

**The**

**activist**

**museum**

Practice, theories  
and actors

Edited by

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**KØN**

VELUX FONDEN





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# Editorial Introduction – Museum Activism in Theory and in Practice

LOUISE FABIAN &  
JULIE ROKKJÆR BIRCH

Museums are not merely disseminators of history. They can be and have been makers of history. A number of special practices – making collections, preserving, arranging, classifying, interpreting, curating, researching, engaging audiences and exhibiting – have formed the cornerstone of museums for centuries. The history of these practices is in itself a rich source of knowledge about the transformation of the cultural, social and scientific history of humans throughout history. Over the centuries, the various related practices have been associated with shifting scientific, cultural and political agendas in divergent localities. The work of museums has been linked to desires to display and demonstrate knowledge and power, to celebrate, preserve or challenge the existing, and to spotlight and change understandings and power relations, or to inscribe new actors or interpretations. The cultural, social and political dimensions, and the tasks of the museum institution have been debated for centuries and, in recent decades, subject to radical rethinking. New actors have taken over museum spaces, and new curatorial practices have been developed and put to the test.

This book delves into some of these museological practices and the ideas that drove and shaped museums, and 'gives the floor' to some of the actors – both professionals and activists – who are helping to create and rethink the work of museums. The book is interested not only in the changing roles museums have played throughout history, but also in contextualizing and understanding the ways in which the museum institution has been critically rethought in recent decades. In recent decades, an ever-increasing number of museums have been explicitly engaged in a variety of current societal challenges.

What can cultural history, natural history, museum objects and museum spaces do in terms of helping us understand the past and its significance for the present, and in terms of creating discussion about possible futures?

This book aims to kindle reflection on, and promote further thoughts about how museums are part of, and contribute to society and social change. The writers of the articles in the book are all interested in the knowledge produced by museums, and the museums' role in, and responsibility for society. Genre-wise, the book's contributions reflect the different positions of the various contributors as stakeholders. There are contributions from activists, museum employees and researchers from Canada, France, USA, Malta, Serbia, Colombia, Australia, UK, New Zealand and Denmark.

The various contributions to the book feature a number of recurring themes. How do you run an activist museum? What happens when you create a mobile museum and meet people on streets and in different locations? How can museums delegate curatorial authority? The book also explores more specific questions from the museums' curatorial toolbox. What special role does sound play? What role do objects and touching objects play in public engagement and interpretation? What special opportunities and challenges are involved in a virtual museum, and can this boost the building of new communities? Can we hand the microphone to marginalized citizens rather than speaking on their behalf? How can we involve citizens in museum work on an equal footing or make the museum space available to external actors who, on their own initiative, want to disrupt and change its creation of meaning?

In recent years, the preoccupation with museums' opportunities to operate activistically has led to a number of projects and publications, which in various ways consider some of the challenges and dilemmas that working activistically can entail. This publication follows on from these. We would like to mention in particular the Danish Welfare Museum in Svendborg, which in a Danish context has been and exemplary and innovative pioneer.

The book features three different types of contribution and is divided into three different sections.

In addition to the Editorial Introduction, Section 1 consists of a compilation of international dialogs and a number of academic articles.

In her article 'The Ideological History of the Activist Museum', Louise Fabian looks at the changing historical, epistemological and political premises of the museum institution, illustrating how the ideological history of museums reflects the development of capitalism, the global expansions, colonializations and nationality constructs of different epochs, and the changes in scholarly ideas and ambitions to communicate knowledge. The article also explores some of the issues raised by attempts in recent decades to critically rethink, decolonize and queerize the museum tradition and establish new knowledge paradigms and museological strategies.

The text 'Dialogs on Museum Resilience' was stage managed by Diane Drubay, the founder of the *We Are Museums*' think tank, in collaboration with Annesofie Norn of the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live, and Sandra Debono from the University of Malta.

The participants in the four dialogs are: Milena Jokanović from the University of Belgrade in Serbia; Julie Decker, Director of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska; Cristina Lleras, a freelance curator who works for the Museum of Bogota in Colombia; Julie Rokkjaer Birch at the time the Director of what was then the Women's Museum of Denmark; Kristin Alford, Director of the Museum of Discovery in Australia; and Lindsey McEwen, head of the Centre for Water, Communities and Resilience in the Department of Geography and Environmental Management at the University of the West of England. The contribution reflects the fact that it was written at the peak of the global COVID-19 crisis but explores issues that are still current. In the contribution, which comprises four conversations, the conversational partners aim to explore and identify different forms of resilience that have matured and developed within what they call the 'museum ecosystem', especially in the so-called 'peripheries' of global politics.

The article by Christopher Gunter and Janelle Anglin of Saint-Paul University is entitled 'Labor History as Social Innovation'. It explores examples of how the culture sector and cultural heritage institutions can empower communities, criticize racist and discriminatory practices, and give a voice to excluded and marginalized actors and stories. It is based on two Canadian case studies: of the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, and the British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre.

In her article, 'Girl Museum: Activism Through Girl-Centered Museum Practice', Ashley E. Remer of Girl Museum looks at how, on the basis of research, exhibitions, publications and other projects, Girl Mu-

seum has worked on finding ways to merge activism into the structure of the museum institution. The article reflects not only on the significance of the fact that Girl Museum is virtual, dedicated to girls and devoid of the usual characteristics of a museum as a permanent collection and a physical building, but also on how Girl Museum has been attacked and the financial realities in which museums work.

In 'The Creation of Flugt', Stina Trolldoft Andresen, Anne Sofie Vemmelund Christensen, Trine Just Hansen, Claus Kjeld Jensen, Malene Frosch Langvad, Louise Thuesen and Helle Ølgaard of Vardemuseerne reflect on the ideas behind, and the ambitions of developing the newly opened museum FLUGT – Refugee Museum of Denmark. They look particularly at how a museum tackles such a highly political topic as flight, at dialog-based public engagement/interpretation, and at the importance of personal testimony in the work of the museum.

In the article, 'The Activist Potential of Feminist Art: Artworks as Agile Objects in Public Engagement and Interpretation in Museums', Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam of the Department of Art History at Aarhus University, looks partly at the form and content of feminist art as a whole, and partly at the activist potential of art, particularly in a museum context.

In 'The History of the Women's Museum: A Museum Created by Women about Women', which constitutes the transition and prelude to the collection of testimonies in Section 2, the former Director of the then Women's Museum in Aarhus, Merete Ipsen looks back at the history of the museum from its inception in the 1980s to the change of its remit and name. She looks particularly at the museum's unique roots in women's environments across class, generation and sexual orientation that initially defined the Women's Museum and its fundamental purpose and principles, reflected in its executive management and day-to-day management, working methods and projects. She also takes a critical look at crucial milestones when these principles were moderated.

Section 2 features testimonies by people who have worked with the Women's Museum/KØN – Gender Museum of Denmark over the years: a burlesque performer who calls herself "the librarian-stripper", Muslim women who curated a pop-up exhibition about Muslim women in Denmark, and a self-identified Muslim gay man. This section 'gives the floor' to some of the activists, with whom, first the Women's Museum, later KØN – Gender Museum Denmark has created space for

reflection and dialog. For example, in his testimony, Elias Sadaq writes:

Ever since I was a boy, I have always loved going to museums, loved walking around the rooms, losing myself in history. When I came to the museum for the first time, I did not regard it as my own, I entered as a visitor, as a stranger in a new home. That was before I understood myself and understood how the museum also told my story, my struggles and my victories. (...) The exhibition made me view myself differently. I discovered that I belonged to a special group of particularly alienated, particularly marginalized individuals. A group of individuals who, in our own way, had broken with norms related to gender, sexuality and identity across ethnicity, belief and class. I felt part of a community (...) Today, there is no doubt that the museum's presentation and treatment of my story, my life and struggle, helped give me the courage to stand up for myself, and to use my voice to give visibility and role models to others in the same situation.

We would like to extend our special gratitude to these contributors for so generously sharing some of their thoughts and experiences.

The title of Section 3 is 'The Toolkit of the Activist Museum'. This article looks particular at the work of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark.

In the article 'BODY and SEX in a Museum: Activist, Discussion-based, Norm-critical Sex Education in a Museum of Cultural History', Anna Svenning, former Head of Public Engagement and Interpretation at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, explores how the museum makes use of its knowledge and objects in the context of sex education and contribute to the personal, social and democratic edification of children and young people. In this context, the article explains how sex education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark is based on eight basic didactical and pedagogical principles.

In her article, 'They See Us Rollin' – Mobile Museum from Vision to Reality', Sarah Bradley, a former employee at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, focuses on the ideas that formed the basis for the museum's mobile museum, and the interactions between museum educators and members of the public that the mobile pop-up museum fostered.

In 'Everyday Life, Nuances and Representation: An Exhibit About – and By – Muslim Women in Denmark', Louise Rognlien, PhD fellow on the research and interpretation/public engagement project Gender Blender, introduces and analyses the work that went into the pop-up exhi-

bit 'Muslim Women in Denmark – Everyday Life, Nuances and Representation'. The exhibit deployed the mobile presentation format that Sarah Bradley describes, so the two articles complement each other. Louise Rognlien coordinated the exhibit in collaboration with a working group of five Muslim women who served as curators. These women describe their experiences of curating in the testimony section of this book. The basis of the project was to investigate the self-presentation of Muslim women, both as a methodological study of the negotiation process involved in the co-creation of knowledge production and as a political compensation for stereotypical objectifications and simplifications.

This book arose out of the collaboration on the research and interpretation/public engagement project *Gender Blender – Everyday Life, Activism and Diversity*, and we would like to take this opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to the VELUX Foundations and their staff for their generous support of that project. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their exemplary work and Signe Uldbjerg for her excellent and thorough editorial work. Finally, on behalf of the editorial team, we would like to thank all the contributors for their willingness to reflect on the process, and for their patience with the fact that various circumstances, in particular COVID-19, meant that producing the book took much longer than expected.







# Section 01

CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE SUBJECT OF  
MUSEUM ACTIVISM BY RESEARCHERS  
AND MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS IN  
BOTH DENMARK AND ABROAD



# The History of the Activist Museum

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## INTRODUCTION

"That belongs in a museum," says the leather-jacketed Indiana Jones in a mature, masculine voice, after repeatedly using tenacious smash-and-grab methods that leave the archaeological sites in ruins and saving the Cross of Coronado from suffering a dismal fate in the hands of less well-meaning, profit-seeking private collectors. Today, a little over 40 years after the archeologist adventurer in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) had female archeology students swooning in droves, as he brushed off road dust and lectured "Archeology = Facts", it is no longer clear whether artifacts belong in museums or, for example, in the local communities from which they were removed.

Museums are not just results of history, they have actively contributed to making history, and in ways that museum institutions in recent years are comprehending and rethinking. Museums have always had to relate to the changing social, economic and geopolitical conditions of which they are part. As the editorial introduction to this book states, the practices and ideologies that form the basis of museums have shifted over time. For centuries, museums have been variously involved in managing and constructing cultural heritage. Looking closely at the history of museum tradition leads us back to the sacrificial offerings in temples, the relics of the monasteries, the treasuries of kings, the cabinets of curiosities of physicians, the collecting practices of the colonial age and the post-colonial showdowns and experiments in developing new forms of knowledge production and museological work. The history of museums is pa-

ved with violence, theft and conflict and with dreams of edification, visions and collaborations, and is thus closely interwoven with the global history of the encounters between different countries, continents and peoples.

In this article, I will first delve into and illustrate how the ideological history of museums reflects the evolution of capitalism, the global expansions of the changing epochs, colonization and nationality constructs, changing scholarly ideas and ambitions for disseminating knowledge. I will then explore some of the issues raised by the attempts in recent decades to rethink critically, decolonize and queer the museum tradition and establish new knowledge paradigms and museological strategies.

To varying degrees, museums have always had explicit or implicit political agendas and both attested to and created history. In other words, historically, the fact that museums play a political role can be viewed as a rule rather than an exception. But the ways they do so change. Thus, in principle there is nothing radically new in the fact that in recent years we have increasingly seen a number of museums defining themselves as critical agents of change that relate to ongoing societal challenges. Even when one of the inspirations for Indiana Jones, the American historian Hiram Bingham, on the three Yale expeditions to Machu Picchu and Peru in 1912, 1914 and 1915 excavated and brought back historical artifacts, human skeletons and mummies from the Inca civilization, it was strongly disputed whether this practice of scholarly discovery legitimized a right to remove found artifacts. The Inca civilization had been wiped out by the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century, and Bingham's expeditions helped draw the world's attention to and frame Machu Picchu as the rediscovered, lost Inca civilization. Bingham himself photographed his Yale expeditions using the latest camera technology from one of the expedition's sponsors, Kodak, and published his photos in *National Geographic Magazine*. The anthropologist Amy Cox Hall has shown how, in the early 20th century, the camera played an essential role in anthropological fieldwork, helping legitimize both the anthropological practice and the authority and results of scholarly expeditions (Hall 2017: 71). The finds of the expedition were transferred to Yale University, where Bingham was employed, and to the private collections of the expedition's sponsors. Already in 1918, representatives of the Peruvian government began to demand the return of artifacts. Again in 2008, the Peruvian government officially claimed about 40,000 illegally removed objects, and in 2012 Yale University began returning thousands of objects to Peru.

## MUSEALIZATIONS AND COLLECTIONS

The history of museums is also the history of how people have collected, classified and museumized objects, and how these museumization practices relate to other societal developments. People collect, treasure, exhibit, and preserve material objects, and there were large collections of cultural objects long before the existence of museums in the modern sense. When we musealize objects, we remove them from their original context and make them part of a collection. Broadly speaking, museological practices are the ways in which people are dedicated to preserving, using and interpreting culturally valuable objects.

When we wish to explore the collections of the ancient world, we encounter a methodological challenge, in that we have very few written testimonies and limited archaeological finds. Nonetheless, there is a centuries' long tradition of collecting, preserving and exhibiting objects. The oldest known method of preserving organic matter is mummification. Mummification involves dehydration. We know of mummification practices in Peru and Chile almost 7,000 years ago, and in Egypt at least 4,000 years ago.

One of the earliest documented museum-like collections we know of is in the Sumerian city of Uruk, which was located in present-day Iraq. The actual collection has been dated to 530 BCE, but it contained clay and stone objects that can be dated back to 2000–2500 BCE (Simmons 2018). Archeological excavations in Uruk revealed objects that testify to a comprehensive, widespread trade network involving ceramics, metalwork, jewels and wine. One of the most famous rulers of what was then Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II, had a large private collection of both antiquities and natural history objects. The ancient Egyptian rulers were collectors. For example, Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III had a large collection of antiquities, art, flora and fauna. We know that already in the Shang dynasty, people collected gold and bronze artifacts, and that many of the ruling elite in the Tang dynasty were also collectors. Of course, we have limited knowledge of how these collections were incorporated into socio-economic, cultural and religious contexts, but these are topics that are still being researched intensively.

In ancient Greece it was especially art objects such as statues, paintings and vases that people collected. It is also here we find the roots of the modern concept of a museum. The Latin word museum comes from the Greek word *mouseion*, which originally meant a 'shrine to the muses'. According to Greek mythology, the nine omniscient Muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. The Muses were goddesses of inspiration, knowledge, and art, and sources and

guarantors of the knowledge found in poetry, mythology, history, drama and science. Such a 'shrine to the Muses' existed in the third century BC in the city of Alexandria. This was a place for storing papyrus scrolls with copies of a large number of famous, important texts and cultural artifacts. There was even a zoo. People gathered here to practice and study music, poetry and thinking. In other words, it was a kind of early hybrid, which eventually evolved into the separate traditions of libraries, archives and museums.

The city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great, whose ambition was for the city to be a new center of Greek culture. One of Alexander the Great's generals on the expedition, Ptolemy I Soter, became pharaoh of Egypt and played a central role in the founding of Alexandria's mouseion. The museum of Alexandria was a means of state control, part of the ambition to make the area an important part of the Hellenistic Empire. Although the mouseion of ancient Alexandria was one of the earliest known materializations of the idea of linking collections and learning, its collections were not open to the public. In terms of operation, these temples were more akin to today's universities than to today's museums.

Inspired by his former tutor Aristotle's interest in botany and zoology, Alexander took a number of botanists and zoologists with him on his travels, collecting and returning home with abundant collections of various species and objects. According to Pliny the Elder, the information and objects Aristotle received from Alexander the Great and other travelers formed part of the empirical basis for his pioneering biological work, *History of Animals* (Greek: *Τῶν περὶ τὰ ζῷα ἱστοριῶν*, Latin: *Historia Animalium*). Recent research has questioned to what extent Pliny was correct in stating that Aristotle received material from Alexander's travels, but there is no questioning the fact that *History of Animals* is interesting in the context of studying the history of museums, because it became a highly influential work. Aristotle categorized all known animal species into a system of continuous progression referred to as *scalae naturae*. He was fascinated by universal principles and detailed eyewitness observations and dissections. In particular, he studied in great detail the natural history of the island of Lesbos and the marine life of the island's lagoon at Pyrrha. Many of the observations of nature featured in *History of Animals* are remarkably accurate. For example, he describes the social organization of bees and the embryonic development of a chicken, but also details, which for many centuries were not taken seriously, until they were later rediscovered in the 19th century. For example, how male

octopuses have a tentacle that, when it reaches sexual maturity, changes shape and turns into a sexual organ for impregnating the female. The taxonomic system developed by Aristotle in *History of Animals* became the dominant authority for two millennia, affecting both the history of European ideas in a broader sense and the ways in which exhibitions were organized in museums.

One of the earliest known advocates and creators of public displays of art was the Roman general and architect Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (63–12 BCE), and there are several testimonies of the fact that collecting and displaying objects was a pronounced practice in the Roman Empire. These collections had religious, cultural, political and aesthetic significance (Gahtan and Pegazzano 2014).

#### CRUSADERS, RELICS AND RELIGIOUS TREASURIES

As Christianity gained ground in Europe, there were also new reasons for, and practices of making collections. The first monastic community was founded in the 2nd century, as the Roman Catholic church was gaining dominance Western Europe and the Byzantine and Orthodox Churches in the East. The churches assumed a key role in terms of framing and preserving knowledge and, together with the popes, were a major factor of power in the Middle Ages. The latter part of the Middle Ages was marked by a series of military invasions – for example, of Middle Eastern destinations – sanctioned and fueled by one Roman Catholic pope after another. These crusades combined military operations, religious pilgrimages and trade-oriented expeditions. The official goal was to secure pilgrimage routes and liberate the so-called Holy Land of Palestine from Islamic control. On November 27, 1095, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in Clermont, inciting and urging the French nobility to come to the aid of Christians in the East. With the blessing of the pope and regarded as pilgrims, the crusaders were granted a number of privileges, their homes and property were protected while they were away, and any sins committed on the journey would be granted absolution. In July 1099, Jerusalem was conquered, and thousands of Muslims and Jews were slaughtered by the Christian crusaders. In many ways, the crusades during the next 200 years influenced the evolution of European societies and have affected relations between Christians and Muslim parts of the world to this day. The conquered land was not merely plundered and occupied. It was also sacralized, and many of the objects that crusaders and pilgrims brought back from these destinations were musealized and included in the collections of mona-

steries, churches and private individuals.

In the Middle Ages, musealized objects were often associated with religious notions that a physical object had some kind of supernatural power. These objects, which could allegedly bring about a special connection with God, were hugely desirable commodities. Churches and monasteries could elevate their status by acquiring religious objects such as body parts or remnants of clothing from saints and biblical figures. It was claimed that a number of the trophies brought back originated from biblical personages or things they had touched, and they ended up as treasured relics in European churches. For example, one church in the city of Durham in England, exhibited parts of the tree under which Abraham was allegedly visited by the three angels who announced the pregnancy of his wife Sarah. The abbey of St Denis near Paris had a large collection of relics, including a drinking cup believed to belong to Solomon, and the castle chapel of Wittenberg had skeletal parts believed to originate from the whale that swallowed Jonah.

The church's treasures contained not only relics and liturgical objects, but also historical and natural history objects such as bones, skins, teeth or eggs from rare or exotic animals. The crusades also led to the establishment and expansion of trading posts in the Middle East, which in turn resulted in the expansion of European markets and the import of new objects such as silk and porcelain.

From 800 to 1300, following the fall of the Roman Empire, the Muslim world experienced a flourishing period in the fields of science, medicine and philosophy: for example, in the cities of Baghdad and Cordoba. The Koran, written down between 609 and 623, had a huge impact on Arab culture. As Islam spread, military conquests, trade routes and missionary activities gave Muslim thinkers and scientists access to libraries and books: for example, from the Byzantine Empire. In this context, many important texts were translated from Greek, Latin, Persian and Sanskrit into Arabic. In general, texts and writing play a very important role in the Arab tradition. The major cities of the Islamic world such as Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus all had libraries containing manuscripts, miniature paintings, drawings and objects from nature. Royal collections – so-called *dhakira* (palace museums), also contained large collections of natural objects, rare and valuable gems, textiles, glass art and miniature paintings.

## RENAISSANCE CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES

The end of the Middle Ages saw an increasing number of private collections in Europe, but only during the Renaissance did private collections become a widespread, fashionable social activity. Not only kings and princes, but also civilians built imposing collections, in which the idea was for the world and all its marvels to be assembled under one roof, thereby casting a spotlight on the collector and providing insight into the wonder of the world. Between 1400 and 1600, international trade and exchange reached an unprecedented level. Oceanic trade routes between Europe and the Far East were established. With the support of the Spanish crown, Christopher Columbus set out to find the maritime route to Asia. As we know, he never did find it, but he completed three voyages to America in 1493, 1498 and 1502, from which he brought back a number of objects that ended up in European cabinets of curiosity.

The Renaissance in Europe involved a combination of looking back and reinterpreting Latin and Greek writers, often with the Arab world as a way station, looking out over Europe towards the countries with which they had made contact, and looking forward, developing new ways of establishing and organizing knowledge about the world. This also made an impact on the way in which knowledge about and the organization of collections were established. Whereas the medieval collections were very much intended to reflect power and wealth, the Renaissance collections were often rooted in a notion of the awesome wonders of the world, art and nature.

In Plato's dialog, *Theaitetos*, Socrates says: "Wonder is the beginning of wisdom," and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* states: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."

The "wonder" (Greek: *thaumazein*), with which Plato and Aristotle are so preoccupied, refers particularly to an admiring wonder at the beauty of the cosmos. As Lorraine Daston and Kathrine Park have shown in *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (1998), wonder at and fascination with the object of study constitute a key part of in the exploration of natural philosophy by Renaissance scholars. This is evident, for example, in the works of René Descartes and the English natural philosopher/chemist Robert Boyle (Daston and Park 1998:13). The scientific history of this period is linked to the idea of an objective, descriptive, systematic exploratory science and the founding of modern experimental scientific methodology. However, according to Daston and Parks, this is inextricably linked to the cultivation of subjective sensibility.



## THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES AS A SCHOLARLY TOOL

The so-called 'cabinet of curiosities' (German: Wunderkammer) appeared in the 16th century, especially among wealthy members of the middle class. The idea of the cabinets of curiosities was that they should serve as a microcosm to reflect and demonstrate the wonderful diversity of the world and the richness of divine creation: simultaneously the omnipotence of God, human prowess and the owner's symbolic access to, understanding of, and control over this rich world. The owners of the cabinets of curiosities were royals, nobles, rich merchants, apothecaries or natural scientists.

