminist approaches to storytelling practices – how can we bring women's voices forward through art projects?

Kind regards,

Hilde

July 17, Nesodden

Dear Hilde,

Let me quote Anaïs Nin as a way of bringing the voice of radical women writers of the past with me into this conversation. Even though Nin wrote her erotic stories to earn "bread money" she wrote about sexuality and women's desire at a time when this was seen as scandalous (for women authors), which is also relevant to my concept of pyrofeminsm.

It was only when she had made the first advances, caressed him, that he began making love to her as she had expected to be made love to. But each time, she would have to begin all over. First, she had to tempt him in some way – fix a loosened garter, or talk about some experience in the past, or lie on his couch, throw back her head and thrust her breasts forward, stretching herself like an enormous cat. She would sit on his lap, offer her mouth, unbutton his pants, excite him. (Nin, 1940s/2002, 91)

My film, *IGNIS*, the second in the trilogy which started with *I am Hydra*, will be a pyrofeminist spell for transformative change in history and the future(s). Let me try to explain my understanding of Pyrofeminism, a concept in the making: In traditional patriarchal cultures, religions, and societies the fire within women has been controlled and suppressed. The feminist uprisings, and current revolutions against regimes in places as diverse as Iran, India, USA, Afghanistan, Russia, and Mexico are all examples of pyrofeminist revolutionary powers struggling to achieve freedom, sexual and educational liberation, emancipation from patriarchal structures and sovereignty for all women, which is not unrelated to erotic desire. The need, force, energy, necessity and readiness for the fight, for agency sexual and otherwise, to be on our own premises, to have the right to express one's voice, to make choices about your own life and body – has been discussed, admired and feared for as long as 4000 years, and it is alive and expressed in myths, art and literature, for me, as far reaching and

diverse as from descriptions of the she-devil/sorceress Lilith in ancient Hebrew scriptures, Circe and Medusa in Greek mythology, the Hindu goddess Kali, the liberating ecstasy St Theresa of Avila writes about in the 1500s, and more recently, in Remedios Varo's surrealist paintings, the literature by Anaïs Nin, the contemporary Sami queeractivist Timimie Mäarak's slam-poetry and in the "woman, life, freedom"-chants of today's Iran.

Trying to find other research into the concept of pyrofeminism I came across Dr. Mary K. Klages's BA thesis *Pyrofeminism: Thoughts on the Cultural Control of Fire and Women*, and ended up writing her to ask her thoughts on the subject. She wrote me back explaining how her modeling of Pyrofeminism, a made-up movement at Dartmouth College between 1977-1981, ignited as a reaction to the overwhelmingly patriarchal history and practice of that institution (founded as all-male in 1769, Dartmouth first admitted women in 1972). Besides this one account, I haven't found any other discussion of the concept of pyrofeminism – which must mean it is the right time to explore it here and now.

In my view, we are entering the time of the Pyrocene, the age of fires. These summer months have seen new record temperatures all around the world, with continuous risk of wildfires running amok, as New York City was recently bathed in apocalyptic orange fog from Canada, Hawaii burning, islands on fire, and this happens every summer now. There used to be wildfires before too, but the forests used to have more of the old growth trees that worked as firewalls, and it's just warmer here on Earth now, less regular rain, but also more excessive flooding than before, the climate has undoubtedly changed a lot in my lifetime. As the cultural critic T.J. Demos writes in his essay *The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics*:

Welcome to the Pyrocene, the geological age of fire, matched by the overwhelming affects of fear and dread, and complicated by the very incomprehensibility of responsibility. We're dealing with the unstoppable spread of chain reactions of material oxidation, releasing more carbon dioxide that causes further warming and droughts and that prepares more ground for fires, all sparked by the depersonalized, historically agglomerative networked agency of the petrocapiatalist political economy—that ultimately burns itself. (Demos, 2019, 1-2)