One of the most famous cabinets of curiosities was that of the classical civilization researcher and physician Ole Worm, whose cabinet of curiosities went on to become Denmark's first museum. The objects in Ole Worm's cabinet of curiosities included a number of natural artifacts such as stuffed animals, stones, minerals, teeth, conches, metals and bones, alongside man-made artifacts, antiquities, tools, weapons and jewelry. The objects were also for study and learning and often used in the context of Ole Worm's teaching at the University of Copenhagen, where he was professor of medicine from 1624. Worm was also King Christian's personal physician, and it is characteristic both of Worm's and of many of the cabinets of curiosities of the time – including those belonging to the Italian physicists and natural philosophers who inspired Worm – that they served medical purposes. From the end of the 16th century, natural history and natural philosophy were perceived as supporting disciplines for Worm's main field – medicine. Worm's scientific method was relatively far-sighted. He was a firm believer in direct physical contact with, and examination of the objects and introduced illustrative object-based teaching at the university. For Worm, who was a Lutheran natural philosopher, the book of nature reflected divine, wondrous creation. The study of the book of nature could teach us about God's plan for the world.

Some of the objects were kept for their medicinal qualities, but what they all had in common was that they should be special and possess unusual, surprising properties (Grell 2022: 201). For example, the collection featured a so-called 'unicorn's horn', at the time a treasured collectible, and also used for medical purposes and to purify water. When conquering Greenland, the Vikings encountered narwhals, and the Vikings and their descendants sold their long, twisted tusks as coveted, extremely expensive so-called unicorn horns to the courts of Europe. The unicorn featured in the Bible and the so-called 'bestiaries' and magical and healing properties were

ascribed to them. Churches placed pieces of unicorn horn in their altar vessels and, until the revolution in 1789, the French king had a piece of unicorn horn dipped in his glass to prevent poisoning. Ole Worm had closely studied a narwhal head and tusk and described how what was assumed to be a unicorn horn was actually a narwhal tusk (Grell 2022: 227). However, he continued to attribute healing properties to the narwhal tusk. Worm also revealed that the so-called birds of paradise from South Africa, which Europe believed to be legless birds who lived in the air, actually were missing their legs because traders had cut them off the stuffed birds, so there was room for more birds in their crates. Worm made this discovery when he found a copy with legs.

The period also witnessed the emergence of a new literary genre – the catalogue. Collectors created the catalogues to showcase their collections and demonstrate their knowledge. The action of cataloguing an object became a new way of musealizing it and categorizing it in a system of knowledge. In 1642 and 1645, Ole Worm published some succinct records of the contents of his collection. One of the purposes was to use them in the context of barter deals with other European collectors and scholars. Following Worm's death from the plague during the 1654 epidemic, in 1655 his son Willum Worm published a comprehensive, illustrated catalogue entitled *Museum Wormianum: seu historia rerum rariorum* (Worm's Museum or a History of Rarities). The engraved illustrations of the catalogue in particular provide unique insight into the collection and categorization systems of the time. Worm's polyhistoric collection was far from just a random collection of oddities. All the objects were organized on the basis of a material-governed principle of order within the boundaries of subject. This meant objects could belong to the mineral kingdom – to which Worm had initially devoted his passion for collection – the plant kingdom or the animal kingdom, or they could be man-made. Willum Worm's catalogue was also structured in accordance with these four categories.

## THE MUSEUM AND THE CONSTRUCT OF NATIONALITY

Especially since the French Revolution, when the state, rather than the king, became the foundation of the nation-state, and the idea of the people as a democratic subject was established, museums have played a major role in our constructs of nationality. In the wake of the

Napoleonic Wars, nation-states rearmed themselves ideologically. Together with libraries and archives, the foundation of museums would come to play a significant role as different nations had to posi-

tion themselves in relation to other nations and were used to form and legitimize national identity and state power. With the formation of the nation-states, people were no longer merely the subjects of the king, but the 'owners' of the state. In the national museums, citizens could encounter stories about the history and values of the nation and civilization. In many cases, the development of more specialized museums such as national heritage museums, cultural history museums, war museums, maritime museums, archeological museums, ethnographic museums, technological museums, art museums and colonial museums, also supported and reflected the pursuit of nationality. These museums often operate with narratives of continuous civilizational progress with the nation as the focal point. A classic example is the national art museums of the 19th century, where art and the national narrative joined forces to create a formative, edifying museum visit.

Opened in 1759, the British Museum was the very first national museum. The Louvre is a particularly illustrative example of this development. The Louvre was originally built in 1190 but was rebuilt in the 16th century to serve as a royal palace. In 1682, when Louis XIV moved the royal residence to Versailles, the Louvre was taken over by a number of art academies. After the French Revolution, the Louvre was reorganized and the National Assembly opened the Louvre as a museum in August 1793, at the time with a collection of 537 paintings. In 1792, the then French minister of foreign affairs, Jean-Marie Roland wrote to the painter Jacques-Louis David:

France will extend its glory over all times and all the peoples of the world; the national museum will comprise a total of the most wonderful knowledge and will command the admiration of the whole universe [...]. It will have such an influence on the mind, it will so elevate the soul, it will so excite the heart that it will be one of the most powerful ways of proclaiming the illustriousness of the French Republic (quoted in Meyer and Savoy 2014).

The Louvre would testify to the fact that France was the heir of classical civilization. In the early 19th century, the Louvre was the largest museum in the world. It contained former royal collections, treasures confiscated from the Church and various objects captured by the French army both within and outside Europe. A prime example was the Italian states that Napoleon had conquered, who had been forced to pay him with around 600 paintings and sculptures. Between 1798 and 1810, led by Napoleon Bonaparte, France conducted a whole series of military expeditions to conquer Egypt. At

the time, France was at war with Britain, so one of the goals of the expeditions was to disrupt Britain's access and trade routes to India. France wanted hegemony over Egypt and several territories in the East. The military expeditions were accompanied by 167 scholars, including botanists, archeologists, historians and artists. The brief French occupation of Egypt kindled great interest in Egyptian culture and history in Europe. During Napoleon's campaign in 1799, French soldiers found, for example, the Rosetta Stone, which they later handed over to the British as part of the 1802 peace agreement. Today it stands in the British Museum.

In 1803, the Louvre changed its name to the 'Napoleon Museum'. Napoleon's conquests of art treasures were actively used in the French politics of the time. In July 1798, the Italian booty was displayed in parades through the streets of Paris. People could see ancient marble statues, cartloads of imported living creatures – including ostriches, camels, lions and gazelles – rare books and manuscripts, and the greatest treasure of them all: 4 copper-clad horses that had been removed from St Mark's Basilica in Venice. These happened to be bronze horses, which the Venetians themselves had snatched from the Byzantine capital Constantinople 6 centuries earlier during the Crusades (Nayeri 2021).

#### REPATRIATION – A DIGRESSION

In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about the return of cultural and art objects to the places from which they were originally removed. Some objects were removed by force, others were part of deals or given as 'gifts' in the context of colonial practices, where tombs, buildings, sculptures, beauty, handicrafts, furniture, mummies, animals and human parts were removed from their original contexts and stored, sold or exhibited in display cases far away from their places of origin. As shown, for centuries there have been controversies about how museums appropriated their objects. Already in the context of the defeat of Napoleon and the French army by the British-German-Dutch army at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815, and the subsequent abdication of Napoleon, almost 5,000 objects were sent back to their countries of origin, including half of the Italian paintings. The negotiations and returns were a hot topic in the newspapers of the time and were discussed by intellectual figures such as Goethe and Stendhal. Each state had to fill out a separate request for the return of their works of art. Today, France is looking back on this period, as the country resumes a more widespread practice of returning works to their countries of origin. In 2018, the French historian Bénédicte Savoy co-authored a report on repatriation, commissioned by the French President



Emmanuel Macron.

Egyptomania has been widespread for centuries. Already during the Roman occupation of Egypt, it became fashionable in Italy to incorporate statues of Egyptian gods into Italian homes and sanctuaries. As already mentioned above, as a result of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, Egyptomania spread throughout Europe. During the early 20th century, there was a resurgence of excavations of Egyptian tombs. Archeologists and frequently their patrons traveled to Egypt in large numbers in the hope of bringing back valuables for museums and personal collections, and it became fashionable in both Europe and the United States to decorate one's home in the 'Egyptian style'. The same period saw the development of modern conservation methods, and people gradually became more interested in exploring and preserving a not-infinite historical resource rather than bringing treasures home. Likewise, Egypt became increasingly preoccupied with the right to manage their own history and its testimony. For decades, Egypt has been demanding the return of a number of objects they believe are essential parts of Egyptian cultural heritage. In 1930, for example, they demanded the return of the bust of Nefertiti from Germany. The bust, depicting the wife of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, was sculpted around 1340 BCE, but in 1912 it was removed and shipped to Germany by the Prussian archeologist Ludwig Borchardt. The Rosetta Stone, which helped the French linguist Jean-Francois Champollion decode the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and which since 1802 has been in the British Museum, is a particularly important point of contention.

Egypt has already recovered a number of treasures, including a mummy believed to be Ramses I, which was returned by the United States in 2003 and is now on display at the Luxor Archaeological Museum. The US has been more open to repatriation than European countries and museums. The Rosetta Stone is still in the British Museum and the bust of Queen Nefertiti is still in Berlin, but in recent years Egypt has managed to retrieve thousands of ancient artefacts from many different places in the world.

To date, the British have been remarkably reluctant to return objects acquired in the context of their imperial history. A very large number of British cultural heritage institutions evolved in an imperial context. One of the most politicized examples is the British Museum's acquisition of what the British refer to as 'the Elgin Marbles'. For the Greeks it is the Parthenon frieze, and its acquisition by Britain was highly controversial from the start. Lar-

ge parts of the architectural sculptures on the Parthenon Frieze were removed from the Parthenon Temple in Athens and sailed to England at the behest of Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, who was British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1799 to 1803. It was claimed that Lord Elgin had obtained permission from the then Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to remove the sculptures, allegedly as a diplomatic gesture of gratitude for Britain's victory over the French in Egypt. However, neither back then nor since then did Lord Elgin or anyone else succeed in producing such a document. Lord Elgin had the sculptures shipped home for £70,000. They were originally intended to decorate his Scottish home, but financial difficulties forced the heavily indebted Lord Elgin to sell them to the British government for £35,000. The sculptures were bought "on behalf of the British nation" and exhibited in the British Museum. As we know, today Greece regards the sculptures as stolen and is demanding them back. The jewel of the Acropolis Museum in Athens is a gallery on the top floor, where space has been made for the removed sculptures to return to their rightful place.

In 2002, the so-called Bizot group – consisting of 18 dominant, predominantly European museums – produced the document Declaration of the Value and Importance of Universal Museums. This document states, for example that: "museums serve not just the citizens of one nation, but the people of every nation". This document, which in practice can serve, and has served as an argument for not returning objects to the countries from which they were removed, has been accused of being an "arrogant imperialist project": for example, by the Kenyan Museum Director and ICOM member, George Abungu (Soares 2021: 443). The idea of "the universal museum" is accused of being Eurocentric and colonialist and of serving to legitimize and preserve hierarchies and representations that maintain the epistemological power of hegemonic museums located in the global North.

#### MUSEUMS, TECHNOLOGY AND THE MERCANTILE

Technical museums and museums of applied arts and design have been important in countries where the idea of scientific and technical progress played a central role in national self-understanding, politics and economics. In Britain, industrial development was particularly rapid, and the belief in the central role of technical inventions in the civilizational progress of history was widespread. From May 1 to October 18, 1851, the citizens of London could visit the so-called 'Crystal Palace Exhibition'. The exhibition was organized by Prince Albert,

Sir Henry Cole and several members of The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), which had been founded in 1754. The organization encouraged exports and the development of domestic industries to replace imported goods, on the basis of the mercantile idea that the most important thing for the nation's economy was the amount of gold and silver that could be acquired from other nations through the sale of its own goods (Howes 2020: 123). Over the centuries, the British state had acquired colonies that supplied the nation with raw materials, taxes levied on imported goods, and gave selected merchants and institutions such as the East India Company a monopoly on trade (Howes 2020: 123).

Henry Cole was concerned with the importance of connecting art and industry and of spreading knowledge to the people (Howes 2020: 173). In 1848, Cole came up with the idea of 'The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry for All Nations'. A royal commission, chaired by Prince Albert, planned the exhibition and selected a building design by the greenhouse builder and landscape gardener, Joseph Paxton. Paxton's pioneering building design, consisting of iron and prefabricated glass elements, was 5 times the size of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, and so spectacular that Paxton was subsequently knighted for his achievement. The world's first producer of bottled soft drinks, Schweppes, was the official sponsor of the event, which was intended as a celebration of modern industrial technology and design. The Great Exhibition was partly a response to, and an attempt to surpass the French 'Exposition des produits de l'industrie française', which had been held in a temporary structure on the Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1844 – the tenth in a series of national industrial exhibitions held in France since 1798.

Although the Crystal Palace Exhibition was intended as a setting for countries from all over the world to exhibit their industrial creations, it was mainly intended to demonstrate the superiority of British civilization. After the exhibition was over, much of its inventory was displayed in South Kensington, in a purpose-built museum called The Museum for Manufactures, which opened in 1857. The museum later evolved into the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Science Museum respectively.

In the second half of the 19th century, similar museums of applied arts opened in a number of countries. In Scandinavia, the Kunstin-  
dustri-  
museet opened in 1876, the Vester-  
landske Kunstindustri-  
museet in 1870, the  
Danish Kunstindustri-  
museet in 1890 and

the Swedish Röhsska Museum in 1904. The Danish museum was founded on the initiative of, among others, the forerunner of Danish Industry – Industriforeningen. Like the world exhibitions and the related applied arts museums, it was intended to serve the development of design and crafts and support industry and trade by stimulating the development and promotion of design of high aesthetic and technical level and encouraging the public to acquire the products (Falch 2004).

The Deutsches Museum von Meisterwerken der Naturwissenschaft und Technik was founded in Munich in 1903, partly supported by the Verein Deutscher Ingenieure on the initiative of Oskar von Miller, who in 1881 as a young man had visited the International Electronics Exhibition in Paris with great enthusiasm and been thrilled by it. The Technical Museum of Denmark was founded in Copenhagen in 1911 by Industriforeningen and Haand-  
værkerforeningen.

The displays at World's Fairs of national triumphs were largely sponsored by private companies, and in several countries, technological exhibitions and museums had close ties to companies that produced the technologies on display. Even today, we often see exhibitions sponsored by companies, sometimes in formats where it seems as if the museums have become uncritical showcases for the companies' PR projects. Historically, technology and science museums have typically focused on technology as something good and, in terms of function, closely connected to the notion of continuous human progress. There are far fewer exhibitions that explore the darker chapters of technology. As we shall see in the section on science museums, however, these too have increasingly begun to tackle more politically controversial topics such as climate crises and the ethics associated with technological development.

## MUSEUMS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Over the centuries, the relations between museums and visitors have changed. In general terms, there has been a development from the specially invited, exclusive audience and the paternalistic, educational, civilizing concept aimed at a broader spectrum of citizens – although still primarily well-to-do, male, white citizens – to the more participatory, interactive, mediating and ideally inclusive paradigm. In the 19th century, the museums' dominant audience was still the cultural elite, but ambitions to expand the audience base and the tasks of museums were gradually growing. Especially from 1850 onwards, the idea grew that museums should edify, educate and instruct, providing visitors not only with knowledge, but also taste and morals. The

National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen was one of the first collections in the world to be made publicly available in its entirety. This happened in 1819, when what was then called 'The Royal Museum for Nordic Antiquities'<sup>1</sup>, was opened to the public. On June 5, 1849, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Denmark was introduced. Signed by King Frederik VII, it marked the transition of Denmark from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. The collections were passed to the state and shortly after, in 1853, the collections were united in the Prince's Palace. In Denmark, the local cultural history museums created in the period from 1850 to 1950 functioned as part of the decentralization process that also followed in the wake of the June Constitution (Rathjen 2020: 98). In the 1850s, there was a major cultural policy debate about the royal cultural institutions such as the Royal Theater, the Royal Museum for Nordic Antiquities, the Royal Painting Collection and the Academy in Sorø (Rathjen 2020). It was hotly debated whether these institutions were outmoded institutions that simply existed for the betterment of Copenhagen's middle classes, or whether they could be opened up and made available to the entire population, including the general public. There were ambitions to renew, popularize and geographically relocate these cultural institutions. The provinces began to claim cultural relevance and, from 1850 onwards, a number of provincial museums, theaters and libraries began to emerge. The so-called stiftsmuseer (diocesan museums – a common term for the first Danish provincial museums) were founded in Viborg, Odense, Maribo, Aarhus and Aalborg.

However, the ambition to propagate knowledge to the wider population dates further back. Between 1751 and 1772, Denis Diderot published the 28-volume work *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* – until 1759 together with Jean le Rond d'Alembert. The vision of the encyclopedia was to make the accumulated knowledge of mankind accessible to the ordinary man and woman in the street. Public information developed in tandem with the development of democracy. From around 1800, the British physicist, philanthropist and groundbreaking pioneer of adult education George Birkbeck gave free scientific lectures on mechanics to members of the working class. In Denmark, the popular spread of natural science emerged especially from 1850 to 1920. In 1844, masterminded by Grundtvig, the first Danish folk high school, Rødding Højskole, was founded. From 1849 onwards, a number of civil society-based organizations and associations developed.

NATURAL HISTORY AND NATURAL SCIENCE MUSEUMS  
Natural science – and the idea of knowledge in general –

acquired very special status at the end of the 19th century. This was also reflected in the development of natural science museums. The Muséum national d'histoire naturelle had been established in Paris back in 1635 – the first museum in the world with a format reminiscent of what we would identify today as a natural history museum. The forerunners of natural history museums were the cabinets of curiosities. As I have described, a large number of the earliest museums also had natural objects as part of their encyclopedic collections. During the 19th century, museums focusing more exclusively on exhibiting objects from nature, viewed through a scientific prism, flourished and increased in number as part of the natural sciences, and their role evolved. Natural science museums have collections that historically played and continue to play a central role as sources of biological data to serve research, teaching and wider interpretation/public engagement, and several branches of the sciences evolved in close interaction with museum collections.

At an early stage, natural science museums kindled great debate about an appropriate approach to interpretation and public engagement. 1869 saw the opening of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and in the 1920s the museum opened the exhibit The Hall of the Age of Man, presenting the contemporary perception of the history of evolution. The exhibition provoked heated debate and opposition among the religious, who believed it led thousands of school children away from the teachings of the Bible and its account of creation.

Over the years, natural science museums have responded to and been part of various agendas of nature conservation. Several have been engaged in collecting and recording biological data characteristic of the areas in which they were located. Several natural history museums such as the Natural History Museum in London, the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, with their vast exhibits and collections, have served as international centers for comparative taxonomic work and research into evolutionary biology and biodiversity.

Natural history collections have proved extremely useful for reasons and purposes that could not have been foreseen when they were founded. Recently, natural history collections have begun to play a central role in relation to the dissemination of knowledge about biodiversity, pollution, climate change and threatened or extinct species. For example, research using old collected eggs revealed how the insecticide DDT has affected the

reproduction of bird species, which in turn helped influence legislation to protect ecosystems. Studies of ancient North Atlantic seabirds helped demonstrate an increasing content of mercury over the past century (Winker 2009: 456–457). Natural science collections have thereby contributed to the monitoring and documenting of biological responses to changes in ecosystems, populations and species.

Dippy, the long-extinct diplodocus dinosaur, was given to the Natural History Museum in London in 1905 by the Scottish-American tycoon Andrew Carnegie. Dippy's fossilized bones were found by railroad workers in Wyoming in 1898. Dippy was the very first dinosaur in the world to be exhibited. Monumental and 26 metres high, Dippy was allocated the place of honor in the prestigious Hintze Hall in the world-famous museum and, as the first exhibited dinosaur in the world, quickly became a star. From 2018 to 2021, Dippy was sent on a tour of the UK as a testament to the changing state of nature in the UK and the rapidly declining biodiversity. The skeleton of a female blue whale by the name of Hope was given Dippy's former place of honor. According to the museum, the idea was for the blue whale to remind visitors of humanity's responsibility for the protection of our planet. Blue whales were hunted until they were on the brink of extinction but were also one of the first animal species that massive global efforts went into saving. The hunting of blue whales was banned in 1966. The fact that such an old, major museum institution as the Natural History Museum chooses to give such coverage to a tale of marine ecology and endangered species, and sends Dippy on tour, also testifies to some of the ways in which museums are beginning to rethink their role. The natural history museums of the 21st century are confronted with global concern about escalating climate change, and themes such as biodiversity, sustainability and nature protection play a central role in many natural science museums today.

#### THE MUSEUM AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

During the 1970s, the debate about museums being too elitist, closed in on themselves and controlled by too narrow population groups raised its head again (McCall and Gray 2014). In this case, the discussion is linked to the idea that museums should not only base their practices on collections, and to the idea of redistributing power and curatorial authority. In this context, the debt of museums to local communities are still up for debate: for example, within the socio-museological tradition developed particularly in Latin America and Portugal, which is concerned with how cultural heritage, commemorative culture and museums can be used in relation to the challenges and development of local

communities. In 1972, a round table discussion in Chile organized by ICOM and UNESCO resulted in the following definition of a museum:

The museum is an institution in the service of society of which it forms an inseparable part and, of its very nature, contains the elements which enable it to help in moulding the consciousness of the communities it serves, through which it can stimulate those communities to action by projecting forward its historical activities so that they culminate in the presentation of contemporary problems; that is to say, by linking together past and present, identifying itself with indispensable structural changes and calling forth others appropriate to its particular national context. (UNESCO 1973,199)

The idea of the so-called 'integral museum' reflected in the Chile manifesto had flourished since the 1960s in the form of "ecomuseums" in France, the social museum in Latin America, US museums that focused on integration with local communities, and for an even longer time in the Nordic countries and the tradition open-air and folk museums<sup>2</sup>.

The French archaeologist/historian Hugues de Varine-Bohan has been a central player in relation to the development of socially conscious museology. From 1965 to 1974 he was the Director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and requested, for example, a more participatory approach to museums. Museums should exist for people, not for exhibited objects (Hugues de Varine-Bohan 2014). de Varine-Bohan was partly inspired by the French museologist Georges-Henri Rivière, who had developed *nouvelle muséologie* and so-called ecomuseums (French: écomusée). The idea of ecomuseums was to showcase civilizations in their natural environments, based on and integrated into the local communities and contributing to local development.

The so-called 'new museology' argues that museums are social institutions with political agendas. However, as can be seen from the above outline of the ideological history of museums, this movement is not entirely radically new, and it has also been criticized, for example, for giving too little credit to its French and South and Central American forerunners (Lorente 2022:11). Particularly in Mexico, local community museums and their museological theory are still flourishing (Lorente 2022:14).

#### THE ACTIVIST MUSEUM

In other words, over the past 50 years, museums have increasingly begun to see themselves not just as showcases for the past or the present, but as actors who have special opportunities and responsibilities in terms of re-



sponding to societal issues. Since the 1960s, museums have increasingly addressed and engaged with a number of issues such as climate change, racial inequality, decolonization, migration, gender and sexuality.

Today, there are so many different ways to acquire much of the knowledge we used to have to go to museums for. Today's museums administer their curatorial authority in markedly different ways than in previous eras in history. More than ever before, museums are increasingly inviting the public in as co-creators of exhibits and supporting and fostering dialog. No longer do museums aim simply to enlighten and edify the masses. In many places we see an attempt to rethink/think about the relationship between the museum and visitors on the basis of critical dialog. We are seeing an increasing number of examples of citizen science, in which citizens contribute, and collaborate with museums to develop science. Several art museums work to co-create artworks with different local population groups. In a Danish context, Trapholt Museum is a particularly excellent example.

The changing expectations of how museums should relate to the surrounding society place new demands on museum staff, who must now not only have the knowledge and ability to manage, interpret and engage audiences in their collections, but must also be able to deal with visitors in new participatory, involving ways. In this context, the museums have a responsibility that is no longer about civilizing, edifying and educating the masses, but about redefining the relationship with the audience in an empowering way that incorporates themes such as inequality and social justice.

A break with the museum's colonial past concerns not only the possible return of objects and the right of countries to manage their own cultural heritage, but also a reconsideration of what we mean by museological practices and knowledge production. Currently, a number of different strategies are being developed to tackle the colonial past and heritage of museums. One of them involves exhibiting to a much greater extent the museum's objects in ways that allow members of the cultures from which the objects originate to contribute to the process of creating and shaping the exhibits.

#### THE DECOLONIZATION OF THE MUSEUM

Museums and other institutions dedicated to cultural heritage and knowledge – including libraries, archives, galleries and educational institutions – help to create and maintain hierarchies in relation to who produces knowledge and about whom and what knowledge is produced. As pointed

out above, much of the cultural heritage stored and disseminated in Europe's museums relates to a past, in which the majority of European countries were colonial powers. Great Britain, Portugal, France, Spain and the Netherlands were particularly major imperial powers, but Russia, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Belgium and Italy also had colonies and trading posts around the world. This colonial past has had a great influence both on which art, cultural and natural objects these countries' museums contain, and on which stories these objects have been used to tell.

However, the relationship between museums and states has proven to be unstable. Empires have been continuously dissolved and restructured, and the relationship between the former colonizing and colonized nations has changed significantly. Many states had to reconsider their narrative identities after new borders were drawn and new states formed. During the 20th century, the more problematic cultural heritage of nation-states, state-induced violent pasts and human rights have increasingly been thematized in museums. For example, after World War II, and especially from the 1980s onwards, we have seen the establishment of a number of memorial museums commemorating the victims of the war (Graffenstein 2020).

This development towards increased attention to "decolonizing the museum" relates to a far more comprehensive development in society, where a number of actors in former colonial centers and formerly colonized countries are working to put paid to the colonial and imperial past and its continuing influence on the knowledge and cultural production of a number of institutions. Museums can no longer simply be viewed unproblematically as national educational institutions for imaginary homogeneous publics. A number of groups that were previously marginalized or objectified in museums have demanded the right of recognition and expression.

Not all groups have equal access to visit, let alone construct, cultural heritage narratives. Various marginalized and subaltern groups have increasingly – sometimes on their own initiative, sometimes invited by museums – used the museum institution to negotiate and challenge hegemonic narratives. Collections, exhibitions and collection practices have been utilized to engage local communities and address various societal issues. Ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, women, indigenous peoples and other groups, which for various reasons are marginalized in relation to the power centers of nation-states, have used museums in various political, cultural and social contexts. A number of museums, both large and small, have experimented

with letting these different groups and local communities influence and negotiate representations of their history and culture. New exhibition formats have been developed with new consignors, and existing collections have been viewed with new, critical eyes. Many cultural history museums have applied new practices to outsource the authority, in terms of documenting and interpreting cultural heritage, to the people affected by that cultural heritage.

A number of European museums have accepted the consequence of the increasing attention to the interweaving of museums and objects in a colonial history, and in their exhibition practice explicitly draw attention to the movement of the objects and the implications of this movement. According to this way of thinking, museums should include information about the objects' origins, how they were acquired, and how they are connected to other cultures. Since 2015, certain museums in the Netherlands – for example, the Tropenmuseum – have made a strong mark within this trend. The current Tropenmuseum, today located in Amsterdam, opened in Haarlem in 1871 as 'the colonial museum' (Kolonial Museum) with an explicit agenda to convince the Dutch people of the excellence of colonial trade (van Huis 2019:222). After Indonesia gained independence in 1949, the museum changed its name to Tropenmuseum. Consistently, but especially since 2015, the Tropenmuseum has worked in a number of ways to develop the representation of the Netherlands' colonial past. The changes at Tropenmuseum have involved external actors with backgrounds in the countries of origin whose cultural artefacts have been exhibited at the museum. Before, people with backgrounds in these locations, had no opportunity to influence the narratives that had been constructed as prisms for interpretation and representation. In the context of revising the museum's exhibits, these actors were invited to take a critical look at and rethink the museum.

They identified how the museum, in its current form, remained silent about the actual colonial violence, and reproduced colonial, racist hierarchies, in which the agency and perspectives of non-Western actors were non-existent, and precedence given to stories of white colonizers. Colonialism was overwhelmingly glorified as a mission that brought civilization, science and progress to non-Western, 'uncivilized' peoples (Huis 2019).

However, recent years have also shown examples of renewed extreme nationalism in some museums: for example, in Eastern Europe. This development is flanked by the fact that today we are witnessing an increase in the number of transnational and global move-

ments and a rise in populism, identity politics and the idolization of nationality.

## INDIGENOUS MUSEUMS

The idea of the museum as a particularly modern, Western phenomenon is strongly rooted in museological tradition (Kreps 2006: 476). However, in recent decades – for example, in the traditions of comparative museology, critical museum theory and critical museology – there has been an increasing interest in rewriting the history of museums in ways that value non-Western museum models and curatorial practices and broaden the spectrum of what we recognize as and call a 'museum'.

In 1983, the New Zealand anthropologist Sidney Hirini Moko Mead published the article 'Indigenous Models of Museums in Oceania'. According to Mead, the Western museum is a "highly specialized organization that has become integrated into the socio-economic, technological, philosophical and artistic contexts of Western nations" (Mead 1983: 98). According to Mead, the equivalent of a museum in Maori society is the *whare-whakairo* meeting house. Mead believes that what he calls "the indigenous museum" is akin to a cultural center run by local communities and integrated into people's everyday life in a very different way than is the case with what he calls "the western museum" (Mead 1983: 101). Like Western museums, these cultural centers are repositories for culturally and historically valued artefacts, but they are also places for the ceremonial, religious and cultural practices of local communities. Another difference is the fact that the cultural centers do not have the same professional managers but are run on the basis of local knowledge and expertise. Mead points out that similar structures exist in other parts of Oceania. The discussion about the so-called 'indigenous museum' has, among other things, dealt with the role that museums play, have played and can play in areas of the world where there is still intense negotiation and sometimes conflict between indigenous populations and newly added population groups: for example, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, Hawaii and those parts of Polynesia under French rule.

In countries that still today have groups of indigenous populations, the confrontation with the colonial past and themes such as recognition, representation and repatriation raise special issues and are given special expressions. In 1978, there was a UNESCO seminar on 'the role of museums in preserving Indigenous Culture' in the Australian city of Adelaide. As a result of this seminar, museums in the region have become much more conscious about employing members of the indigenous po-

pulation and giving them seats on boards, representing them in collections and recognizing them as actors who can convey their own history. The British colonization of Australia from 1788 onwards had disastrous consequences for the indigenous population. Aborigines were first officially recognized by the Australian government and counted in censuses in 1967. Up until then, they were not regarded as Australian citizens and did not have the right to vote, labor law protection or the right to social benefits. Not until 1993 were they given the right to fight for ownership of additional land.

In Canada and the United States too, this problem has received a great deal of coverage. For example, the Abbe Museum in Maine, founded in 1926 on the basis a collection of artifacts related and belonging to the Native American population, for example, has the following vision, which explicitly expresses an ambition to reflect on and realize 'decolonizing practices':

The Abbe Museum will reflect and realize the values of decolonization in all of its practices, working with the Wakanabe Nations to share their stories, history and culture with a broader audience. (from the museum's webpage).

1989 saw the creation of the National Museum of the American Indian, and in 1990, the United States Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA requires all state-supported institutions to register and publish lists of objects related to burials, religious practices and mortal remains originating from indigenous peoples.

Various museum associations have also begun to address the racist and imperialist implications of the past collection practices and curation of museums (Cahan 2016). Museum Detox is a network of people of color known as BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) who work in museums, galleries and the heritage sector in the UK. The association's mission is as follows:

Museum Detoxers empower and support each other to heal, to be ourselves and to reclaim our history. We collectively learn ways to practice self and community care, collective action and solidarity. Through our self-actualisation we will inspire more equitable museums and cultural heritage sector. (from the association's webpage).

Museum Detox works to achieve greater equality for people of color in the heritage sector by implementing practices that create more inclusion, equity and justice.

#### THE INCLUSIVE MUSEUM

Concomitant with the increased focus of recent decades on how museums can be made more inclusive and

accessible to more diverse groups of users, projects have also been developed that focus on opportunities and rights for people with physical or mental disabilities. The UK-based Curating for Change project (<https://curatingforchange.org>) works for example to tackle the underrepresentation in museums of people who are deaf or neurodivergent or have physical and mental disabilities. This underrepresentation is evident among employees and visitors, and in the stories told in the museums. In 2017, the theme for the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) annual meeting was 'Gateways for Understanding Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums.' Today, an increasing number of museums have special exhibits and/or exhibit formats for people with visual impairment. As early as 1886, a small museum called Le Musée Valentin Haüy opened in Paris. It was founded by Maurice de La Sizranne and exhibits objects designed for the blind. However, it is unlike later museums created to be experienced by the blind. But the Museo Tifológico (Museum of the Blind), opened in Madrid in 1992, is. Created by the Spanish blind organization ONCE, the museum gives blind and partially sighted visitors the opportunity to use touch to familiarize themselves with famous buildings, the history of braille and tactile works of art created by blind and partially sighted people. Since 1985, The Victoria & Albert Museum in London has staged several annual events with a special focus on the tactile, aimed at people with visual impairment, and provides a sensory backpack for children and families with visual impairment. Since 2002, the V&A has had Barry Ginley, who is blind himself, as its Disability and Access Officer. The Louvre and The Smithsonian, for example, hold interactive 'InSight tours' for small groups of blind and visually impaired visitors, and in Athens you can touch copies of original Greek works at the Tactual Museum.

One hallmark of these initiatives is their conviction that the sense of sight as just one of several senses – touch, hearing or smell – that you can use when visiting a museum. From a purely curatorial point of view, rethinking museums and making them more accessible and inclusive also involves thinking 'outside the display case', so that a museum's objects become more physically and tactilely accessible, enabling visitors to interact with them more directly. It is highly likely that in the coming years we will see more and more museums co-creating with people with different disabilities in order to include experiences and representations of disability and various perspectives on it.

creasing concern about how museums produce knowledge, and how they include or exclude different actors in their knowledge production, is the effort to rethink and expand the ways in which museums produce ideas about gender and sexuality. Museums help shape cultural norms and values and historically have been remarkably silent about the history, lives, experiences and struggles of lesbian, gay, transgender and queer people. Since the 1960s, there has been increasing LGBTQI+ activism in the public space. Sexual and gender minorities have demanded equal rights, visibility and social, cultural and political representation. In recent decades, in many countries, this development has also caught on in the museum world: both through attempts to integrate sexual minorities into existing museums – for example by exhibiting the museums' already existing collections with special attention to sexual minorities and their history, and on the basis of new, more autonomous initiatives that operate on their own terms outside the existing institutions and power structures (Chantraine and Soaeres 2021).

The advent of LGBTQ+ activism in museums is also concerned with showing how museums reproduce hetero- and cis-normative representations. In 1981, the first women's museum in the world was established in Bonn, and since then women's and gender museums have been established in a large number of countries. Some of these have their own physical spaces, others are purely virtual, and some – for example, Kvinnohistoriskt Museum in Stockholm – does not have a fixed location, but mounts exhibitions and events in various locations. The general ambition of these museums and exhibits is to disrupt and change existing, dominant gender representations, compensate for epistemic injustice (Fricker 2017) and develop a feminist reading of culture and history (Clover 2022).

Schwules Museum opened in Berlin in 1985 – the first museum in the world dedicated to gay history. Since 2009 it has increasingly expanded its remit to include other sexual minorities too. 1985 also saw the opening of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society Museum in San Francisco.

The Museu da Diversidade Sexual in São Paulo opened in 2012 in memory of victims of the AIDS epidemic. The museum's mission is to preserve the social and political cultural heritage of the Brazilian LGBT community, contribute to the visibility and appreciation of diversity and fight for citizenship and human rights. It is the first museum in Latin America with this focus.

In 2016, the Leslie Lohman Museum of Art opened in New York, a platform for artistic exploration on the basis of queer perspectives, with the goal of using art to explore, support and inspire the understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences. The history of the museum dates back to 1969, when the couple Charles Leslie and Fritz Lohman – the same year as the Stonewall Riots and at a time when that type of art was controversial – opened an exhibit in their attic apartment in the South Village, featuring art that thematized homosexuality. Over the following years, the couple went on to collect large amounts of homoerotic, homoromantic and homopolitical art from various places in the world: an art form that in many places is secret and frowned upon.

The documentation and dissemination of LGBTQI+ history has given rise to a number of different curatorial strategies. Since 2008, a Swedish NGO, The Unstraight Museum (UM) has collaborated with LGBTQI+ NGOs around the world to collect, disseminate and make history available from a non-normative perspective. In 2022, Norsk Museumstidsskrift marked the 50th anniversary of the decriminalization of sex between men in Norway with the theme issue *Queive blikk på museene*. In the introduction, the editors treated the issue in the light of international focus on queering the museum, pointing out that, by virtue of their knowledge of history, museums are particularly well equipped to make history more diverse and connect past and present, and that a queer approach to collections of museums has helped develop the museums' knowledge development (Walle, Fojuth, Jernsletten and Koren 2022).

There are only a few LGBTQI+ museums in the world. On the other hand, interesting formats have been developed to occupy existing museums. We find not only positions that work to expand the palette of which genders and sexualities can find themselves presented in museum spaces, but also more radical voices that want to queer the museums (Sullivan and Middleton 2019; Walle, Fojuth, Jernsletten and Koren 2022). Queer theory insists on not simply accepting a narrative to expand the palette of representation, but on destabilizing the interpretation/public engagement situation itself and the understanding of gender. Developments in LGBTQi+ museology reflect developments in LGBTQI+ activism. Just as more traditional, identity-based, lesbian and gay activism often acts politically on the basis of an understanding of gender and sexuality, in which the political action is based on a solidary identification with a special group, museological strategies also exist that are about making visible and fighting for the history, cultural heritage and rights of



a particular group. Queer political activism works more radically to reject heteronormative logics and systems rather than to achieve tolerance within the heteronormative system. (Munuz 2009, Halberstam 2013, Sedgwick 2013, Fabian 2023). In tandem with this, museological strategies exist that are about destabilizing and disrupting the normative knowledge production of museums. The anthology *Queering the Museum* (ed. Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton) develops a queer-theoretical analysis of how museums constitute their own knowledge production.

#### THE RADICAL DEMOCRATIC MUSEUM

In summary, we can conclude that in the context of specifically rethinking the museum institution, it is essential to make it clear how one understands and works with concepts such as inclusion, diversity, representation, justice and equality and particular the tools and opportunities for action these understandings facilitate.

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” (Lorde 2007).

Thus wrote the self-identified lesbian feminist Audre Lorde in 1978. The question remains as to what extent it is possible to decolonize and queer the museum, because historically there is no denying that it was one of “the master’s tools”. One of those who have expressed skepticism about this possibility is the British independent researcher Sumaya Kassim. Kassim was part of a group of co-curators invited in 2017 to create the exhibition ‘#ThePastIsNow’ at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. “Decolonising is deeper than just being represented,” (Kassim 2017) wrote Kassim in the article ‘The Museum will not be decolonized’, in which she reflects on whether in such projects one can move beyond tokenism. Kassim raises the question of how we can prevent decolonization from becoming just another part of the imperial museum’s collection:

“I do not want to see decolonisation become part of Britain’s national narrative as a pretty curio with no substance – or, worse, for decoloniality to be claimed as yet another great British accomplishment: the railways, two world wars, one world cup, and decolonisation.” (Kassim 2017).

In *Hegemony and Radical Democracy* (written with Ernesto Laclau) and *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe sets out to reformulate radical democracy as agonistic politics. According to Mouffe, any consensus is the result of temporary hege-

mony and a stabilization of power that inevitably involves forms of exclusion. According to Mouffe, a successful democratic order is not one that removes differences, divisions and conflicts, but one that reduces antagonisms and manages conflicts in ways that recognize contrasting differences as legitimate but still oppositional. In her radical concept of democracy, Mouffe is more concerned with conflict and disagreement than with consensus as the necessary virtue of democracy. Nora Sternfeld transfers this radical democratic view of the necessity of conflict and Mouffe’s idea of radical democratic citizenship and the necessary antagonistic pluralism and plural antagonism of democracy to the museum; for example, in her work *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (2018), which has made a great impact – particularly on German museum theory. According to Sternfeld, the idea of being a neutral moderator is a post-democratic fantasy. The radical democratic museum must therefore be an emancipatory space for self-reflexive criticism, allowing itself to be changed and challenged by external voices, making conflicts clear and acknowledging the struggles against inclusion in ways that do not pretend that the conflict has been resolved, or remain silent about exclusions (Sternfeld 2018).

Nick Stanley, editor of the anthology *The Future of Indigenous Museums: Perspectives from the South Pacific* (2007), proposed that we stop regarding the Western museum as a stable entity and instead view it as a dynamic institution that is constantly in the process of considering its own legitimacy in relation to changing publics (Stanley 2007:7). In a museum context, the discussion about justice relates partly to the question of how the individual actors and museums recognize their own position vis-à-vis privileges, access, class, power and money. Museum-wise, this work is also about identifying how, throughout history, museums have functioned and continue to function in ways that prioritize and strengthen particular forms of knowledge and knowledge-creating actors.

In summary, one can conclude that museums have always been political, but that to a great extent their authority and curatorial practices are being deconstructed and rethought. Museums and museological practices are also concerned with social and epistemological justice. But how do we progress beyond tokenism? Queer theory insists on not simply accepting a narrative to expand the palette of representation, but to destabilize the interpretation/public engagement situation itself. In parallel, the decolonization will not only politely

accept the invitation to co-curate, but instead deconstruct the museum's inherited narratives.

Museums connect past, present and future and are increasingly preoccupied with the double whammy of simultaneously acknowledging how history lives on today, while at the same time experimenting with handing over the microphone and curatorial narrative authority to new actors who can help museums become democratic spaces in radically new ways. For any readers who might want to participate in this further rethinking and who seek inspiration, this book's bibliography features a number of references to a wide variety of websites from museum networks or museums that have made their experiences available to the general public.

<sup>1</sup> When Christian Jürge n Thomsen was given responsibility for the storage of ancient antiquities, he also decided that they should be registered, sorted and classified according to the categories Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age. This categorization went on to become fundamental in terms of archeological research in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> The first people's museum was built in Christiania (present-day Oslo) in 1881.



# DIALOGS ON MUSEUM RESILIENCE

## ANNESOFIE NORN

Curator at the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live (Denmark)

## DIANE DRUBAY

Founder of We Are Museums (France)

## SANDRO DEBONO

Academic at the University of Malta (Malta)

*Bidragydere:*

## MILENA JOKANOVIĆ

Research-associate at the University of Belgrade, and associate of the Museum of Yugoslavia (Serbia)

## JULIE DECKER

Director/CEO of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (United States)

## CRISTINA LLERAS

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## JULIE ROKKJÆR BIRCH

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## INTRODUCTION

Genuinely pivotal moments are rare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led humanity to experience an unprecedented sense of collective grief across the world. The vulnerability of our bodies and of our economic and social systems were then exposed and tested to the core. But, as the world was then closing down, we also got the chance to prepare for what would come next. As Alessandra Morelli, the UNHCR Representative in Niger noted back then: “It may feel like our lives are on hold right now. But with resilience we can start building for the future.” (Morreli 2023)

We know that museums are coming to terms with their pivotal role in this new decade, shifting their mission towards their social and cultural responsibility, understanding their impact on local communities and engaging in key social debates. This type of leadership requires substantial innovation, boldness, honesty and, as Robert R. Janes (founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice) adds, “unprecedented cooperation” (Janes 2019). We also know that many voices are still left out of mainstream networks. This is one good reason for rallying and synergizing the global museum community to come together in new conversations, and set the example of a new solidarity model of exchange within the global museum sector that can contribute towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

We need to understand what actions our institutions can and should take to help communities rise stronger and become more resilient. This is not just necessary for the post-COVID-19 world, but also, and even more so, in the face of the much bigger planetary emergency we are also facing.

One thing the year 2020 taught us is how we are all intrinsically connected.

From May 2020 to February 2021, We Are Museums and the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live convened an ongoing conversation on the basis of online dialogs between networks of museums for the purpose of fo-

stering collective wisdom and strategic know-how. Museums with recent experience of rebuilding and transforming collective stories of trauma through cultural programs can help us all find our way in this changing world.

Through this series we wanted to find a form of conversation and dialog that could illustrate our connectedness: how one insight, shared with one person, will have a ripple effect on conversations happening in 2nd, 3rd and 4th degrees. Like a relay race, the conversation was set between two people, representing different points of view on the subject of resilience and supporting a great variety of perspectives. Each participant joined conversations, first as the interviewee and then as the interviewer.

This series of online dialogs took place on the We Are Museums online community, a global neutral space that rethinks and reshapes museums. In parallel, the guests have been contributing to this collaborative reflection inspired and influenced by their online interactions.<sup>3</sup>

## OVERVIEW

This series of conversations may hopefully serve the purpose of a compass with which museums can take the bearings of resilience. From Alaska to Aarhus, Belgrade to Bogotá, participants sought to discover the meaning of resilience for museums through stories told and experiences lived within the global museum ecosystem. One guiding question keeps all conversations in focus: how can we build new habits of resilience as the museum ecosystem equips and prepares itself for a post-COVID-19 world? The resilience presented in these conversations is elastic and agile, creative and active. Here, we explore museum thinking that does not emerge from the stereotypical but comes from beyond.

The conversations started by exploring how the politics of post-war territories can incubate meaningful resilience. The practice of collecting by artists active in the former Republic of Yugoslavia brought into focus a particular type of resilience informed by alternative narratives. By collecting disowned and rejected objects, actions and stories, these artists sought to inspire the world around us. These conversations also presented new ways of remapping our perspective and thinking. What we regard as the peripheries of our world, society and culture can be seen as resourceful places where we can learn resilience. The challenges may be much bigger and more complex for the Anchorage Museum in Alaska, but the lack of an institutionalized tradition or established museological practice made meaningful changes easier to

foster. Peripheries could be the places where post-COVID-19 museums can understand and assimilate resilience.