The actual fires mirror the fires of military conflict simultaneously happening around the world – the geopolitical summer is hot with Russia continuously bombing Ukraine, threatening peace in the rest of Europe, and so the women of Russia have been revolting, with demonstrations in the bigger cities, thousands of Russian feminists have been jailed and harassed since the war begun. The fire within women all around the world will no longer be suffocated and old patriarchal structures – responsible for fossil capitalism, and more broadly, racial colonial capitalism – must go up in flames. Pyrofeminism is the internal fire – the passion within us, and within the earth itself, the actual centre of our world is fiery, liquid lava, hot with the possibility to erupt at any time, volcanic action right now happening several places simultaneously, the pyro, fire always present in us and in the mother earth. Pyrofeminism holds the power of transformation through fire – this metaphorical fire inside us burning through to let new, hopefully more ecologically sustainable, more inclusive, more equal worlds erupt. In the Pyrocene, the answer is not to try to eliminate all flames, but to use it responsibly as a source of life, but according to an ecologically sustainable – or better: eco-feminist/pyrofeminist – way.

With my art I want to seduce you, to shine a light on what is important now. My grandmothers and foremothers, spirits of artists, writers, thinkers, activists, women who decided to stand up to the patriarchy, are all whispering in my ears, a polyphony of voices through their legacies. I'm listening to them and letting their voices seep into my dreams of new worlds, my work and my spells, my films, trying to bring their stories with me, to you. As an artist I have the freedom

to choose the stories I tell, and which voices I lift forward – in some ways like a curator of chrononarrative and aesthetic entanglements – but in a museum context what freedom or constraints do you operate within?

Best wishes,

Thale

August 2, Kongsvinger

Dear Thale,

The IAWM (International Association of Women's Museums) was founded in 2012 and while they are different – they have common aims; to work with women's and gender history and promote gender equality and women's rights. So, we need to discuss the concept of freedom, what it entails for women past, present, and future, and the role of the museum. Museums have a role to play in promoting diverse voices and narratives and challenging oppressive norms. However, museums themselves can also be reflective of the broader societal challenges, and they too must grapple with curatorial, economic, or other decisions that are sometimes influenced by gender biases or perpetuate unequal representation.

Museums should not only be safe spaces for women to express themselves, but also contribute to a broader cultural shift towards gender equality and empowerment within the artistic realm, including class differences between women, that can constitute social antagonism within a single gender too. The Women's Museum in Norway works to create an environment where women (artists or non-artists) can explore, innovate, and challenge societal norms without fear, knowing that their voices are valued and respected. In which ways does this resonate to your experiences as a feminist artist?

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Kind regards,  
Hilde

August 8, Rome  
Dear Hilde,

My work as an artist is to push the boundaries of imagination, creating new words, concepts and changing the language and stories of the past, and thereby inventing the future. Let me quote another poem by Dagny Juel, which I recently translated to English, and, for me, shows her way of joining women's political and libidinal agencies in pyrofeminist fashion:

The wind sweeps gently through the abyss of the night,  
Thousands of wild eyes tremble for a second,  
The sleeping Earth moans with angst in her dreams  
Feeling the kiss on her unconscious mouth.

All the golden leaves in a whirlwind dance!  
This last game....

My golden hair: a flaming wreath!  
And soon so pale....

The Earth opens her wide womb  
From it boiling rivers flow:  
Twinkling flowers  
In rainbow splendour,  
Blood and fire!  
With terrifying force  
Raising their arms towards the shining globes.

The wind sweeps gently through the abyss of the night,  
Thousands of gold stars tremble for a second,  
The sleeping Earth now softly smiling in her dreams,  
Feeling the kiss on her closed mouth.  
Untitled poem by Dagny Juel (Juel, 1890s, 180-81)

But Juel is not the first (if there ever was such a thing!). Bringing my daughters to the Santa Maria della Vittoria church in Rome, to visit Bernini's sculpture of the ecstatic Santa Teresa of Avila, we talked about her writings, how she brought her passion and her fire into her devotion, and how this was considered acceptable, because she was a nun, she wrote about her ecstasy in relation to God, and how Bernini's sculpture (from 1647-52) expresses and even amplifies her uncapturable highly erotic energy, opening the possibilities for these emotions to be part of everyday life for (catholic) women visiting the church during the last 400 years. In visiting museums, considering radical poems and works of art, aren't we all allowing ourselves to become entranced by (and some of us doing the weaving of) spells? Letters – and artworks containing messages and meanings too! – are conversations magically transcending time and space, the words we read and the words we write hold the limitless power of transformation. Artistic research is not bound by the rules and limitations of academic research; instead, we can use an intuitive approach, and I see a more tentacular gathering-of-knowledge-perspective as fruitful in these processes. As Donna Haraway writes in *Staying with the Trouble*, tentacular thinking gives us the possibility to focus on feeling as a tool for experiencing and analysing the world (Haraway, 2016, 31). I can follow a more sensorial, sensual form based on attraction, longing and desire where I can use my own body's reactions and emotions to lead the way in my research and in the assemblage of metaphors, meanings and messages I want to include in my work. When you say museums can function to challenge societal norms, this is where I consider it crucial to do so.

Now, towards the end of summer, the air is getting cooler, at least in Northern Europe. I watched the new Munch film (Dahlsbakken, 2023) and I'm thinking about how Dagny is portrayed there – in this film, the part with her is set in contemporary Berlin, and she is portrayed as an independent woman, filled with agency and desire, for men and for life. She is out partying with Edvard Munch, riding a bicycle – she is steering the wheel, with him holding onto her – through the Berlin evening. This film shows a new and radical narration of her story that focuses on her life, and not her dramatic death. We know from historical sources that Munch was one of her close friends, there are letters describing his visits to her home in Kongsvinger, he made several paintings of her, and he was also one of the few who publicly defended her artistic legacy after her death.

I keep coming back to Dagny Juel's story, how she was defying all rules for how a woman of her time should be, uncompromising choosing love and desire, her hot, almost erotic writing about her life, her love stories and the world, her deciding to be with Stanislaw Przybyzicki, and then leaving him – to great despair for her family – and for being only 33 years old and a mother of two children, she was artistically a success. Besides her own work, what she did for other artists,

translation of letters and texts and other collaborations, she was a force to be reckoned with and had an immense influence on how Norwegian art and artists were received in Europe around 1900.

Writing about Dagny Juel, her life and legacy, and letting her words – her poems – travel through time and through new channels, like these letters, we are bringing some of her thoughts and world views, with us towards the future(s).

Thank you for this long summer of writing and thinking together!

Thale

Figure 3:



*Munch*, 2023, film by Henrik Martin Dahlsbakken, photo: Dahlsbakken

August 10, Kongsvinger

Dear Thale,

Our correspondence ends here, but thanks to our letter writing process I am beginning to visualize a model for museums and artists to work together as platforms for feminist adult education. Arndís Bergsdóttir argues in her paper *Museums and Feminist Matters: Considerations of at Feminist Museology* (Bergsdóttir, 2016, 127):

Conversations with post-human feminisms are a re-tooling of feminist research that would benefit museums as they make it possible to map meaningful contacts between museum practices, technologies, science, bodies, and objects – to name a few possible encounters – that let us discern which constellations of relationships get to matter, and which do not.(...)They also provide alternative tools for the recording of histories as entangled human and/or non-human processes that can be taken apart and reassembled, thus making different possibilities possible.

The model uses imagination as a catalyst for change. Changing collective memories, structures and narratives built over time is a gradual process that requires [starting with ourselves] persistence, collaboration, and a commitment to challenging established norms. If your artistic freedom is granted, the museum should take on the role as facilitator, supporter, and channel to the

wider community. This requires that museum management gives priority to use resources on gender issues, to think long term and to invest in collaborative projects with artists. As such I believe we can inspire public discourse, creating new collective memories and new feminist futures!

Hilde

The Women's Museum, Norway.

Figure 4:



Dagny Juel, Spring 1901, Warsaw, photocred: L. Kowalski/Anno Kvinnemuseet

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