The seeds of resilience can also be found in activism, particularly when directed towards rethinking narratives informed by anticipated futures. Experiences of museum activism presented during these encounters came from Bogotá in Colombia and the city of Aarhus in Denmark. When a museum chooses to become an activist, resilience becomes a necessary skill. The greater the challenge, the greater the need to persevere and the more that need increases over time. Resilience is certainly required to navigate the uncertainties of the present, but the desired ambition that these conversations explore is much more about the long-term. The pivotal role museums have today involves envisaging the future and reflecting on the past, constructing alternative narratives of the future and offering possibilities, not just visions of catastrophes. Regardless of its collections, themes, size and place, no museum can ignore the upheaval we are living through. The call to activism has never been so pronounced. It is up to museums to incubate that spark to become something bigger over the long term. This is a time when much can be questioned. That too is what resilience stands for.

In their call to activism, museums can also become the voice of their communities. Our conversations also tracked a community-driven type of resilience, which may also rethink the use of museum collections as testimony to the past and tools for the future. When collective action is required in the face of crisis, museums can become beacons of hope. Resilience may be about having the courage to change course and lead that change on behalf of communities. Museums are certainly not neutral, and in times of crisis the call to action is akin to an obligation. It is naive to think that we can proceed in this complex world doing business as usual. Resilience can empower museums with the courage to move forward.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, resilience can best be learned through first-hand experiences. We might consider that to be a learning-by-doing approach too. Taking the plunge may not be an option for some museums but these case studies can certainly provide the missing spark to set things in motion, hopefully for the long-term ambition of fostering better futures.

# Dialog #1

## BUILD COLLECTIVE CULTURAL RESILIENCE THROUGH CREATIVE COLLECTING

Dialog between **Milena Jokanović (MJ)**, research-associate at the University of Belgrade, and associate of the Museum of Yugoslavia (Serbia) and **Annesofie Norn (AN)**, Lead curator at the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live (Denmark)

*The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on May 27, 2020.*

**AN** Heritage values can create a strong sensation of a shared "we", provide support and help communities build resilience to absorb disturbances. At the same time, the sensation of shared identity has also featured prominently in national campaigns to "take back control" of Britain through Brexit and "America first" with Donald Trump.

I enter these dialogs in the hope that we can use the global crisis we are facing to move beyond national identity paradigms and instead build new collective understandings and resources informing heritage values based on the ideals of a "global we".

Never before have we been so globally connected. Never before have we experienced a global crisis on such a scale. By bringing different voices together in dialog on the topic of resilience, we will explore the tensions, synergies and creative opportunities from past, present and future experiences of the crisis.

The first dialog with Milena Jokanović will explore the lessons we can learn from memories and archives from the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

**MJ** Quite a few terms come to my mind when reflecting on the museum and arts sector in general during the current pandemic. Resilience, solidarity, creativity and collecting processes are some of those I choose when contemplating potential strategies to overcome this turbulent period. Very important, I believe, is the process of creative collecting as a response to the crisis. Moreover, COLLECTION (collecting process) and CREATIVITY (art), make us RESILIENT. These three words frame my thoughts and reflections.

The International Committee of Museums' report on COVID-19 published in April 2020 a list of steps for museums to address resilience.





"3D Wallpaper for Children's Room: Mickey Mouse Pattern" and "Tricolor (Flag of Yugoslavia)" by Vladimir Perić. Property of the Museum of Childhood Art Project.

The sixth step is particularly telling: "Consider the possibility of rapid response collecting and documenting the crisis and its impact, and promise to come back to it afterwards." (ICOM 2020).

Equally important to collecting is, as I argued, creativity, so we could turn to UNESCO's action: "RESILIART Artists and Creativity beyond Crisis, with a subtitle: "Because art and creativity make us resilient." (UNESCO 2020).

One has to keep in mind that: "The system of art is resilient and art is now responsible for change. Artists are the people who provide material for imagining a different future." (Eno & Varoufakis 2020). Coming from Serbia, and researching contemporary art practice that often uses memory as raw material for further work, I recognized powerful personal memories represented with objects and strong emotional responses being built in artworks.

The 1990s were very turbulent times for the Balkans. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was followed by socio-economic instabilities and shifts in political ideology, cultural policy and public memory. A thriving cultural sector was one of the victims. The museum institutions of the region failed to agree on how best to communicate the crisis and how to represent the (lost) identity, including individual destinies. Artists stepped in spontaneously and took on the role of preservers of memories. Their activities resulted in a parallel, independent art scene. Finally, they created not only ready-made installations, but also entire artists' museums, such as the Museum of Childhood as well as The Inner Museum (Museum of Kitsch).

Walking through bankrupted factories, abandoned houses and flea markets, artists picked up the material culture of Yugoslavia's socialist times, using it as raw material to reinterpret and transform into works of art. Trash was the material to use in an economic crisis, but it also served as a social critique by preserving individual memories and consequently stimulating discussion. The flea market from which artists picked their material culture, can be understood as a symbolical, valueless and timeless limbo, from which chosen objects were recontextualized and transformed into important carriers of memories. The above-mentioned artists' museums, therefore, captured collective memories, even including public monuments, which were frequently removed or even cut in times of crisis. Some of these collections were later acquired by museum institutions.

**AN** It is, indeed, fascinating how the most mundane objects and personal stories became a material culture for artists' collections during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. At a historic time when museums were closed and collections no longer accessible, discarded property, objects and personal memories came to represent the (hi)story. Today these collections have an essential role to play in supporting a new collective identity and shared heritage values for the region. In Serbia, these responses helped communities see the world from a different angle and to look forward.

In a sense, today we are in a similar interim period, in the midst of a crisis, with our institutions closed. Milena sees this as an opportunity to build new collections of "micro-memories" to be used as raw material for re-imagining who we are. These creative responses to turbulence are important strategies with which to build resilience. By collecting a diversity of personal testimonies, we can help give our communities more solidarity and inclusiveness.

#### AUDIENCE REACTION

The first phase of this dialog created strong emotions within the audience and many participants could relate to what Milena shared, even if the context, time or causes were fundamentally different. Very quickly, the question of relevance became central in the discussion.

Afterwards, it broached the lack of distance to history that might distort our choice of collecting and the fact that collectors need to be conscious of biases towards one story more than others. Today, as during the dissolution, we need to create inclusive collections aimed at a shared issue, acknowledging deviant viewpoints and experiences.

These comments highlighted vulnerable communities as they often lack the capacity to collect their memories. If we want to create collections that build inclusiveness, then we need to be aware of the inequalities that make some people's memories less resilient. Although we are now in a moment where we all have shared memory, we will see it presented very differently in the future, depending on who is the owner of the (hi)story and their agency of building resilience.

**MJ** I argue that collecting and creativity as an immediate response to the crisis are strategies for resilience. Moreover, these processes give us the potential for imagining the world and all of us in this world differently. So, maybe the crisis of this scale, when every individual, as well as all humankind, is vulnerable, is the right moment to rethink that "global identity" with all the new, real and virtual, spaces of its embodiment.

It is invaluable when people get inspired with the crisis and have a strong creative response to the state of fear, loneliness due to isolation and sadness or rage. This is why I think that museums, artists and cultural workers should use this momentum to create comfort and connection through culture.



In the next dialog with Julie Decker I want to explore further how one museum institution succeeds in constantly evolving and engaging the community, tending to finally construct the image of a more positive world in the future.

## Dialog #2

# CREATIVITY BEYOND CRISIS – EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES AND ENCOURAGING GLOBAL Dialog

Dialog between **Julie Decker (JD)**, Director/CEO of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (United States) and **Milena Jokanović (MJ)**, research-associate at the University of Belgrade and associate of the Museum of Yugoslavia (Serbia)

*The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on July 9, 2020.*

**MJ** How can a museum serve its community? What is the social role of this institution? How are we engaging audiences, listening to different voices, representing a variety of cultures? How are we interpreting and extending museum collections to make them stay relevant? Finally, what are the steps museums can take to stay resilient in a time of crisis and how can it help us transcend the trauma?

Just as turbulent circumstances are the result of different factors such as economy, health issues, conflicts, climate change and many more, there are also many different examples of museum resilience. However, the common ground for each initiative is creativity. Not just the artistic creativity, which is enabling us to envisage the image of the world and new horizons in it, but also the creativity of a museum as a social institution.

Preparing for the conversation with Julie Decker and researching the activities of the Anchorage Museum of which she is director, I was stunned by how optimistic museological theory is coming to life in this institution. Our dialog is based on the idea of a museum as a changing, engaging, constantly learning and open institution that is using its important resources smartly and that is created to see, act and be beyond crisis.

**JD** The Anchorage Museum exists in a Northern place long colonized by European explorers and, like many museums, in conception was a symbol of colonial European colonization. It is from here that we think about the ways climate change colonizes and how we need to decolonize to respond.

In 2015, we installed 'Chin'an Gu Ninyu' on our façade – or "Welcome, You Came Here" in the language of the Dena'ina, the Indigenous people of Anchorage.

The most common map views of the world feature the Mediterranean at the center. Alaska is at the edge, squished out of scale and at the periphery. Maps of the United States show Alaska decapitated, floating around by the equator with Hawaii. But we suggest that periphery and center are relative to your point of view.

The Arctic has long been considered remote, vast, empty, white and unpopulated. Pristine and now precarious. Colonizers brought disease, religion and rape. Alaska was sold from Russia to the United States, and referred to as a folly. President Trump wants Greenland. A decolonized view suggests a story of Indigenous people who have survived for millennia in the place. The reality television series that portrays Alaska resists decolonization. It places ideas of the periphery – people at the edge of both place and norms.

Today's global climate crisis affects the most vulnerable people and places. The coastline of Alaska is eroding. Our edges are crumbling, but our edge is that we have been responding and adapting first. Being an ally and forming alliances require a deep understanding of deep time and a deep connection between people and landscape – at the core of Indigenous knowledge.

Climate change has brought new economies, curiosity seekers and art, science and environment tourists – a sort of last-chance tourism – and tourism has long colonized Northern places and other places considered peripheral. We need a radical shift in thinking.

The sustainable architecture, design and technology of the North can be found in everyday Indigenous knowledge. The periphery is not simply a place of catastrophe, disconnected from its future. Perhaps our centers are behind.

The periphery is the front line of colonization, extraction and climate – and as a result, it is a place of activism, of strong Indigenous voices, who react, and respond, who remind us of our nature and our human nature, and who ask us to listen in new ways. We are interested not in a frontier past or a wild west, but an acknowledgement of language and values, of people and landscape in a reciprocal relationship. We are marked by our histories. We search for a collective way forward. People of peripheries are not silent, but visible. In our urban places, we need to recognize the places and people beyond, who are witnessing change.

Climate change is one of the most pressing social and environmental issues and will require radical, innovative thinking to understand its complexity, and to respond. Climate knowledge is distributed differently and has been consistently negotiated at the edges – in places considered peripheral. The power to respond to the greatest global experiment is in knowledge centers rather than economic centers. Knowledge exists in the places that have responded for millennia, that have not lost connection to the natural world. Peripheries are created through geographies, economies and politics. These places have been forced to exhibit a different kind of resilience and invention than is found at our global cores.



Anchorage Museum.  
Tilhører Anchorage Museum.

At the Anchorage Museum, we seek radically new modes of thinking and responding. We develop projects that are about invention and iteration, about response and overreaction. We explore action beyond social action and beyond current academic definitions, proposing a new kind of discipline in response. The North is a compelling place to explore these ideas, as the North is changing more rapidly than any other place on Earth and must respond first – making it a place of radical invention. To grasp a global response, we have to put the peripheries at the center.

**MJ** Julie's inspiring attitude teaches us that resilience is based on the point of view of the world and in the language we use to name the things around us. Having a vision of a more positive future and finding ways to look forward constitute a strategy to overcome the crisis.

As she argues, we should not see our world through economic centers, but rather through learning centers. With this attitude, we could be capable of inventing a new kind of resilience that is on our global course, to be more connected to the natural world, to involve and represent a variety of voices, and to rethink our identity with all its alternatives and differences.

To base response over reaction, action beyond the social action and current academic disciplines. To build a new discipline in response!

## AUDIENCE REACTION

Julie's presentation inspired a very dynamic conversation, in which participants were intrigued by the idea of flipping the standard map and thinking of a place as an important point of departure for the function of a museum. It was also seen as a strategy for rethinking traditional models of a museum institution: exhibition-making, image building and knowledge perception. So, Julie explained how the Anchorage Museum is, on the one hand, training its staff to use new media for expression and move out of museum buildings and, on the other, inviting Indigenous people to raise their voices and artists to work long term within the institution to tackle relevant problems.

Questioning the role of the museum in the context of local as well as global identity-building led the discussion further to broach the issues of a particular museum's uniqueness and response to the needs of the multicultural local community on one hand, and relevance on a global scale, on the other. We stressed the potential of a pandemic situation in creating a sense of togetherness in solving a global problem.

Finally, the discussion turned to the issue of the sustainability of the museum, which is changing and moving beyond traditional frames. Concluding that the Anchorage Museum used the opportunity of not being the most popular institution considering its location and collection to experiment with programs and formats, we could understand how the relevance is based on the idea, responsibility and social role of the museum, but also how this approach eventually proves to be transformative for the economic state as well.

**JD** Museums need radical change and need to be part of that change. They need to move from theory to practice.

As museums, the imperative is to play a role in finding new ways of telling the story of our place, and what our place might mean for the rest of the world. As the world faces the unprecedented climate crisis and pandemics, museums are more important than ever for facilitating essential human connection and making meaning. As a result of these crises, human ways of life and ecosystems will be changed, and the impacts will vary over time and with the ability of different societal and environmental systems to mitigate or adapt. Museums have a role to play in helping people imagine and contemplate that future.



# DIALOG #3

## SHIFTED NARRATIVES – THE RELEVANCE OF PAST AND FUTURE

Dialog between **Cristina Lleras (CL)**, independent curator currently working for the Museum of Bogotá (Colombia) and **Julie Decker (JD)**, Director/CEO of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (United States).

*The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on August 11, 2020.*

**JD** Museums have often thought about permanent galleries, permanent histories and linear historical narratives. They have often looked to the past. We examine the ideas of permanence and relevance, suggesting that the most pivotal role of museums may be to envisage the future in addition to reflecting on the past. We must learn to complexify the narratives, include multiple perspectives and forums, and move away from the idea of the authoritative voice and the known. We should be part of telling stories of lived experience and part of imagining a better future for all.

**CL** The COVID-19 pandemic is yet another sign of the need to change gear and transform our relationships with the human and non-human world. The coronavirus can be understood as a big red sign alerting us to take the climate and social crises seriously. Museums have an important role to play in stepping up to the challenges societies face all around the globe.

During the lockdown of early 2020, the team at the Museo de Bogotá –a small scale museum in Colombia’s capital – developed a collaborative digital exhibition on Instagram (@museodebogota) to reflect upon the local impact of the 1918 influenza epidemic. This experiment – a means of responding quickly to the changing context – enabled us to think about relevance as museum professionals and what the Museum could offer its audiences amidst such uncertainty. From the engagements and what users shared with us, we learned that the past, the traumatic events of 1918, can not only shed light on the possibility of overcoming present-day circumstances, but also highlight the challenges that remain.

Elaine Heumann Gurian calls this “timeliness”, a means to describe rapid responses to the unpredictable and unexpected (Gurian 2003).

Being relevant and responsive is not only about choosing exhibition topics but also being able to offer services to affected communities that might not fit the museological canon. Giving up programming to become a space for solace, for instance.

How do we collectively overcome the impact of a pandemic? The virus and its consequences have locked us not only in our homes (if we have the privilege), but also in time. Suddenly every day was Groundhog Day. Daily tasks and screens became the measure of our days. After looking at the past, my proposal is that we suspend this present, as overwhelming as it is, to be able to imagine a future that is not "normal" (in the sense of going back to where we were before), but where we can redefine notions of care and solidarity. This does not mean ignoring the crisis, but putting it on hold in our minds.

In this scenario, museums can construct alternative narratives of the future that offer possibilities – not only catastrophes. No museum, regardless of its collections, themes, size or place, can ignore the upheaval we are living through. Even if they are not in the realm of the natural sciences, museums can learn from science to find pathways of dialog and change. We need transformations, not only in terms of how we engage with audiences in debates about the future, but also in terms of how museums see themselves and their role in the capitalistic system.

At first, I resisted the idea of reopening the physical space of the Museo de Bogotá, because I did not find that the permanent exhibition (inaugurated in June 2019) responded coherently to the present. I found myself wanting to suspend the exhibition to create projects outside of the building, going out to communities and providing opportunities for people to connect. Making the museum a platform. This was a chance to rethink the museum, once again, in terms of what it can do for others, as opposed to creating exhibitions as final products for consumption.

**JD** Museums have long been about their buildings, exhibitions and collections. But what if those "assets" prevent museums from truly serving audiences and from being relevant? How do we break away from colonial ideas of collecting and representation and embrace more nimble and agile ideas and definitions of what a museum is? Collections should be about storytelling – relevant to now and the future, to the broadest range of audiences. If the stories are not relevant, neither are we.

**CL** These are some of the ideas that I take away from the conversation.

These times of crisis provide an opportunity to rethink our practice. We can question everything: collecting, exhibitions, buildings and communities. We can also reconsider the time about which we are able to tell stories: the past, the present, the future.

The past is meaningless if the museum's collections are not read in the light of the needs of the present and future. It becomes a burden if it is fetishized and if all resources are put into this exercise. We briefly

mentioned the museum as a hoarder, much in tune with the capitalist logic of accumulation, as a practice that needs to be transformed. As an alternative, we can think about learning a language rather than an object-based practice.

Museums also need to think about the narratives we believe will be of use to future generations. Can we create a language that accurately reflects the lessons we derive from the pandemic? Can we collect the future to transform present-day practices?

What effective role can museums play in this crisis? Can museums be sites for transformation? We don't need to think about the climate and social crisis in the same way, but we do need to think about them at the same time.

Even though as professionals we have been talking about community participation for decades, the notion of the museum as a listener to experiences of resilience rather than as a talker still a practice needs to be further developed. Can we create new methodologies?

What does it mean to be a museum professional during the present-day social and climate crisis? There is no easy or single answer to this question. I think its importance implies that we continue to debate the possibilities.

# Dialog #4

## TAKING A STAND – POLITICS, RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Dialog between **Julie Rokkjaer Birch (JRB)**, former Director of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark and **Cristina Lleras (CL)**, independent curator currently working for the Museum of Bogotá (Colombia)

*The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on September 22, 2020*

**CL** Museums have been thought of (and some still are) as “neutral” and objective, interpreted by some as disengaged from the political and social upheavals of our time. Museums take different stands towards the changing world. One way we have approached this role of museums in societies is through the term “activism”. What does it mean to be an “activist” museum? There is not one sole definition. One way is by looking at the past and the material collections that testify to the past and read, talk and share them in light of urgent, present-day issues. In this context, resilience is the result of collective action in the face of social and climate crises. A collective project involving resilience and survival is the result of the museum workers who make this possible. When we talk about activism, transformations and resilience, it is the people who believe in such things as possible that have to be touched and transformed first.

**JRB** In times of crisis – museums are more relevant than ever. Having a big mission and being unafraid to be political (not party-political) can transform not only you as a museum worker but also the audience.

Museums are the most trustworthy institutions in society. Much more than the media and politicians (perhaps not surprisingly). Maybe this trust is rooted in a conception of museums as neutral, objective institutions. But nothing is neutral – not even museums. Museums should be very much aware and explicit about that, and about their beliefs and mission in society.

The reaction of the Gender Museum to the lockdown was very immediate. How could we be a museum with neither a building nor physical objects? The notion of a museum as a public media platform for dialog was enhanced by Corona.

An activist museum is an agile museum. During the spring lockdown in 2020, the Gender Museum collected stories about lockdown-related gender issues. For instance, we collected reports of gender-based violence, a gender-divided workforce, gender differences related to

COVID-19 casualties. The museum organized a "Museum Takeaway", which brought history and knowledge to the people and started a debate on the street.

For the Gender Museum, resilience is always about trying to push the limits of concepts – to try to be more than a museum. It is not naive to want to change the world. It is naive to think that we can go on in this complex world doing business as usual.

**CL** Julie highlighted how the COVID-19 experience was transformative in itself for museums, because it forced these institutions to push the needs it had previously identified and to question their boundaries. This poses an interesting challenge. When does a museum stop being a museum to become something else – for example, an advocacy group or an NGO? The nexus with the past, its collections and the women's movement in the 1980s makes up the structure for the museum's present. What does such a museum look like in the present and future? Should it be renamed to speak a language that is understood by present-day generations? Should it honor its foundation? All these questions are relevant because they speak to the museum's capacity to question its very being in response to society's needs. Museums are more relevant than ever because they are our common homes, and how we interact with others in such spaces or programs can determine how we find togetherness. Taking Julie's words, we need more organisms and fewer organizations.



### DOCTOR KRISTIN ALFORD

Director of MOD. at the University of South Australia  
(Australia)

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Community resilience as a capability to be nurtured is embedded where I live in Adelaide, South Australia, and provides a useful framework for museums and their communities.

In late 2000, South Australia launched an initiative known as Thinkers-in-Residence . International experts were invited to spend extended periods of time applying their domains of knowledge to big questions in the hope of creating local innovation and social change.

In 2012–2013, the Thinker-in-Residence<sup>5</sup> was Professor Martin Seligman, known for founding the positive psychology movement. His project saw partnerships from industry, education and the health sector come together in pursuit of a "State of Wellbeing": that is, how might we enable wellbeing at scale? Out of his residency, the Wellbeing and Resilience Centre was established to develop these strategies and interventions further, including the championing of PERMA+<sup>6</sup>.

PERMA+ outlines components that support mental and physical wellbeing, which in turn provide the foundation for being able to bounce back; to be resilient to challenging events. The components of PERMA+ are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment plus Physical Activity, Nutrition, Sleep and Optimism.

I share this, as museums are well-positioned to provide wellbeing at scale for their communities. In examining the components for PERMA+ museums provide Positive Emotion through visitor experience and Engagement with multitudes of stories through collections, artworks and immersive experiences. The stories museums share provide a sense of Meaning and even Optimism to the community as they negotiate histories, perspectives and hopes. In the pursuit of more



Foto from "Seahabilitation", which was part of the exhibition "IT'S COMPLICATED" at Museum of Discovery - MOD.  
© Sia Duff / MOD.

participatory experiences through co-design, museums also provide support for the aspects of Relationships and Accomplishment.

In the current context, museum professionals under stress may also find the pursuit of these aspects of PERMA+ useful for their own personal wellbeing and source of resilience, in undertaking activities that build community wellbeing, but also in being supported to find avenues for Physical Activity, Nutrition and Sleep to ensure physical wellbeing.

The useful thing about this model is that it recognizes that wellbeing and resilience are not necessarily about avoiding crisis, hardship or trauma. It enables us to build support structures so that we can

respond effectively, hopefully, "bouncing back". Though also, sometimes the way we respond to crisis enables us to "bounce forward", being strengthened by the challenge to ultimately thrive.

**PROFESSOR LINDSEY MCEWEN**

Director of the Centre for Water, Communities and Resilience, University of the West of England (England)

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

On reflecting upon the foregoing stimulating dialog, and after personally mulling over how museums might play a distinctive 'building' role in long-term resilience in civil society, I ask a few questions and share some thoughts. As a precursor point, "community" and "resilience" are well-recognized "weasel words". Practitioners in risk and resilience are asking how communities can extend beyond the local for social learning in developing their capital for resilience and solidarity. They are also questioning how local resilience thinking can shift from engineering ideas of resistance or rhetoric of "bounce back" to more fluid, evolutionary adaptation and transformation for more resilient states. Understanding the varied dimensions of both concepts is critical in exploring the territory and opportunities for how museums and communities might interact for mutual resilience. What struck me in engaging with the dialog so far is how your conversations form a mirror to those that are already taking place within the research and practice of "developing community resilience" around the roles of the arts and humanities as disciplines and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Museums and Archives) as a professional sector. How can local museums and other creative organizations work together with their communities for synergetic local resilience? What characteristics, values and worldviews are needed in both? What understanding of self as an individual or organization, and relationships with others in a place and beyond place?

In my contribution to "Dialogs on Museum Resilience", I mooted possibilities – characteristics of an embedded museum that has a synergetic relationship with its communities – for mutual resilience. This involves imagining a museum that is engaged and aware of the compound, overlaid or cascading risks – extreme weather, civil, technological – within its locale. That is a learning and knowledge institution that is community-embedded, inclusive in the voices it captures and brokers. A museum that is well networked, collaborative and creative, inventive and resourceful. To be resilient in a socio-ecological sense involves being flexible, flippable and adaptable within the resilience cycle, with evolving practices and connections. It requires thinking creatively within and outside the intensity of actual events and social stresses, and the sensitivities of their recovery. Learning for resilience at levels scaling upwards from the individual museum professional or community member predicates ways of working that require awareness of self and others in emotive learning domains. Managing uncertainty and working within complexity require

creative thinking and envisaging with room for dreams and fears.

The climate crisis provides opportunities to reconstruct resilience—building far beyond traditional agencies with statutory responsibility for dealing with risk and resilience. However, this requires more oblique and emergent thinking about which and how other organizations could contribute to developing community resilience as an evolving creative space. In Dialog #1, we explore how museums, through their creative collecting, can facilitate connection with past lessons from memories and archives. Here the museum is a creative collector supporting the local building of “collective cultural resilience”. Dialog #2 considers the idea of the museum as “changing, engaging, open and always learning”, integrated with valuable collective learning from those already living at the edge or margins. Connecting with such places in global dialog for mutual learning about living at the margins provides unique opportunities. In Dialog #3, we reflect on the unique potential of a museum as a pivot between the past and the creative imagining of possible futures, while in Dialog #4, we capture the potential value of the museum and society in activist space. While these dialogs provoke thought as individual entities, collectively they articulate the (re)inventive opportunities of an agile positioning of the museum sector in the ferment of present and future cultures of resilience as creativity. This is a particular opportunity in pandemic recovery and narratives of reset.

As we see from the preceding dialogs, such engagements require “higher rung” participation with a strong sense of co-creation, and attention to engaging and valuing hidden, marginal and multiple voices. This is aligned with agendas of environmental and social justice within the climate crisis. Such an approach fuels a sharing of diverse capital for new cross-cultural behavioral insights and solidarity. This work involves grit, persistence and risk-taking – a willingness to work at the edges or boundaries, in liminal spaces and zones of transition. It requires strong attention to “local”, but within a multi-web of global connections. In their creative collecting and curation of artefacts, and their ability to pivot thinking about past and future resilience, museums have distinctive opportunities to contribute. This is in the way they collaborate, what and how they value, and in their development of cultural networks within the global museum sector, building out from the local places and relationships.

Such reflections on the distinctiveness of the museum sector as a setting for future thinking through creative solidarity are timely and potentially transformative. Making space and time for ongoing international dialog between museums and communities for intercultural ‘learning for resilience’ is a key part of the weave. International dialog initiatives like this one – that explore museum–community symbiosis across climatic zones and demographic settings – are potentially in a unique position in sharing embedded practices for resilience within and beyond place. This increases the likelihood that museums can co-create a crucible for the exploration of dreams and fears about possible futures within and outside their distinctive communities. As a researcher working in “community resilience”, I encourage you to open up this reflective dialog as an ongoing practice for mutual capacity building across the museum sector. There are also important opportunities for explorations with other sectors navigating the challenging territory of how to co-create future resilience with civil society.

3  
The full-length conversations can be seen at <https://wearemuseums.com/dialoguesonmuseumresilience>

4  
“Culture in Urgency”, [www.cultureinurgency.com](http://www.cultureinurgency.com) [March 29th 2021]

5  
Thinkers in Residence is a program in Adelaide, South Australia, designed to bring leaders in their fields to work with the South Australian community and government in developing new ideas and approaches to problem-solving, and to promote South Australia.

6  
PERMA+: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment +Optimism, Physical Activity, Nutrition and Sleep.





# Labour Cultural Heritage as Social Innovation – Two Canadian Studies

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 2019 federal plan for history and commemoration in Canada, the Minister responsible for Parks Canada, Catherine McKenna, emphasized the important temporal connection people make by linking with sites of heritage by stating:

This plan represents a new way of sharing history at Parks Canada's heritage places – one which includes diverse voices, presents multiple perspectives and inspires conversations about Canada's past, present and future. (Parks Canada 2019, 5).

Undoubtedly, heritage sites link people in time and space. But this statement represents a progressive ethos that commits to "diverse voices" and "multiple perspectives". Why is the government mobilizing a department like Parks Canada to take on socio-political issues? Parks Canada is a curious institutional choice for "progress", given that its charter was last updated in 2002. Worse, the 2002 Parks Canada charter does not mention the words equity, diversity or inclusion. Instead, the four operative commitments listed publicly are: "to protect, to present, to celebrate and to serve". Regarding the third commitment, the charter ambiguously states: "...To celebrate the legacy of visionary Canadians whose passion and knowledge have inspired the character and values of our country" (Parks Canada 2002). Presenting the idea of celebrating the legacy of "visionary Canadians" with the aforementioned qualities is not only ambiguous, but also opens the door for severe criticism if the definition of "visionary" does not correspond with the public identity, and if the citizenry – particularly Canada's Indigenous

people – genuinely feels omitted, ignored or misrepresented in the selection process. More importantly, given the many major and micro cultural transgressions that have persisted throughout Canada's history, and the government's historical authority in determining the authorized heritage canon and overarching cultural discourse, these problems lead to two questions. Why would the government – and Parks Canada, mainly – make a serious commitment to the public at this time, and why through heritage? Given Canada's dominant historical control, this action presents a discontinuity. Is this a genuine bridge for public participation or another tokenistic effort?

By connecting past narratives to specific spaces and times, heritage, a subsector of culture, instils the public (i.e., an institutionally constructed imaginary collective of people, like the nation state) with a temporal identity. Western governments, like the United Kingdom or France, have developed strong establishments that are able to maintain a cultural hegemony – a dominant overarching discourse that seamlessly dictates the cultural and social orientation and practices – within its borders. In Canada, the government uses its power and authority as elected representatives to authorize and sponsor outside official cultural narratives on behalf of its constructed public (the nation state and international audience). More importantly, by creating public policies (e.g., the Historic Sites and Monuments Act, Canadian Museums Policy, Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee) and cultural institutions (e.g., the Canada Art Council, National Museums of Canada, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission), the government directly constructs and homogenizes its cultural discourse by empowering those who conform with its authorized narrative and editing out of competing cultural discourses. In this way, these public institutions work within their public to inform and shape their shared histories and cultures, while actively seeking to facilitate the existence of activists (or counterpublics) that feel excluded or ignored in these narratives (Warner 2002).

More interestingly, when curated by a local institution – like community museums – heritage can offer an authentic sense of place and a heightened sense of environmental awareness, while building a firmer connection to a location (Barlett, 2002). Given their unique identities, local community museums are simultaneously created by their public (inheriting their values, norms, objectives, etc.), while also creating their public. The same could be said of a government department, like Parks Canada, with a mission, commitments and an operational plan. Together, Parks Canada – as a government institution –

and other Crown corporations in the cultural sector are tasked with ensuring that only authorized heritage narratives are produced, reproduced and institutionalized. In fact, large public museums have been "civilizing" and "educating" people with government-sanctioned narratives for decades (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett 1995, 2003). So, how do ignored and excluded people resist these reproduced and institutionalized narratives? One way to resist is interstitially through their own community heritage institutions. By exploiting spaces and cracks in the cultural sector with little oversight by the government (i.e., the dominant structure of power) and establishing a separate institution with its practices and strategies (i.e., an interstitial strategy), a public can begin to mount their cultural resistance (Wright 2010). An interstitial approach is desirable to groups (i.e., people held together by shared values, norms and objectives) with activist inclinations and a desire for a long-term trajectory of cultural change. By circumventing the official cultural narrative espoused by the government, these public groups create exhibits and initiatives that progressively broaden the cultural sector's narrow spaces of representation. Of course, this is not to say that all new cultural projects that seek to establish a more prominent identity and cultural presence for its public cannot, or do not, use some form of state support in the pursuance of their own goals and initiatives. Simply put, by claiming a space for themselves, an interstitial approach allows the otherwise ignored and excluded public to effectively resist without direct violent confrontation in what was once a government-dominated ceremonial and heritage landscape. In this context and given Parks Canada's proclamation of "diverse" recognition, the next question that emerges is: why are this commitment and new ways of cultural resistance necessary?

In Canada, the government has made attempts to support issues regarding diversity. Institutionalizing Indigenous land acknowledgements, for instance, helps recognize the environment and land ownership issues – whether there exists a treaty or it is unceded and in dispute – and showcases another attempt to recognize the diversity of cultural spaces in Canada. Similar efforts have been made through internal museum reviews "to address institutional bias and discrimination" (Canadian Museum for Human Rights 2021), and to create new objectives promoting the cultural diversity of their collections and publics. However, systematic racism and discrimination against vulnerable peoples and multicultural publics are regular occurrences in Canada. For example, in the city of Hamilton Ontario, systematic

discrimination emerges in several forms, including creating a culture of discrimination through police presence in public schools (Hewitt 2020; Mitchell 2020), when public educators or officials openly express racist opinions (Hristova 2021; Rankin 2019), when peaceful celebrations like Pride or protests against hate groups and politicians are violently resisted (Mowat 2019; Craggs 2019), or simply by excluding groups from using public space for cultural events (Craggs 2018). Similarly, in the Metro Vancouver District in the province of British Columbia, racism and other forms of discrimination are not uncommon due to the largely multicultural public (Statistics Canada 2017). Whether it is due to a lack of direction, priority, or effort to address racism and discrimination beyond mentioning “commitments” to “fairness” in their citywide objectives (McElroy 2020), the district has been plagued with problems. For instance, Metro Vancouver has excluded peoples and fomented a culture of ignorance due, in part, to an overabundance of white representation in local politics (McElroy & Joseph 2018). As a result, the interests of vulnerable peoples are unrepresented, and consequently their policies and initiatives do not materialize. Thus, we begin to see the rise of racist attacks on vulnerable peoples, especially the large Asian population, including anything from slurs and physical attacks (Takeuchi 2020) to cultural property defacement (Woodward, 2020). In response, the community, not-for-profit organizations, and networks have offered their local support (Tanner 2021) and space for discussion (Johnson 2020).

This research examines how heritage institutions resist the government-sponsored narrative and the numerous resulting racist and discriminatory consequences. More specifically, we examine two case studies, the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (WAHC) and the British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre (BC Labour), to understand how their projects connect the discriminatory plight and hidden and excluded contributions of vulnerable publics to the cultural sector. While this article does not evaluate the effectiveness of these interstitial practices and strategies, it is interested in understanding how the alternative community projects (such as WAHC and BC Labour) in the cultural sector can potentially help socially enhance communities and peoples. We found that these case studies, through activist practices, reappropriate long lost or ignored cultural stories and repopulate them back in the community. More interestingly, their practices of creating new narratives showcase a local resistance against the government-sponsored narrative that has historically compounded into contemporary racist and discriminatory consequences.

## METHOD

This research is rooted in the discourse analysis tradition of qualitative research inspired by Michel Foucault's (1969) archaeology of knowledge. The concept of discourse can be conceived to understand the historical evolution of a society by examining its practices, strategies, and effects (implications). Through this lens, discourses explain the order of how things function in our world, including how some ideas or phenomena connect, why some concepts are important, and others marginalized or excluded. Of course, some discourses become hegemonic in status, and in the case of a discursive struggle between a hegemonic and activist discourse, it is important to see how the challenging discourse looks to combat the dominant ‘reality’ through the production of their discursive practices and meaning making (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Without any objective laws to fix or eternally ground society, groups like labor museums are always in a process of challenging the formation of certain discourses. Thus, the aim of discourse analysis is to discover how power relations are created and normalized through discursive productions of meaning in specific times and places.

As a research method, discourse analysis allows us to make a detailed description of the different narratives emerging from institutional practices and strategies and possibly offers insights into their influences and connections. In this research, we focus on describing the strategies and practices of cultural actors (exhibitions, stories, objects, collaborations, etc.) and the effects that follow as they attempt to circumvent the cultural mandates and restrictions imposed by the government. The objective is to highlight and understand these activities and their implications, not to evaluate or defend their strategic choices. More specifically, we act as observers examining claims to explore how these labor cultural projects use their practices and strategies to socially innovate and enhance their communities.

We chose to analyze two case studies in two Canadian provinces: WAHC in Hamilton, Ontario, and BC Labour in Burnaby, British Columbia. Both are autonomous cultural institutions situated in areas that vary in population, space, and demographics. However, they were chosen for their relative importance in each province as labour heritage hubs. WAHC (2022) receives the majority of its funding from labor organizations with smaller amounts from public and community sponsors. Similarly, BC Labour (2022) receives its funding and support comes from labor organizations (district trade councils, unions, worker associations). Given their activist mandates that differ

from traditional cultural institutions (e.g., natural history museums, art galleries, performing art centers, etc.), we aimed to examine the potential impact of each case study's non-traditional activities in the cultural sector for its public. Therefore, we examined the practices and initiatives of these groups to identify how these activities work and their general implications for social innovation for each case. After identifying certain practices, we inventoried publicly accessible materials, both physical and digital. In some cases, we collected email exchanges, public documents (official memos, annual reports, bylaws, personal accounts, minutes, archives, etc.), press releases, personal notes from public meetings, and email exchanges with key informants.

#### CASE STUDIES

Established in the late 1980s by a group of labor historians, artists, and local activists who recognized the need for a place to celebrate workers' history, WAHC (Workers Arts and Heritage Centre) is a labor history museum in Hamilton, Ontario. Built on the mission of "bringing together ALL working people (paid and unpaid) through art, history, and culture, enabling a stronger, more connected community" (WAHC 2021a, 5), the Centre showcases the contributions of working people through art, exhibits and performances. Moreover, WAHC presents a socially transformative vision: "a society where all labor matters" (6). Buttressing this vision and mission are three core values:

**Solidarity:** We believe that we can accomplish more when we work together and support common struggles.

**Equity + Inclusion:** We commit to ensuring that we engage and promote the voices of ALL working people, recognizing all forms of work and labor (paid and unpaid).

**Dignity:** We respect the inherent right of ALL people to be valued and accepted without judgement.  
(WAHC 2021a, 7)

In line with their transformative vision, these values reflect an activist ethos and discourse that allege an alternative form of public empowerment through inclusive and equitable treatment and representation. More than an alternative discourse, these values represent and imply a cultural challenge by using the government-ignored history of Canadian labor (discontinuities) to not only recognize

the contributions and struggles of working people, but also to learn from these experiences while "challenging the future – for future generations" (WAHC 2021a, 2).

Located in one of Canada's oldest "federal" public buildings (the Custom House), WAHC purchased the formerly-government-owned property and renovated it to handle exhibits that are self-described as "contemporary and interdisciplinary art" (WAHC). According to the board of directors, with such a storied history of different uses – a hub for trade and exchange, schoolhouse, temporary residence and manufacturing production – the Custom House was thought to be an ideal location because of its industrial history, while also being situated within a working-class neighborhood (WAHC 2021b). More than this, the city of Hamilton has a long labor history that includes many working-class groups fighting for unions and labor rights. Consequently, Hamilton is a heavily studied community in North America due to its industrialization transformation from handicraft production to modern industry, where "class polarization and struggle were essential features" (Palmer 1979, p.xii). For instance, the history of the labor movement started in the middle of the 19th century during Canada's Industrial Revolution when Hamilton was home to multiple large factories that forced skilled craftsmen out of their small workshops and into these factories. In the end, these actions "broke down their [craftsmen] skills and cheapened their craft" (McMaster University n.d.). These factory workers formed craft unions that gave them more control over their labor conditions. Together, these narrative elements form the basis of labor heritage in Hamilton, from which WAHC draws and creates exhibitions with the aim of addressing contemporary issues that are relevant to workers and labor, as well as historical topics, while also engaging different communities and unions to develop projects.

In a similar vein, BC Labour (British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre) is a labor museum run by a non-profit organization located in Burnaby, British Columbia (BC). Initially founded by Jack Munro in 2004, the Society aimed to "honour the memory of the working people" (Novakowski 2019,1). Although no formal mission or set of values are stated publicly, the membership application affirms its priorities:

...I agree to support the vision, purpose and principles of the BC Labour Heritage Centre Society. Specifically, I commit to the work of the Society to preserve, document and present the rich history of working people in British Columbia. I further support its



engagement in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province. (BC Labour 2021c).

From this membership commitment statement, we can see how devoted BC Labour is to union values like equality and respect, as well as its drive to connect its public with diverse local partners, while pushing forward shared community goals. More interestingly, there is a clear objective to “define” and “express” the traditionally excluded role of labor in developing social policy and the province’s future. BC Labour (2021b) has carried out this vision through various socially engaging projects (e.g., how it preserves and shares the history of workers who helped build BC social policies, or the movements for unionized work). BC Labour also commissioned a book titled *On the Line* by Rid Mickleburgh that tells both the ugly and the inspiring past of BC labor movements, including excluded or ignored parts of this history. Moreover, this book shares various experiences of the racism and discrimination woven into these essential movements, including the positive impact these marginalized groups had on the advancement of unions (Killan 2018).

Within the Metro Vancouver regional district where BC labour is located – and the greater provincial area – labor sites exist ubiquitously. Consequently, BC Labour has populated and commemorated over 190 of these ignored sites with plaques that hold significance to diverse working people for public viewing (BC Labour 2021c). For example, the history of BC Labour is marked by the construction of two transcontinental railways, as well as the development of the mining industry and the forestry sector (Sinclair 2011). The location of Fort Langley, for instance, represents a fur trade struggle, as it was the former trade post of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the fur trade economy that operated through the transcontinental railway (City of Burnaby 2021). Burnaby and railway construction attracted many migrants, including a large population of workers from China. However, this allure included discriminatory restrictions for Asian Canadians purchasing land (Burnaby Village Museum, 2021, p.5). For example, Japanese Canadians worked in Burnaby’s sawmill, as well as the Nichols Chemical Plant, while Chinese Canadians dominated the vegetable trade. For the most part, Burnaby’s working-class residents influenced the political climate, leaning towards socialist and labour politicians in the 1920s (Burnaby Village Museum 2021, 10). Similarly, there were also labor movements for a minimum wage, eight-hour

days and worker’s compensation around this time, which led to the development of a Worker’s Compensation Board in 1916 and a minimum wage for women (Sinclair 2011).

Both Hamilton and Burnaby have unique and impactful histories within the larger Canadian commemorative narrative. More specifically, these cities grew and developed with the influence and labor of the working class, who, over decades, fought for labor rights, unions, and a better future. WAHC and the BC Labour both reflect the importance of the working public, and their practices commemorate their labor heritage.

#### CANADIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS: A HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT TO OPPRESS?

The power of institutions is undeniable. Yet, like any tool or instrument, the implication of its use is primarily directed and determined by its handler. When examining its relationship with its public, an institution can either empower or limit the identity, values and norms of an individual or public, and thus the ability to make decisions and act through “formal and informal rules, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and systems of meaning that define the context within which individuals [...] interact with each other” (Campbell 2004, 1). To better understand the alleged potential of an institution’s inherent activist ability – to use these rules and enforcement mechanisms to contribute to the development and stabilization of citizen preferences by making them transparent, coherent, rational, and reasonable – we reviewed the literature concerning the historically dominant and oppressive cultural institutions, their ethos, practices, and public impacts. In doing so, we uncovered three approaches aiming to further the hegemonic system and the status of its benefactors. This first is an “iron fist” approach whereby reaped colonial spoils were prominently and proudly displayed in large private institutions. These cultural institutions were privileged repositories exclusive to the elite and represented immense wealth, status, and power. The second symbolizes a “velvet glove” approach. To culminate mass appeal, cultural institutions opened, democratized, and decentralized. Instead of an overt show of power, national governments commonly used these institutions to circulate and reinforce their politicized heritage, values, and norms. The final approach is symbiotic. In a similar vein to Wright’s (2010) work on symbiotic transformation, cultural networks and associations parallel the work of unions and their members. As a result, some gains through political lobbying are incrementally made. However, these gains come at the cost of autonomy, leading to an artificial sense of democracy,



inclusion, and worse, activism.

Before the birth of the contemporary museum, the development of government departments of culture, or the creation of heritage associations, the iron fist approach first emerged in the cultural sector in the form of majestic temples and beautiful palaces. Although the functioning of these institutions is far from consistent due to shifts following how society classified and understood knowledge, the relationship between the visiting public and the wealthy owners who used these spaces to organize and conserve their objects, art, and pillaged colonial treasures, is far from clear. On the one hand, the royal elite and bourgeoisie owned and operated these institutions and operated them exclusively under generally self-interested goals. On the other hand, to legitimize this displayed authority, rarity, and power, the public was required to attend and visit. Regardless of these inconsistencies, the very existence of many of these early institutions implied a hierarchical power by presenting the wealth, exclusive social status, and authority of their owners.

Despite shifts towards more consistent models like the museum, the evolutionary idea of housing collections and organizing culture and knowledge remained intrinsically linked to the notion of displaying wealth and power to legitimize status and power. Several authors – e.g., Tony Bennett (1995; 2004), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992; 2000), Georges Bataille (1930), Germain Bazin (1967), etc. – have documented, contributed, and critiqued the understanding, development, genealogy, and history of these collections as a reflection of early museums and museum studies, much of which discussed the etymology, genealogy, and function of the traditional museum and its derivation from the Greek *mou-seion*, a term referencing a place of the mythical female Muses. In the 17th century, the first restructuring of these early cultural collections changed as the result of inconsistent styles of conservation, ordering, and exhibiting (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Following shifts in the categorization of science and knowledge, new, more coherent taxonomic structures of knowledge emerged, leading to knowledge becoming a way of self-legitimizing the institution and sharply contrasting the principles of the prior century, which focused on worthiness and nobility status. However, the late 18th century presented another reordering of collections and classifications that formalized the public restrictions to these housed spaces whereby collections of art and culture were thematic. According to Bennett (1995; 2003), these spaces demonstrated royal power, symbolized family power, and functioned as an instrument of learning. As a result, these transforma-

tions created classifications of the owners that categorized collections according to their prestige and wealth. By presenting this bourgeois status, these early museums functioned as a cultural instrument of oppression by reinforcing the asymmetric relationship of authority between the public (the dominated) and the ruling cultural elite (the museums and its owners). In the end, this antagonistic relationship slowly led to reforms that enabled many artistic and cultural works to be dispersed and reconstituted into public institutions to create a more accessible space for the general public to enjoy (Bennett 1995).

To facilitate public access to important cultural and artistic pieces, government institutions took over caring for, preserving, and exhibiting their collections. Some of these institutions began even before Canada's independence (e.g., the New Brunswick Museum, the Canadian Museum of Nature, and the National Gallery of Canada). While this "rescue" may seem entirely selfless and for the benefit of the communities unable to care for these items, how these exhibits and cultural narratives were constructed and by whom became a new and pressing issue. Although no longer in the exclusive hands of private elites, these cultural artifacts and their constructed exhibits began to present and reinforce distorted and politicized cultural narratives. Motivated by the political and elite interests of government representatives, these new heritage narratives adopted a gentler, more manipulative approach (velvet glove) to reconstruct its public's values, norms, and overall identity. For example, one of the first commissions to formally highlight Canada's need to strengthen its national image and culture by instrumentalizing culture was the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (i.e., the Massey Commission). Chaired by Vincent Massey – who was at the time chair of the National Gallery of Canada – this commission operated from 1949–1951. Massey, like many other arts and performing art patrons (e.g., Lord Strathcona, Sir Edmund Walker, and J.S. McLean of Canada Packers) sought to stamp the Canadian community with a "cultured national design of British inheritance" (Edwardson 2008, 50). These like-minded elites saw culture as an instrument to "civilize the people" by providing the general public with moral direction, enlightenment, and, ultimately, "elevated" tastes.

Formal changes to Canada's cultural landscape emerged in the 1970s through the national and "unified Canada" vision of a new Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and his Secretary of State, Gérard

Pelletier. In his 1972 speech, Pelletier pleaded: "I venture to hope that my appeals in favor of democratization and decentralization will have been to some degree instrumental in bringing about change" (Pelletier 1972, 222). In other words, for Pelletier and the government, the issue was not the content exhibited in public cultural institutions, no matter how exclusive, elitist or manipulative. In fact, it was the government's prerogative to shape the cultural narrative through national museums, which serve as repositories and interpreters of national heritage (Dorais 1987). Instead, the government needed to make this heritage content more accessible to the public by strategically deploying their objects and messages. To facilitate this process, financial support measures for private and public museums were restructured – building on the 1968 Museum Corporation Act – through the introduction of the 1972 National Museums Policy. This act increased support for museums to increase their public reach (decentralize) and make cultural property more accessible (democratize) to the whole population, not just a select group. As such, "civilizing" shifted to "educating" the public. Development around the objective to widely circulate the authorized cultural narrative led to the formalization of a museum network, the creation of national exhibition centers, and a federal loan collection for areas unable to properly house major collections (Pelletier 1972, 220–221). These changes implied that culture was progressively viewed and treated as an objective-achieving resource. This change also meant that the traditional role of artifact conservation was sidelined in favor of more promotional goals, effectively making the museum a government policy instrument.

Finally, taking the form of cultural allies, museum associations represent a symbiotic approach of oppression towards small, community-owned and managed cultural institutions. By taking on the role of advocate and government policy enforcer, associations can force smaller, more vulnerable cultural institutions into an ultimatum: conform with government- and industry-set ideas or be excluded from the potential support afforded to those who have assimilated. Established in 1946, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) represents one of the earliest and largest associations that – along with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – has worked to define and delineate the notion of museums. In fact, in its founding bylaws, ICOM restrictively defined museums as: "all collections open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but exclud-

ing libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms" (Article II – Section 2). Similarly, in 1951 ICOM also worked to prescribe a specific operational purpose for museums, whereby the museum's purpose was restricted to "preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value" (ICOM Statutes, July 1951). It took decades of manipulating and prescribing definitions, including hundreds of proposals, before the notion of having a non-physical space as a museum became more commonly accepted (ICOM 2019).

In their contemporary iteration, many cultural associations have rebranded and promoted themselves as lobbyists and advocates that "champion, support, connect and elevate the museum sector" (CMA n.d.). For instance, the Ontario Museum Association (2021) offers newsletters, provides performance, economic, and "effectiveness for the public" statistics, and pushes for action plans focused on collaborative workforces, "relevant and meaningful collections", and tools to help coordinate collecting approaches for the province. Along with awareness campaigns and government lobbying for increased funding for its members, these support practices can be helpful for cultural institutions (OMA 2019). However, the symbiotic "give-and take" edge of this approach emerges when critiquing the standards and requirements for association membership or, worse, government funding. Aside from the fact that funding disproportionately favors larger, well-established organizations, such as the Royal Ontario Museums (ROM) which have received increases in funding (ROM 2009), the principles and guidelines are unnecessarily restrictive while tailoring too much to classical notions of a museum (for specific standards, see: Government of Ontario 2017). For association-specific benefits, the Alberta Museum Association (AMA), for example, tried to restrict the use of the term "museum" – in accordance with their 2001 definition, see: (AMA n.d.) – by promoting a "recognized museum program" that requires adherence to a specific handbook on standard practices, suggesting that the term "museum" must be earned. These limitations discriminate against smaller museums that are less resourced or those that seek different goals coupled with some traditional museum practices. Unsurprisingly, there are many more cultural institutions in Canada, including those that self-identify as museums, that do not hold membership in these associations, or that have not easily qualified for any major government funding or support. Thus, in a true symbiotic fashion, despite claims for museum advocacy and support, association benefits were programmed with the

"greater good" in mind at the expense of those who do not easily conform.

In sum, the overarching trend for the cultural sector is how entwined its various elements are with the neoliberal system for the benefit of its bourgeois proponents and the detriment of the more vulnerable public. The iron fist approach reflected a general trend wielded by the bourgeoisie, who amassed many cultural and artistic works. Enclosed in privately held spaces, the acquisition of these stolen and exchanged treasures represented power and status and was organized and conserved exclusively for private enjoyment. The velvet glove approach began opening these spaces and circulating heritage objects for public consumption. Now decentralized and housed in publicly accessible spaces, these artistic and cultural artifacts took on a more focused public oppression approach that sought to "civilize" publics through government-authorized narratives that normalized and promoted bourgeois values and norms. Finally, the symbiotic approach showcased the potential of unified resistance by cultural associations on behalf of its memberships. However, for publics whose attempts to establish a holistic, grassroots community space for cultural appreciation and the preservation of their self-curated heritages, the advocacy practices are outweighed by a cultural association's requirement to gatekeep and the reinforce government standards and financial support criteria, as well as the associations' privileging of corporatized large and established cultural institutions. Moreover, attempts to control aspects of the cultural landscape, such as the definition of "museum", reflect attempts to create its exclusive public and membership, while barring smaller, less-resourced institutions the association feels are not worthy of formal recognition.

#### FIGHTING BACK: COMBATING THE HEGEMONIC SYSTEM

After collecting and sorting through all available materials, three overarching trends emerged among the two case studies. First, there is a desire for public service that partly arises through education programs. More specifically, for each of the cases, there are educational initiatives that target various members of their respective publics. For example, WAHC offers school visits to their space for students and pupils to engage with and learn about the important contributions of working people to the local civic, cultural, and national landscapes (WAHC 2021c). For young adults, there is even a "Solidarity School" for "emerging artists" that teaches them how to empower themselves as workers through interactive sessions and workshops exploring intersections of work,

art, and activism on subjects like the Employment Standards Act, the role of unions, the minimum wage campaign, and how artists can empower and protect themselves as workers (WAHC 2021d). In partnership with the BC Teachers' Federation, BC Labour operates a Labour History Project whereby members (BC teachers retired or currently teaching) prepare lesson content on labor history for the BC school curriculum. Thus, BC Labour (2021g) has a vast assortment of digital lesson plans and videos designed for interactive cases, all of which are free to use. There are also workshops prepared for union training that discuss health hazards using developed case studies (e.g. Stave Lake Quarry, Burns Lake explosions, etc.). To widen the Centre's appeal to families and children, WAHC also participates in "Doors Open Hamilton", in which the public can visit, learn about the Centre's work with local artisans and its historic location, and participate in various craft and tool demonstrations. Finally, WAHC offers professional training in summer schools for artist-educators using seminars on museum education, labor art and history, and techniques like issue-based workshops for different aged audiences (WAHC 2021e). Similarly, BC Labour's resources could be seen as an attraction to the academic audience, including political or labor enthusiasts and historians. For instance, since 2016, BC Labour (2021e) has been assembling a compendium of union organizing stories (video and audio) of people involved in BC history.

Second, both institutions have created projects and strategies that directly challenge the hegemonic government discourse, its reproducing practices, and the official narrative it espouses. For BC Labour, this resistance takes the form of communicative strategies with their public and their overarching community. For instance, BC Labour (2021e) researches and publishes stories and narratives that substantiate and challenge current government-sponsored narratives by shedding light on ignored and excluded accounts (e.g. Surrey teachers' strike 1974, the Langley Affair 1939-1940, Coal Creek Mine Disaster, April 5, 1917, etc.). Furthermore, BC Labour produces a podcast, entitled "On the Line: Stories of BC Workers" that features volunteer-produced stories on a variety of labor topics, while also physically memorializing spaces and objects in the heritage environment with plaques that aim to remember working people in a project entitled "Plaques Around the Province". For WAHC, scheduled events and programming that commemorate pivotal events, like the Winnipeg General Strike, or performance and paneled events such as their "Confronting Global Capital" project, are im-

portant fixtures for engaging with the public. In fact, the Confronting Global Capital project included a variety of critical narratives that took the form of story circles, collectively created theatre performances, and joint labor and academic panel discussions. The commemoration of the General Strike alone reflects an aggressive stance against the federal government who, just four years earlier, dismantled and excluded its exhibit on the Strike at the Canadian Museum of History (Smith 2015). In celebration of the 100th anniversary, WAHC (2021f) developed this project to highlight the sacrifice and struggle of the 35,000 people (men, women, and children) who walked off the job to demand better wages and the right to collective bargaining, all culminating in "Bloody Saturday" where state representatives killed two protestors, wounded 34 others, and arrested 84 more. By confronting the public with questions (what happened, what was gained, what is the legacy, and whose voices were excluded?) and by situating the narrative in the context of the larger historic ruthlessness of government actions towards the original Indigenous landowners – the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, including the homeland of the Métis Nation – the project reminded the public of the violent pattern of state-sanctioned violence, motivated by colonialism and capitalism.

Finally, beyond simply critiquing government-authorized or censored narratives, both cases use their resources to repopulate the cultural landscape with forgotten and excluded histories of different cultures and people. For example, BC Labour has contributed to the "Community Stories Collection", a collection of more than 500 Canadian online projects. With a narrative framed around learning from the past to work towards a better future, BC Labour's digital exhibit "Solidarity: The Largest Political Protest in British Columbia's History" includes photos, videos, artifacts and oral history interviews that showcase how labour and activist organizations forced – through escalated protest actions – the development of the Kelowna Accord. This event became the most prominent political protest in BC's history. Furthermore, BC Labour (2021f) has initiatives with the University of the Fraser Valley to develop the working contributions of South Asian labor. In particular, the project focuses on the various contributions and developments of BC's South Asian labor and forces the public to confront issues around racial exclusion.

Similarly, WAHC (2021g) launched a digital project, 'Workers' City', dedicated to documenting and circulating Hamilton's workers' stories. First, taking the form

of walking tour booklets, the current iteration is in the form of an interactive website and mobile application that showcase many perspectives and stories, with the aim of developing the application to include other stories. In addition, WAHC (2021h) supported events such as screening LGBTQI+ Pride documentaries like "And Still We Rise" that document the resistance to the anti-homosexual act in Uganda, or events like "¡Si Se Puede! (Yes, we can!) Youth Dinner and Workshop", hosted with WAHC's Youth Council and the YMCA's Young Women's Advisory Council. This event brought together diverse, local youth to celebrate and discuss the work of labor activist Dolores Huerta. In the same vein, the event "Women at Work featuring the Hamilton 7" celebrated International Women's Day and Equal Pay Day in Ontario through a community gathering, performance, and storytelling by the women of Hamilton 7, a storytelling collective (WAHC 2021i).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Together, these case studies illustrate three interesting implications. First, from a cultural perspective, both institutions not only started as local cultural projects brought on by the working-class people in their neighborhoods, but these projects also emerged as initiatives to re-appropriate their culture by creating a locally owned and operated space to share and distribute their knowledge, experiences and heritage. In doing so, these institutions engaged in practices that interstitially brought excluded voices and narratives to the forefront of the cultural landscape.

This mission was achieved in two ways: critiquing the official cultural narrative; and repopulating the ceremonial landscape with excluded and ignored public voices, experiences and cultural stories. For example, both cases offered public engagement opportunities (e.g., events, tours, invited speakers and panels) for their various publics to participate in to understand specific issues, regulations and disputed histories, or simply to be informed of the development of essential labor or community subjects (e.g., workplace regulations, social awareness campaigns, the importance and role of unions, etc.). These opportunities offered the public a safe, non-government-monitored space in which to engage with controversial issues and common local problems, and to acquire skills and information not typically circulated in government-owned news or media institutions.

In terms of critique, the mandate of both cases enabled them to reseed the public space physically and digital-



ly with testimonies from the community. For instance, BC Labour populated the Vancouver Convention Centre with plaques from workers, individual contributions, family experiences, and historical controversies. Again, BC Labour also had an ongoing, province-wide physical plaquing strategy featuring dozens of excluded or ignored stories from several people and cultures, all of which were shared freely.

Second, both case studies mobilized their resources for public service from a social innovation lens to symbiotically empower their specific communities. More specifically, they use their resources (i.e., cultural expertise, accessible space, digital materials and archives) to provide a static learning opportunity (i.e., displays, monuments, plaques and exhibits) and active exchanges (i.e., events, workshops and panels) for their participants to be more critical and informed of challenges to their heritage, labor or community. For example, WACH's Solidarity School provides training for new artists and includes interactive sessions on activism and art, as well as on labor subjects like the Employment Standards Act and the importance of the minimum wage campaign, thus equipping new artists with the knowledge to protect themselves as workers. In the case of BC Labour, several projects were initiated to promote important labor issues and celebrations (e.g., Day of Mourning BC Schools Project, the Asbestos Memorial Project, the Labor History Project, etc.), while others, like the development of Labor History Walking Tours, present opportunities to acquire more familiarity with the community's roots and heritage.

Finally, building on the social innovation lens and both implications, we begin to see how both institutions have engaged in practices that attempt to erode the overarching neoliberal system in two ways. First, both case studies are implicated in the symbiotic practices of government and associations. Much as associations act as cultural intermediaries and lobbyists, some overlap with some of the practices of WAHC and BC Labour: most notably, the school and education projects and events (e.g., South Asian Labour History Project or the Migrants Organizing for Rights and Status) and a few commemorative celebrations and memorials (e.g., Day of Mourning or the Asbestos Memorial Project). While these partnerships have mutual benefits for the cultural institutions (i.e., resources, broader appeal, more project opportunities) and government (i.e., local public appeal, shared project risk, smaller resources investment, managing not implementing), they are often short-term. More importantly, these collaborations have their limits and will only go as far as the government allows. Pushing past any intended objective

without government consent may lead to consequences (i.e., project termination, removal from consideration for future funding opportunities, changes in regulations). Second, both institutions also challenge the neoliberal status quo interstitially through their independent work, outside of government, in unoccupied cultural spaces. In other words, both cases resist conforming to or supporting the government authorized narrative by taking on cultural projects that represent peoples and communities that have been excluded or ignored. For instance, although focused on labor, these institutions still feature many diverse themes around vulnerability, including disability (mental health, physical accessibility), identity (gender, LGBTQI+), and heritage (distinct local cultures, industries, ethnicities, regions), thus emerging as a reflection of the diverse community and public.

This research showcases the potential of cultural organizations to resist and fight against the hegemonic cultural discourse curated and reinforced by the government in Canada. More specifically, WAHC and BC Labour commit their institutional practices and resources to various projects that work to ultimately scale back and resist the colonial-inspired practice of forcing a commemorative culture and heritage that is politically and oppressively laden.

In Canada, there exist many reinforced oppressive memorials and statues that represent horrific events, people, or initiatives, such as James McGill (slave owner who enslaved Black and Indigenous people) and Sir John A. Macdonald or Egerton Ryerson (both architects of the residential school system that assimilated, abused, and killed Indigenous children). These names are significant and influential beyond their fixed positions, because they also lend their name to several essential institutions, including educational and public service institutions. By unearthing ignored and excluded accounts of history and culture, community cultural institutions have the potential to empower their respective publics by challenging these unchallenged and established symbols, which are by their very nature oppressively authoritative and misleading about heritage and historical events, because they reduce horrific events and those who suffered to that of a single person. In reducing narratives to individuals that support inequitable hierarchies and practices that sustain them, heritage created and authorized by the Canadian government valorizes competitive individualism over collective and communal values and norms. In the end, for WAHC and BC Labour, heritage is not created by one person alone, but



on the backs of hardworking, exploited laborers through their daily employment.



# Girl! Museum – Activism Through Girl-Centered Museum Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

*"He aha te mea nui o te ao He tangata, he tangata, he tangata/ What is the most important thing in the world? It is the people, it is the people, it is the people."*

This is a Maori whakatauki, a guiding principle of the Indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, my home for two decades. It teaches that people are ultimately and infinitely more important than things – common knowledge and common sense for Indigenous communities that have been murdered, shunned, and oppressed by the colonial cultures, that have usurped them and their land, stolen their material culture, and put it in museums. "Life before art" is what I was taught as a security officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City at the turn of this century. While not entirely sure they meant it two decades ago, my lived experience has reinforced its accuracy. Prioritizing people over things is an ethos that should extend throughout cultural work. Who and what an institution stands for are becoming more valuable than the objects held within the walls. In the future, if they exist, museums will all be activist. As educational and intellectual hubs for communities, they will have to be. As part of the process to both decolonize and indigenize, any cultural institution, regardless of subject area or mission, would do well to take that lesson on board.

Girl Museum, the first and only museum in the world dedicated to girls and girlhood, takes this philosophy to heart. When I founded Girl Museum just over a decade ago, it was to "be a museum", but with an entirely new model of being and purpose. In 2009, a virtual museum was basically unknown, so the path to define and achieve it was



Girl Museum's webpage

wide open. While Girl Museum was not the first virtual museum, it was the first to emulate a physical museum in its purpose, function, and use. Adapting the practices of physical into the virtual space is not straightforward or easily done. The space and the visitor become different concepts with their own benefits and challenges that are in constant negotiation. But the purpose here is not to discuss the definition of a virtual museum, but how art and activism are natural allies, and how museums are perfectly suited to harness the power of both for constructive change. The purpose and mission of Girl Museum is to celebrate girlhood and provide a positive, safe virtual space for girls. As established from its beginning, and as stated on the website, the vision is: "To be a world class, socially responsible virtual museum. To preserve, protect, and advance girl culture from around the world and throughout time. To support healthy, creative minds, safe bodies, and peaceful communities for girls into the future." (Remer 2021a). These are simultaneously attainable and aspirational goals. Some are meant to inspire and drive change, while others are benchmarks to climb on and from.

In the case of Girl Museum, the change desired is better lives and outcomes for girls. That girls are worthy of such an elevated state is confounding to those who are used to the status quo. There are at least five museums in the world dedicated solely to the art and life of Pablo Picasso, who was arguably the most celebrated misogynist in the 20th century art world. Surely girls, who at any given time make up half the population of the planet, deserve to have a place dedicated to them.

To understand the marginalization of girls, one can look at the etymology of the word "girl" and its evolution and contestations over its meaning. As described in Girl Museum's first exhibition, *Defining Our Terms*, "'girl/gurl/gyrle' was originally used in the 14th century to describe a child of either sex and did not specifically refer to females until the 16th century. Although obscure, the root connotation of "girl" is common in most languages, meaning an unmarried or sexually inexperienced female as well as a servant or slave." (Remer 2021b). This defining of the girl by her position in relation to males, her social class and her sexuality provides evidence that girls were not thought of as individuals. The use of the term over time became pejorative, as almost all words related to females do. In the language of colonialism, using words that reinforce the child-like nature of slaves demean and lock those persons in a state of perpetual subservience and reliance on the oppressor. It carried on after the Civil War and into the modern era (Green 2017).

In the 20th century, the term "girl" broke through racial barriers to be used as a misogynistic tool towards women generally. As women of all colors entered the workforce in the 1950s and 1960s, being referred to as a "girl" was *de rigeur* for the office environment. This was for similar reasons as before, to belittle and infantilize women for the power and pleasure of men, who were their superiors in the workplace. As the Women's Movement spread during the 1960s and 1970s, pushing back against the patriarchy included a rejection of the word "girl". Actual girls were now called "young women", which on one hand was empowering and on the other forced social expectations of a more developed maturity on children. The rampant

sexualization of girls during the 1970s in media was no coincidence. This continued into the 1980s, when using sexuality and lost innocence to sell just about anything became standard practice.

While the 1990s saw the term "Girl Power" arise from girl punk and zine culture, it was commodified by the pop music industry via the Spice Girls to push out the notion that girls have power and that they should use that power – ostensibly to buy music, concert tickets, merchandise, etc. However, the concept of girls having power still resonated globally despite the overarching capitalist intentions. Not coincidentally, it ushered in a new strain of research and scholarly writing about girls, especially girls and the media.

These disparate studies and papers gradually coalesced into Girls' or Girlhood Studies, a field that brings together research and scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. Though still largely marginalized by traditional academic subjects, Girlhood Studies has demonstrated that interdisciplinary inquiry can move girls from objects to subjects and call into question girls' significance, even within feminist circles, and help combat internalized misogyny on individual, communal, and societal levels. Inspired by this, Girl Museum combines Museum Studies with Girlhood Studies to reinterpret material culture with this new way of viewing girls and girlhood as integral to understanding human art, history, and culture. This chapter is designed to showcase how Girl Museum is activist by centering the girl philosophically and in practice, and how girls of the past, present, and future are honored.

Using the arts to advocate for social change is a well-worn path, especially for feminism<sup>7</sup>. However, aesthetics has given cover to perceived neutrality. Collection houses that contain fine arts and material culture have always had political agendas, either subtle or overt, but have not typically been advocates for human rights, especially art museums, despite purporting to be educational institutions. However, these thin veils and thick walls have been breaking down over the past decade. Ideally, museums should be places of activism as a matter of policy and programming, finding ways of pro-actively supporting and elevating visitors, communities and staff. If starting from scratch, they can build this into their framework and fabric, but for larger, older institutions, this transition is more difficult. It becomes a matter of how to do it and making this necessary change possible. There are a myriad of ways that museums can be activist. Girl Museum Program Developer Tiffany Isselhardt noted:

own way – sometimes, it's just in the exhibits and programs they present; other times, it's being a communal gathering place for forums and discussions and hard moments; and others are much more actively activist."<sup>8</sup>

For Girl Museum, the primary community is girls. However, social change does not come from only focusing on one group; the community must be built for everyone. The most obvious way that museums can become or commit to an activist agenda is through curation and interpretation. Who and what is shown and celebrated, and how those subjects are discussed are opportunities that many museums use to reinforce norms, but they can also offer a site where norms can be challenged and interrogated.

#### CENTERING THE GIRL: A PHILOSOPHY

Girls seems to be both ever-present, in that images of girls are ubiquitous in museums and in the media, yet usually absent from the dominant social discourse. For over a decade, there has been constant justification of Girl Museum's work, challenged by many who simply do not get the importance or urgency, and by those who should know better – those whose memories of girlhood are purposefully suppressed or deemed just a holding pattern for womanhood. The truth is that girlhood was never homogenous or even a collective experience. It is/was felt and lived differently by each girl, each individual, that has gone through it. Girl Museum honors and celebrates this diversity and works each day to show why she must be protected. The girl is brought from the margins into the center and given her due. Girl Museum brings feminism into the museum space to advocate for girls (Remer & Rhoades 2017). The articulation of its philosophical position has evolved into something unique: a girl-centered feminism focused on girls – their experiences, their survival, and successes. This section explores how to center girls philosophically within a museum institution.

Humans are complicated and cannot be contained in single boxes, and barely even on a spectrum. Kimberlé Crenshaw's breakthrough work on the intersection of factors that come into play when examining people's, especially women's lives, is essential for a more holistic understanding of the human experience. (Crenshaw 1989). A person's class, social status, race, religion, age, location, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. all contribute to different outcomes, yet for girls the situation is dire. Globally, girls are the most marginalized of the marginalized. Holding for every other factor, sex is the most determinant factor in a girl's life experience and expectancy (Sohoni 1995, 4). It is too simplistic even to say that from the moment of birth the odds are against



her. It is from the moment of her mother's birth, and her mother's, and so on. Generations of internalized misogyny and cultural oppression are written into her DNA. The status of girls and women has been worsening over the past five years, despite the Millennium Development Goals set forth by the UN Development Programme (UNDP 2020). As authoritarian tendencies and full-blown regimes become more prevalent, perceived threats give governments, societies, and families any excuse to restrict girls' access to education, and to increase domestic violence and human trafficking.

For all the reasons mentioned above, girl-centered feminism is a departure from how traditional feminism sees itself. But also the centering and elevation of the marginalized (I will not call her the Other, because she is us) disrupts the patriarchal system that even the best feminists are often compelled to uphold. While it seems to some that progress has been made in traditional spaces, Maura Reilly points out in her book *Curatorial Activism*: "It is important not to be seduced by what appear to be the signs of equality – women and non-whites have never been, nor are they yet, treated on par with white men." (Reilly & Lippard 2018, 20). The same goes for girls.

Girl-centered feminism takes feminist standpoint theory, the position of women as the center point and replaces her with the girl. Girl-centered feminism functions as a disruptor in the museum context, which is traditionally an institution of the patriarchy. Even more boldly, it undermines the key message museums traditionally have been constructed to relay – that only great men do great things. The very idea that a girl, seen in many ways as the opposite of a man, could do great things or even be great, is traumatizing to the dominant paradigm. Having a strong philosophical stance gives Girl Museum a solid grounding from which its policies, projects and decisions can stem. The extension of this within the system becomes a girl-centered feminist museology.

Girl-centered feminist museology must take two positions as inalienable. First, it must center the girl and her experience in all decision making. This principle must run across the entire spectrum of activities. The second is taking a pro-girl stance. The implications of this are far more wide reaching than at first glance. Here the question is asked: "How will this decision, project, exhibition, etc. affect girls and will any of those effects be negative or exploitive?" This principle is based on the Native American Seventh Generation Principle as stated by Oren Lyons (Seneca), Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation: "... when you sit in council for the welfare of the people, you

must not think of yourself or of your family, not even of your generation...make your decisions on behalf of the seven generations coming, so that they may enjoy what you have today." (Lyons 2008). This Indigenous philosophy is applicable to all aspects of human decision making. However, here it is specifically applied to the idea that a museum can present a holistic and cohesive message about the value and importance of girls by committing to not exploiting or harming them.

Stating the museum mission is the easiest part – putting the words onto paper where all the staff and the board can access them, to check in with them, to make sure they are living this principle. It is in the day-to-day running and activities of the museum that the principle is challenged and must be constantly re-examined through a process of questioning. For most museums, although uniquely not Girl Museum<sup>9</sup>, a major consideration is the permanent collection. In fact, having a collection is what defines a museum to most within and outside the industry. How girl-centered feminist museology impacts the collection is multifold. Starting with the acquisition process, the object is assessed and questions are asked like: "Did a girl make or use this?", "Is a girl represented by this?", and "Are there any neglected or hidden aspects of this object that are girl-related?" Once acquired, the application in the conservation of objects asks questions about prioritization of care for objects seen as less important because they are made by or for girls. Next, girl-centered feminist museology asks about what is valued enough to put on display. Are there any objects that share girls' stories or do works representing girls include their information or narratives if known? For Girl Museum, because it has no collection and uses other museum collections to explore girl history and representation, it is easier to make these assessments for the purpose of research and exhibitions.

As far as research goes, girl-centered feminist museology is quite clear. First, take the girl as a departure point and then include as many perspectives as is feasible. Within the "girl" topic spectrum, there are almost an infinite number of ideas for exhibitions and projects. This has enabled Girl Museum to participate in many diverse publications and delve into research that no mainstream museum would consider. Personal and professional interests of the team, as well as subjects suggested by the public, generate much of Girl Museum's research and feed directly into the exhibitions and interpretation. Exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, are the next area where girl-centered feminist muse-

ology can be applied.

The exhibitions produced by Girl Museum are all models for social advocacy, even if they are seemingly benign. Interpretation is the forward-facing content in a museum and the output of research. It is key to creating a relationship with viewers as well as transmitting both the philosophy and outlook of the institution. Girl-centered feminist museology guides interpretation by setting a standard for the questions to ask and to try to answer for the public. These include lines of inquiry like: "Who is the girl represented", "Is her name or anything about her life known?", "Is there any record of her own voice or perspective?" For example, in the exhibition *Illustrated Girls*, which explores the drawings of girls in classic children's stories, taken individually they can seem like cute pictures, but collectively they demonstrate how powerful an impact these images have had on generations of girls growing up. Deciding on what aspects of girlhood to showcase is the biggest challenge, as almost anything can be explored. The main concerns are to have a plan and think through the entire process to make sure that nothing about the topic raises any deal-breaking flags or concerns.

As with any museum exhibition process, the audience is of primary concern. Each exhibition at Girl Museum has a slightly different audience as well as a different definition of "girl". Though the overall museum's definition of girl is "self-identifying females under the age of twenty-one," exhibitions are given flexibility to adapt this definition to meet cultural or historical definitions when dealing with different topics, and to introduce audiences to these adaptations as a means of better understanding changes to girlhood over time and space. This is significant as there is no "one size fits all" for learning, so each exhibition must also be its own entity. Girl-centered feminist museology allows for maximum flexibility within the pro-girl framework. This does not mean to shy away from topics and situations that are difficult, such as human trafficking and child prostitution. It serves to support choices and remind creators that exploitation is a fine line, and it is best to err on the side of protecting girls rather than risking harm.

#### CENTERING THE GIRL: A PRACTICE

Rigorously adhering to the underpinning of girl centrism in theory and within the institution becomes a guide for how everything within functions. This section illustrates the practice of centering the girl. As stated earlier,

the mere act of giving girls a platform is controversial. Isselhardt states: "By privileging the viewpoint of girls/girlhood, Girl Museum automatically counters the dominant white capitalist patriarchal narratives of history and culture."<sup>10</sup> Creating a space and a place for girls is best done by girls<sup>11</sup>. To make the most of the minimal tools and resources available, Girl Museum was built by its founder and a small group of dedicated, like-minded volunteers who continue to generously give their time and energies to make it a success. As described above, having a platform of one's own is a reward for the efforts of the team. Run collectively as much as possible, the volunteers who work with Girl Museum are a true community. This was reinforced over the many years of the COVID-19 pandemic when virtual spaces became all that many people had in terms of human contact. When the world went online, Girl Museum provided a beneficial source of community, virtual opportunities for students that required internships for graduation, and a safe space for our team to focus on input and output in all areas of production for the thousands of people who visited.

From its beginning, Girl Museum has been asking: "Where are the girls?" The answer is of course, "everywhere." Content for girls that is not trying to sexualize or commodify them is rare, especially on the Internet. In the museum world it is very rare. Exhibitions about the representations of girls in historic art are almost unknown<sup>12</sup>. Girls are more present in contemporary art, especially photography, but their participation is often quite problematic and/or exploitive. Girls are more often acknowledged in social history museums, but have never been the sole focus of exhibitions. If anything, they get mentioned in relation to clothing, toys or puberty and marriage. Illuminating the lives of girls of the past helps to build understanding and empathy towards them and their present counterparts. They are us. Making the connections between the past and the present is vital for girls to see how they have always had an impact on the world. To this end, Girl Museum has four core exhibition series: *Girlhood in Art*, *The Art of Girlhood*, *Girls in the World*, and *GirlSpeak*. This has now expanded to include a *Contemporary Art* series. (Remer 2021c). There are also projects that fall outside of these categories, usually driven by staff or a new platform.

Demonstrating the diversity of girls' experiences and contributions is the purpose of the four central themes. *Girlhood in Art* explores girls' representations and participation in the fine arts, digging deeper than the typical portraits of princesses and daughters of artists that usually turn up in art museum exhibitions. *Art of Girlhood* examines girls as human – what they do, eat, wear, play,

sing – all the tangible and intangible aspects of a girl's life. *Girls in the World* looks at social issues and injustices from their historic origins and how they impact girls today. While all the series are activist in their own way, this one is purpose built for showcasing it. Lastly is the *GirlSpeak* series, comprised of community-contributed and crowd-sourced content-based shows. Here Girl Museum gives the platform to those who wish to speak and share from their perspective.

Part of the Museum's mission is amplifying girls' voices and showing the ways that "they are us." There are many opportunities for both staff and guest writers to share their thoughts and experiences. Isselhardt stated: "Girl Museum gives girls a voice – both scholarly in examining them, but also by inviting them to participate in the museum process or even give feedback on it. Social media and blogging make this more so, as it empowers girls to lend their authentic voices rather than having the museum speak for them. Letting your community in – as authentic and diverse voices – is not necessarily new to the field, but it is something that many museums still fail to embrace." The blog has been a key part of how Girl Museum relates to the world, finding its multivalent voice and sharing it with others. This is best described by Editor-In-Chief Kathleen Weidmann:

I've always seen it as an extension of Girl Museum's overarching mission...To that end, we're currently refocusing on sharing news stories, political events, media reviews, and research that directly touches upon girls. We're also starting to include original fiction centered around the girlhood experience.<sup>13</sup>

As stated above, Girl Museum seeks to draw attention to the diversity of girls' experiences and lives and to the connections between the past and present. To this end, Girl Museum highlights stories about girls doing great things, but also does not shy away from the many challenging, precarious, and difficult situations facing girls today. Scanning the internet news sources from around the world and sharing it on social media is something people routinely do several times throughout the day, but Girl Museum chooses content to share with a singular purpose, and in doing so, it aims to be more impactful in raising awareness.

#### HONORING THE GIRL: A MOVEMENT

Making the theoretical and practical commitment to centering the girl is the way that Girl Museum uses its position as an activist institution and as an online platform to advocate for the worth and value of girls. This advocacy is a way to showcase and honor girls, but also a call

for others to stand up for them. In this last section, the work of honoring the girl is demonstrated using four Girl Museum exhibition projects: the *Heroines Quilt* series, the *Sites of Girlhood* project, *I am a Girl*, and *Girl Activists*. *Heroines Quilt* became the first recurring exhibition developed by Girl Museum (Remer 2021f). Every even year, starting in 2010, Girl Museum invites the public to submit their girlhood heroines to celebrate Women's History Month. These submissions are posted on each day for the month of March, so that when displayed all together they create a quilt. This was inspired not only by a desire to honor the historic girls' and women's work of quilting, but also by the community action AIDS memorial quilts of the 1980s. The *Heroines Quilt* exhibitions are documentations of girlhood heroines and the lasting impact they have on our lives. Any exhibition driven by public contributions can be unpredictable in terms of participation, and this one has always been difficult to get submissions. To mitigate this, two of the *Heroines Quilt* exhibitions departed from the community-driven method to focus on larger themes and specific heroines of the Middle Ages and the First World War to honor its centenary.

The *Heroines Quilt* exhibitions provide a unique opportunity for participants to recall their childhoods and write about their earlier selves and their role models. This is a quiet but powerful act of reconciling the memory and the self with expectations of futures already now lived. There were many who submitted with comments along the lines of how nice it was just to think about their girlhoods again and sit with some of those memories and the joy they brought. By compiling the quilt-square heroines, the exhibitions create a community, not only of those heroines, but of those who participate. The act of looking celebrates those people and characters that populate our pasts as individuals and as collectives, of generations raised with access to similar content and values. Making connections between yourself and others' experiences in the past helps reinforce bonds that remind us of our need for community. Memories of girlhood shape people's lives in important and different ways – some may recall vividly the adventures they had as girls, while others want to forget or disregard the significance of these experiences. While these may seem small, even these tiny acts of honoring the self and those who contributed to the construction of the self are significant in acknowledging that humans are at once individuals and inseparable from the communities that raised them.

A more purposefully international looking,



"Girl Activists" Exhibition banner.

yet still local-focused exhibition is the Sites of Girlhood. The premise is to identify girls around the world and their achievements and literally put them on the map. The primary component of the exhibition is a searchable Google map populated with stories of girls from around the world. Project Manager Brittany Hill shared that: "[Sites] honors girls in the best way – by not focusing on cultural ideas of beauty and grace, but also honors all those girls are capable of fighting for an idea, giving back, and creating a more loving a colorful world."<sup>14</sup> The project highlights a range of experiences and is focused not only on the positive ones. There is a pin for the memorial to the witch burnings in northern Norway and one for where Joan of Arc was murdered by an English religious court. There is a pin to honor the girls who drowned off the coast of Italy trying to flee from north Africa and one for girls who died in menstrual huts in Nepal. Showing the myriad of girls' experiences, to paint a full picture of what lives are like is the true purpose and seeing that displayed on a map of the world reinforces the reality that girls are significant everywhere.

Not surprisingly, the distribution of girls' stories is uneven and quite difficult to access in many places. Hill noted that finding stories about Indigenous cultures, especially in formerly colonized places, was challenging. But so were the stories of girls in developed nations that would think of themselves as advanced in terms of social justice.<sup>15</sup> This first phase of the project is populating the map with those stories that Girl Museum can source from research. The next phase will rely on individuals contributing stories of girls from their communities. While this project is still being rolled out, it will

give opportunities for celebration and memorializing of girls of the past and the present whom the world would otherwise never know about.

A very special exhibition that was a long time coming launched in September 2021 – I Am A Girl. While it is obviously about identity, this exhibition explores historic and contemporary attempts to define girls and how they define(d) themselves. Described by its co-curator, Yuwen Zhang:

This exhibit and the discussion it invites are not an attempt to come up with a single and ultimate definition of girlhood, but to show the public the diversity of girlhood and the fluidity of gender identity today. We tried to incorporate diverse views, from scholars to the general public. We also tried to show these thoughts and definitions from a variety of dimensions. For example, how girlhood is defined from historical and contemporary perspectives, and how girls identify as a 'girl' differently.<sup>16</sup>

Simply trying to explore the definition of girl and girlhood might not seem like a radical act, but it is, and risky as well. Girl Museum has tried to create an experience that will be challenging and reassuring.

Identities have always been in flux, but for the marginalized, only during the past decade or so have there been more outlets to make public declarations or even explorations. And few of these have been safe places.<sup>17</sup> The exhibition documents the varied experiences and thoughts of girls, functioning as a space for girls to talk about their experiences and identities while feeling free and supported. Honoring and celebrating the diversity of girlhood was challenging for the team, especially as hi-



storic information about girls is largely written not only by men, but mostly by adults. So, accessing girls' own experiences and thoughts within the global archive is a titanic undertaking. Zhang shared some specific challenges:

After finishing the first draft of the timeline of girlhood definitions, I found that I unconsciously included many examples of Western, white girls. Then I set out to look for more 'outside of mainstream' research, only to find girlhood studies is an emerging research area and most of the research is focused on girlhood in Western society. As a girl growing up in Asia, I felt a bit disappointed and that is sort of a challenge.<sup>18</sup>

Getting the tone correct and making sure everyone is included is an ongoing challenge and no doubt there will be absences. For this reason, the exhibition is open for people to contribute after it launches as well. This is a way Girl Museum can constantly expand the conversation and the information available by welcoming community contributions. Reflecting on the importance of such an exhibition for girls' education and empowerment, Zhang said: "I Am A Girl gives girls an opportunity to show themselves and encourages them to engage in personal reflection. Giving girls a voice definitely demonstrates action upon inequalities and injustices!" As she works in education, she said:

I especially agree with this. Powerful changes always make it continue to spread, and museums are vital sites for that to happen. For educators, their recognition and awareness of girlhood and girl power will influence the education of the next generation. For young people, seeing strong role models can empower them to change for the better.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, for the lives of girls today, it is possible to dive further and create more nuanced content as the knowledge and access is present. In 2021, Girl Museum launched an exhibition called Girl Activists, showcasing just how important being an activist is to girls and to the museum. The show highlighted girls around the world standing up for themselves as girls, the environment, their communities, water access, education and more. "By giving girls a voice, a museum inherently says, 'girls are important' and 'girls should be valued, listened to, heard' — and in a white capitalist patriarchy, that is activist," stated Isslehardt<sup>21</sup>. Guest curators Paola Gianturco and Gayle Kimball, who are both important writers about girls and their power, put together an exhibition that celebrates girls' thoughts and actions that can become a road map for others to follow their lead. It honors girls who are honoring their foremothers, themselves and the planet through activism, and nothing gives more hope for the future. The type of show is an ideal example of the multiple levels of philosophical, ethical,

and pragmatic ways in which Girl Museum practices museum activism.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Perhaps, just like girls, seeing strong models can also empower museums to do better. In their recent book *Museum Activism*, Janes & Sandell wrote that less than ten years ago, it would be unusual and even disparaged for a museum to engage in explicit activism related to injustices, human rights, and environmental issues. (Janes & Sandell 2019). This was evidenced by my own experience at the 2011 American Association of Museums<sup>22</sup> conference in Houston, Texas, which seemed to be entirely funded by the oil industry. The acceptance of big oil or other extractive/exploitive money in museums was ubiquitous and advocating for ethical sponsorship in my own museum seemed naive to those who would even engage in a discussion about it. It seems that now the tide has turned. Positive steps include the University of Leicester's 'Socially Engaged Practice in Galleries and Museums' course (Adair & Levin 2020). More education and training programs will hopefully follow suit and require courses in social responsibility and activism rather than just offering them.

So how can museums effectively be activist without being tokenistic, opportunistic, appropriating, or commodifying? They must make activism a core part of their mission and values system that guides all activities. This was the driver for Girl Museum. While it may be tempting to think doing so in the virtual space would make such a mission easier, it is not the case. Embracing a mission that goes against the status quo — and embraces activism for a marginalized group (girls) that is still under threat — and the very idea of centering girls' experiences and points of view become an invitation for violence. Girl Museum has been attacked by online trolls, with hackers destroying the site in 2018, and faces the need for constant site monitoring and annual discussions on fundraising without sacrificing our values. So, accepting the risks of being a target and the limitations of what can be done within a miniscule budget, while pushing the boundaries of what is possible, has been a big learning curve, but also taken in our stride. There is no institution in the world that cannot do better in policy and practice in service to its community.

The biggest lesson of the past decade for Girl Museum is just to keep going and keep an open mind and heart about learning how to do better while remaining true to our mission — and more importantly, to the



people that we serve. Though we do not watch our visitors walk through the door, we have seen the impact that our platform has on individuals. Contrary to assumptions, online activism is not just about reach. It is about doing good work and impacting one person at a time. One of the highest compliments given to us was from 11-year-old journalist Willa from the New Moon Girls magazine: "Girl Museum is fascinating, sweet, sad, amazing, and makes you wonder and think. THANK YOU to Ashley and everyone there for making this!" (Remer 2021e). To have the expectation of changing the world by reaching millions online is to fail before starting. So, as Zhang so aptly put it:

Having an impact on a few and then making changes for many, in my point of view, is also one of the goals of activism in general: activism is all about bringing positive social changes. Activists empower individuals, make changes in communities, and in the end bring society toward a greater good.<sup>23</sup>

A perfect museum is not possible, but creating and adhering to an activist mission, while remaining flexible and adaptable to the world, is a challenge all should attempt. Through small steps taken together, museums can change the world.

7

While artists have used their work to comment on society and the government for millennia, since the 1960s global art activism has become more prominent, organized, and targeted. In terms of feminism, there have been the Guerilla Girls, Barbara Kruger, Judy Chicago, Jenny Holzer, to name just a few.

8

Tiffany Isselhardt, email conversation with author, June 16, 2021.

9

Girl Museum started out as a non-collecting institution and maintained that we would only collect digital images. Since then, a few digital images and paintings have been donated.

10

Tiffany Isselhardt, email conversation with author, June 16, 2021.

11

By "girls" here, I mean a broad concept encompassing those who identify as girls, those who consider themselves grown up girls (or adult women who had girlhoods), trans-girls, etc.

12

There have only been two to the best of my knowledge, *Picturing Her* at the McCord Museum in Montreal, Canada in 2008 and *Angels and Tomboys* at the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey, USA in 2012.

13

Kathleen Weidmann, email conversation with author, June 17, 2021.

14

Brittany Hill, email conversation with author, June 16, 2021.

15

Ibid.

16

Yuwen Zhang, email conversation with author, June 21, 2021.

17

Girl Museum functions as an online safe place where girls can express themselves free of judgement, protected from online trolls (as much as possible), where they control how to engage or not. This includes deleting content that they then change their minds about sharing.

18

Zhang, Yuwen. Email conversation with author, June 21, 2021.

19

Ibid.

21

Isselhardt, Tiffany. Email conversation with author, June 16, 2021.

22

As the American Alliance of Museum was then known.

23

Yuwen Zhang, email conversation with author, June 21, 2021.



# The Creation of FLUGT

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## THEORY AND METHOD

There are several ways for museums to be activist. In her article, "'I'm gonna do something' – Moving beyond talk in the museum", the English researcher/author Bernadette Lynch identifies two trends: operational activism, whereby museums aim to make a difference for vulnerable groups; and performative activism, whereby museums represent vulnerable groups and their stories (Lynch 2019).

Even though both approaches have something positive to offer, both also present challenges. Operational activism calls for knowledge about vulnerable groups, which is not usually part of the work or knowledge area of many museums, while the vulnerable groups also need to exist in the museum's community if their efforts are to make sense. Otherwise, cooperation requires time and resources for transport between various towns and areas. Conversely, the performative approach may mean that the museums will be activist on behalf of the vulnerable groups and, as a result, the latter will lose their opportunity to be active in tandem with the museum.

FLUGT's exhibits veer towards the performative approach. The personal stories of refugees form the basis of the exhibits created by Vardemuseerne in collaboration with the Dutch design agency Tinker Imagineers. While we gave refugees a voice in the exhibit, it was also important for us to reach out to the countless visitors who visit our area every year, taking them on a journey, in which we move from numbers to people, and opening their eyes to the reality of being a refugee. It is in this context that performative activism emerges. Thus, our focus is not "me–

rely" on refugees, but also on our visitors and the insight they can gain at the museum, the dialog and debate this can kindle and, particularly, the empathy, which they can take out into the community and thereby make a difference.

There are several reasons for this, including our academic and professional background. Vardemuseerne has a tradition of working with target groups and creating new exhibits and museums.<sup>26</sup> Although we have been good at raising the bar in terms of what exhibits can and should be able to do, this background influenced us. Initially, activism was not a concept we consciously understood. Therefore, we spent time on study trips and meetings, where we tried to gain a closer sense of what activism meant for us. We discovered that it was, to a huge extent, about giving refugees a voice. Due to our lack of knowledge and experience of working with vulnerable groups, and because there were only a few refugees in our neighboring community, it became more about how we could use insight to qualify the ongoing debate about refugees, than about being active and thereby activist with refugees. We ourselves have no first-hand experience of fleeing, so it was equally important for us to involve refugees in the process. The result was therefore more performative than operational. As we will explain later, in the future we aim to apply operational activism as a supplement to the performative approach.

As mentioned before, the exhibits in FLUGT are based on a large number of personal stories, but it was neither possible nor always desirable to incorporate all the stories we collected. The goal of the collection was to ensure a representative selection of stories across time and place. The selection of stories was also based on the fact that we were dealing with people whose native language is not Danish and who sometimes had only been in the country for a few months before we met them for the first time. This meant that misunderstandings could easily arise, for example, as a result of interpretation or difficult-to-understand Danish. In some cases, it meant we had to jettison those stories, because it was vital that the refugees understood what we were asking of them. It was equally important for us to understand their entire stories so as to avoid any misunderstandings in their subsequent representation in the exhibits. The fact that we discarded certain stories means that certain voices do not get heard at the museum. This could be looked upon as problematic. On the other hand, all the stories made a huge impact on the project, as they helped not only to nuance, but also enhance our view of what being a refugee means. This insight also helped us when coming up

with the concept for the exhibit and in subsequent interview situations.

#### FLUGT – AN INTRODUCTION

As already mentioned, this article is all about FLUGT – Refugee Museum of Denmark, which opened in Oksbøl in the summer of 2022. The basis for the museum is the violent story of the the millions of German civilians who fled the horrors of war on the Eastern Front in the winter of 1945. While fleeing, tens of thousands of them died of cold, starvation and the assaults inflicted on them by the Red Army. The majority of them arrived safely further west in war-torn Germany, but about 250,000 reached Denmark – ill, exhausted and suffering from their devastating, grueling escape. At the same time, in the last months of the war, they arrived in a country that basically did not want them after almost five years of German occupation.

After liberation in 1945, the Oksbøl camp, which had served as a German military camp during the war, was used to accommodate many of the German refugees who at that time could not return to Germany. None of the refugees were allowed to leave Denmark until contact could be established with family and friends back in Germany, who could take care of them, and until there was more order in Germany.

During the four years of the camp's existence, it became nothing short of a city behind barbed wire with institutional kitchens, schools, a theatre, a cinema, a police station, a fire station and a town hall. The refugee camp was also the largest in Denmark with 35,000 inhabitants in 1946 alone.

At the end of 1946, the first refugees were allowed to leave Denmark. However, the vast majority of them did not return home or to the areas whence they had fled but were divided between the four occupation zones and thus distributed throughout most of Germany. Although the refugees were given the opportunity to state where they wished to go, it still meant that virtually all of them had to establish a new home in areas they did not know – and areas that did not necessarily want them. After the war, the local population often had enough to do fending for themselves.

By February 1949, the large refugee camp in Oksbøl was empty. In the following year, it was demolished building by building so that the building materials could be recycled in the construction of new houses in post-war Denmark. Conscientious objectors



German refugees fleeing the horrors of war at the East Front in 1945.  
Foto: Unknown



The old refugee camp in Oksbøl.  
Foto: Blåvandshuk Lokalhistoriske arkiv





Impression from the first part of the exhibition "Refugees at all times" at FLUGT. Foto: Mike Bink



Museum guest going in the audio tour in the former refugee camp in Oksbøl  
Foto: Mike Bink

ground bricks into mortar, and removed doors, windows and wood-burning stoves until ultimately nothing remained other than the buildings used during the demolition process, the camp's cemetery and the ground plan of the camp in the shape of paths and roads (Jensen 2020). One of these buildings is the camp's hospital, and it is here that FLUGT was established in the summer of 2022 – filled with personal stories of flight and being a refugee across time and place. The stories are thus not only about German refugees, but also about Hungarian, Bosnian, Syrian and countless other refugees, all helping to put a human face on the intangible figures in the media.

#### HISTORY IS IMPORTANT, BUT SO IS THE PRESENT.

The story of the German refugees forms the basis for FLUGT: partly because the museum is located in one of the last buildings from the refugee camp, and partly because history is often a safe area that can be easier to relate to than the present, which can be both complicated and problematic and colored by strong attitudes.

In this context, history can help us learn more about ourselves and the world in which we live. So, in FLUGT we chose to juxtapose the German stories with the stories of modern-day refugees, extending from 1949 to the present day. This approach helps spotlight the fact that refugee stories and the related themes are universal – not something that only go on today. Finally, the juxtaposition can also show why it is both important and necessary to know why some people flee today.

In this context, FLUGT is made up of three experiences, in which the Refugees at All Times exhibit is divided into two parts – telling stories both about the German refugees and about more recent refugees. The personal stories give voice to and put a face on the huge numbers we know from the media. The two other sections deal solely with the Oksbøl Refugee Camp – in an exhibit featuring original objects, photographs and drawings – and the outdoor area of the camp. Visitors can visit the cemetery and the last residential barracks and go on an "audio walk" that whisks them back to the time when the largest refugee camp in Denmark was located in Oksbøl, as they walk along the original paths and roads of the camp. Together, the three sections of the exhibit make the refugee issue relevant and relatable, so we can see ourselves in it and, maybe most of all, in the people it is all about.

#### FLUGT AND ACTIVISM

As mentioned previously, the fundamental objective of FLUGT was to give both a face and a voice to refugees: people who,

throughout history, have been dehumanized in public debate, reduced to a number and a problem for society. By using the position of the museum in society as a megaphone for this theme, in the exhibits we sought to represent each individual with respect, while sparking reflections that may lead to actions, either on behalf of, or together with refugees. So, it is worth considering whether a visit to a museum can actually impact the subsequent thoughts and actions of visitors. Therefore, in FLUGT, activism is defined by the presentation of a complex theme in exhibits that aim to provide guests with new perspectives on refugees on the basis of the refugees' own stories. History forms the basis of the exhibits, nuancing the usual presentation of the subject in the press and on social media. In the long term, FLUGT also aims to be a meeting place for discussion events, at which people can air divergent views to be anchored in the museum's subject area. The desire of the museum is to create a framework for meetings between people and to nuance the debate. This is part of what we understand by the term "activist museum", where one of the declared goals is to give refugees a voice and a face, provide visitors to the museum with insight, and deploy a performative approach to qualify and promote democratic conversations. It is this overall understanding that forms the basis for the considerations that the following sections identify.

#### REPRESENTATION AND EMOTIONS

As the overall ideas for the development of FLUGT fell into place, work began on creating the exhibits for the museum. As mentioned, the exhibition is divided into three parts: first, the history of fleeing through the ages; secondly, the story of the site and the German refugees in the Oksbøl camp. The third part features an account of the history of the refugee camp outside in the plantation where the camp was located. Visitors can go an audio walk around the traces of the original camp, listening to the story precisely where it took place and getting a sense of the size of the camp. For more than 40 years, historians at Vardemuseerne have accumulated knowledge about the Oksbøl camp and the flows of German refugees in the wake of World War II. But now it was time to start gathering material about refugees in more recent times. The interviews and objects we collected gave rise to new considerations, when selecting cases for the exhibits. We needed to define the limits of what we could and should show. For example, there is a difference between seeing images in the media and in a museum. The exhibition medium can make it difficult to block out images, moods, stories and emotions, partly because you are in the middle of it. It is easier to turn off the TV or close the newspaper and return to normality. So, we needed to



strike the balance between giving refugees a voice and telling intense stories about the suffering of real people, touching the guests and giving them food for thought, but never giving them a downright unpleasant experience so they would never wish to visit the museum again. On the other hand, it was also very important for us to be true to the stories of the refugees – stories, which sometimes contained violence. This section will, therefore, look at how we collected interviews and how we considered representation and emotions in an exhibition context.

#### INTERVIEWS WITH REFUGEES

Part of the preparation for the exhibits in FLUGT involved conducting a number of personal interviews with people who had experienced flight and who now resided in Denmark, arriving in the country between 1956 and today. Overall, the museum tackles a tough, serious subject and this applied equally to the collection of modern stories about experience of flight. These people shared their vulnerable, personal and, in many cases, traumatic stories with us – stories that would then be presented in the museum's exhibits. This required circumspection. But it was also important for us, precisely because these personal stories can help make a difference in terms of our understanding of what being a refugee means.

During the creation of FLUGT, people with experiences of flight served as informants, sharing their stories with us in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. It was important for us to collect the stories because they would form a basis of testimony. Their statements and stories helped shape and formed the basis for the museum's exhibits. The people who told us about their flight helped us by describing their experiences, because none of us involved in devising the museum's exhibits had any such experience. More than anything else, their experiences, voices and authentic stories can represent and nuance the narrative we hear about refugees.

At the start of each interview, we introduced the informant to the overall concept of FLUGT and explained the purpose of the interview: to create an empirical basis for, and insight into the experiences, moods and feelings implicit in a refugee's life. We also explained that we would use some of the stories in the museum's exhibit. We also explained to the interviewees that the goal of the interviews was to put a human face on refugees – if not literally, then metaphorically – in that a human, personal story nuances the refugee narrative, which we often encounter in media discourses and public debates. The desire to create nuances and bring human experiences into play undoubtedly contributed to the motivation of the informants who told us their stories.

In all these interviews, we attempted to identify a topic that for many people is personal and vulnerable. That meant we were moving into sensitive territory, where we constantly had to scrutinize and consider what we could and could not talk about. We talked to people who had fled at many different times – both in terms of their stage of life and period of time. They had escaped from many different places in the world and in many different ways. We asked them what they had come from, what had gone on prior to fleeing and what had happened both along the way and after they arrived in Denmark. But most importantly, we allowed each story to shape itself individually, enabling the informants to tell their story as they wanted it to be told.

The structure of the interviews was very open, using a general interview guide that was constantly adapted for each individual interview. Each story is unique, and each narrator should have the opportunity to highlight the elements of their experience of flight, which they deemed particularly important and were comfortable describing. So, the starting point differed greatly from interview to interview. After all, when does the story of a life uprooted really begin and, when if ever, does it end?

Some stories started with the moment the first bomb exploded; others the moment they fled. Some started with detailed descriptions of everyday life – before escape was even an issue. Others even started long before the narrator was born to illustrate the fact that some conflicts and their consequences extended over generations.

Stories of flight are not only stories of conflict, war and crossing borders in the dead of night. They are also stories of people saying goodbye to all that their existence entailed: family, friends, schooling, career, everyday life and dreams. They are also stories about everything that happened afterwards: all the other things that make up a person's life. Many of the people we talked to described the loss of identity involved in fleeing from their life in one place and starting over somewhere else. For many of the interviewees, it was important to stress the fact that experiences of flight do not end just because the actual flight does. The consequences of fleeing stay with people for life.

Some of them gave detailed accounts of their escape routes and experiences along the way, while others made no bones about the fact they deliberately did not talk about certain things, because it

was too difficult for them. No one was under any obligation to tell us their personal stories. More than anything else, it was crucial to create a sense of security and to avoid re-traumatizing the people who chose to share their stories with us. No one needed to share anything with us – or exhibit part of their life in a museum – that felt transgressive.

There were some things we could not address at the museum. Some refugees struggled with the Danish language, so we were not sure if they understood our questions. On other occasions we simply did not get to hear their stories in the interview situation, in which the time restriction was also a deciding factor vis-à-vis the sensitivity of the topics we could broach. But also, as mentioned before, because the interviewee kept quiet about these topics. At the same time, we only heard a sample of the many refugee stories that existed. That is why it is vital to stress that at FLUGT we did not strive to create a complete picture that articulated every aspect of the world's refugee situation. That was quite simply impossible. But we could give the informants a voice and highlight patterns that recurred in the stories: characteristics, similarities, descriptions common to the stories we collated – elements of the personal stories that are at once totally individual, yet at the same time have something universal about them. Because, as human beings, we find value, security and meaning – meaninglessness too, for that matter – in many of the same things across time, place and cultures. Finally, we could seek to ensure representativeness and balance in our selection of stories.

Linguistic barriers, especially in interview situations where interpretation was not an option, was another reason why we could not access certain stories. Accordingly, at the museum, when selecting the stories, we also assessed whether we could justify the inclusion of a story in the exhibits if it was uncertain whether the informants had understood linguistically what we asked them for when they shared their story with us. In some cases, we ended up not telling certain very poignant stories in the museum.

Before including a refugee story in the museum's exhibits, we submitted it to an editing process. This was necessary, given that our communication to our visitors is based on audio guides, which require a short format. For one thing, this meant that we rewrote the stories, but endeavoring to remain as faithful as possible to them. The stories were then recorded by actors who

interpreted the stories with emotions and moods. In this context, the refugees included in the exhibits can be said to have become activists. However, as a result of selection, rewriting, interpretation by actors and subsequent composition, they may also have taken something of a back seat. It is the voices of the actors who recorded the stories we hear as opposed to those of the refugees. One could argue that this creates distance between the refugees and visitors to the museum, removing an element of the authenticity and activism. On the other hand, it was important for the tone of voice to be both evocative and emotional, and to feature clear pronunciation that everyone could understand. It was also essential to operate with three languages in FLUGT – Danish, English and German – so that as many people as possible could enjoy a visit to the museum. Having said that, the activist element can never be completely taken away from the refugees, because they made their personal story and voice available to the museum. This was vitally important, given that these stories form the common thread of the exhibit and made such an important contribution to the profile of the museum. But of course, the approach impacted the type of activism at FLUGT: performative activism.

However, the use of audio guides plays another significant role in terms of the experience, since they help bring our visitors closer to the stories by personalizing them with real voices, sounds, moods and emotions. We had also learned from our experience with Tirpitz (where we also use audio guides) that sound facilitates greater contemplation than if visitors have to read stories – for example, on signs and posters.

However, there is a downside to the use of audio guides with headphones. Silence reigns, and we rarely hear visitors talking to each other in the exhibits, which may be a problem vis-à-vis our ambition to be a meeting place and a venue that boosts democratic dialog. On the other hand, we also find that our visitors make great use of our café and garden, and that they often need to talk about their experiences with our museum hosts on the way out and when returning their audio guide. In this context, we assume that the dialog continues on the way home when people's experiences and thoughts have really gelled. This is something it will be interesting to investigate in the future.

#### EXHIBITS WITH EMOTIONAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Selecting stories for the exhibits was also a matter of







Majority of visitors talk in the museum  
café and garden, some some also  
discuss the exhibitions while seeing it.  
Foto: Mike Bink



ethics. What stories could we permit ourselves to present and how? The year is 2015. On a beach in Turkey lies a 3-year-old boy who has drowned, his head submersed in sand and the ripples of the waves. The image is circulated throughout the world and this small, lifeless body in the red T-shirt and blue shorts becomes a symbol of the gravity of the refugee situation and its major human consequences. Today, the image is iconic. For most viewers, it immediately evokes the civil war in Syria and the countless crowded rubber dinghies in the Mediterranean, almost certainly accompanied for many people by an unpleasant, sinking feeling in their stomach.

The question is: do photos such as that of Aylan Kurdi, as the boy was called, belong naturally to a museum dedicated to refugee stories? The photo actually does feature in our museum. Does it cross a line that lies somewhere between the representation of violent, personal stories about real human life and the experience of visitors to the museum? On the one hand, the image is widely known from the media etc.; on the other hand, its presentation in a museum context means that visitors are forced to relate to it in a new way. In other words, the context in which it is displayed plays a key role and can help reinforce the content.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma, nor is there any right or wrong answer. Boundaries will vary from person to person. But ultimately the question is about what measures one should deploy in exhibits to promote understanding and empathy among our visitors as part of our activism, regardless of whether that understanding of the topic is positive or negative. How confrontational or activist can we be in our public engagement in our endeavour to underscore the narrative of the exhibit?

We are very conscious of the fact that as a museum we are faced with a privileged dilemma. While our job is to convey a story that, in a professionally sound way, elaborates on this complex theme, we must also reach our visitors and influence them. For more than 100 million people throughout the world, this is not just a "story". It is their reality. As a museum, we need to be aware of this responsibility. We must also consider our visitors when we devise exhibits. Many of the visitors to FLUGT have absolutely no experience of fleeing or escaping. For them, their visit to FLUGT will hopefully engender insight and reflection and, when they leave the museum, hopefully the experience and contemplation will remain with them for some time. But people who have been refugees are impacted for life. So, our task

is to create opportunities for experiences that move our visitors, making them feel something, think about their own opinion, reflect and compare their own life to that of the refugees and maybe also do something, which would emphasize the activist element of FLUGT. Empathy for certain groups can only grow if we make sure that there are places that provide nuanced insights and narratives, which we can both relate to and mirror ourselves in.

People who have no experience of fleeing, will never fully understand what it means. Nor is it our intention for FLUGT to give visitors a physical sensation or sensory experience of flight. But it is great if they gain insight into and think about what it means to leave behind everything you know. To uproot yourself. To be scared and desperate and maybe to find yourself again in a new place. We try to appeal to universal human emotions that provide us with a common frame of reference for understanding the subject of the museum: emotions such as sadness, joy and hope, with which we are all familiar from our lives in different situations, and which enhance our understanding. We are not talking about emotion for emotion's sake, but emotions should be involved, because we learn and remember better when we are emotional (Austing & Sørensen 2006). We take experiences away with us and become potentially receptive to shifting our point of view. That is why it is also important to find a balance, in which our feelings do not get out of control and turn into some kind of emotional pornography, or guests leave the museum with stomachache, distancing themselves and switching off in order to protect themselves. It is our responsibility to strike a reasonable balance and arrive at a point where we fabricate empathy rather than sympathy. Finally, images and stories must never be presented in such a way that the refugees cannot recognize themselves in them. We must constantly ensure that they are constructively included in the journey we want to take our guests on, so that it is not the content as such that constitutes the activism, but the voices of the refugees, the journey and the reflections they kindle.

#### ACTIVIST AND DIALOG-BASED PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND INTERPRETATION

FLUGT is an important learning environment for schools and educational institutions. In Vardemuseerne LEARNING we constantly consider what approaches we need to deploy to promote learning, and how to activate our knowledge, space and museum objects so they also benefit younger generations. One of our greatest priorities is how as a museum we can contribute to the democratic development of children and young people and their ability to make up their mind, on the basis of both history

and the personal refugee stories featured in the museum. The latter are particularly relevant in relation to our public engagement and interpretation activities for children and young people visiting FLUGT. Over the years, Vardemuseerne LEARNING has gained comprehensive experience of conveying different topics in the fields of both cultural history and the natural sciences, and we constantly reflect on, and discuss what approaches are best in a learning context.

For some years, we had presented the story of the German refugees in Denmark's largest refugee camp after World War II in an existing public engagement/interpretation program for secondary school pupils. The program, entitled *People Behind Barbed Wire*, is process-based, involving work both before and after the pupils' visit to the former refugee camp in Oksbøl. The learning activities of the material were inspired by cooperative learning and dialog-based public engagement/interpretation, requiring collaboration between the pupils. The storytelling in the program is based on some of the real human fates we know about from the Oksbøl camp. However, they are versioned to ensure a strong, communicative narrative that tackles the various themes the pupils have to work on: flight, uncertainty, lack of food, war, self-determination. The pupils are divided into groups, and each group is given a suitcase with an "identity". They are then guided around the area, given assignments, work together and exchange suitcases. Working together, each group has to identify the resource that their "identity" is missing. In short, they have to sit for a while "in the shoes of a refugee" where a real refugee camp was once located. As in the exhibits, we found that placing extra emphasis on some selected personal stories helps stimulate the young people's sense of empathy. However, one of the challenges of this is that the pupils get a slightly one-sided picture of refugees, which is at odds with the ambition of the museum. However, for the young people, the experience of meeting a "real person" actualizes the overall theme of flight, making it more relatable, even though it involves the voice of both history and the museum. Even though the program mainly addresses the German refugees in Denmark after World War II, discussions with the young people move on to the topic of today's refugees, and there is usually a connection to their own lives. Thereby, the program reflects not only a link between past and present refugees, but also the museum's activism, since, on the basis of personal stories, history provides insight into what it means to be a refugee, and generates dialog about, and reflections on what being a refugee may be like today. The program thus creates its own kind of journey and invites the pupils to take part in it.

Sometimes in the program we encounter pupils who, for one reason or another, express extreme or unbalanced attitudes that can be difficult to accommodate and tackle. On one hand, as museum educators we are very interested in creating space for reflection and discussion among visitors. On the other hand, though, we do not want to become a kind of catalyst for hateful and offensive utterances and comments. When trying to challenge these pupils and their attitudes, we often find that some of them are totally unwilling to enter into discussion. On the contrary, they may adopt a provocative approach to the subject. This usually leads to a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in the rest of the group, which does nothing to boost the young people's democratic self-confidence. On the other hand, this uncertainty is also important, because maybe the pupils really learn something about each other. We just have to provide a professional framework, in which there is room for different attitudes and the pupils can feel safe.

The intention of an activist presentation of a topic such as flight and refugees, in addition to empathy, is to support the democratic development and dialog of young people. We also see this in the ability of young people to take a stance. Unfortunately, though, in some cases, the opposite is true. We have found that many of the young people initially find it difficult to make up their mind about such a major topic. They appear to find it risky to elaborate on why they think as they do. Fortunately, we often find too that their self-confidence grows during the program. Most students are good at reflecting on, and understanding even complex issues, once they have the time and opportunity to delve into special personal fates and circumstances and get close to the stories. The *People Behind Barbed Wire* program is a good example of a concept that creates a safe learning environment that paves the way for understanding, dialog and debate, and ultimately stretches the pupils and extends their horizons.

Based on these learning experiences, we are now devising new programs for FLUGT. Given the ambition of FLUGT to be a meeting place for dialog and new realizations, the educational programs need to have the same objective. We are more than aware that we are moving into a sensitive and controversial public engagement and interpretation environment. The fact that we present past actions and issues in a contemporary perspective can give rise to exciting and fruitful, but probably also intense discussions and debates. At the same time, we

aim to devise educational programs that can convey history to both kindergarten children and high school students with the same overall goal: to actualize history, turn statistics into humans and inspire (self-) knowledge and democratic conversation.

It goes without saying that this is a challenge, but the personal refugee stories, museum objects and the museum space are a huge help in our public engagement/interpretation efforts. These elements are particularly helpful to the activist approach, when introducing this complex theme in a non-classroom setting where history was actually made. Here, our role as museum educators is also a strength, since we can assume a more objective position in the learning situation, guiding pupils towards an expanded understanding, and facilitating a conversation or debate based on objects or setting.

When devising programs for FLUGT, we aim at providing educational institutions with teaching that is more case- and practice-based than what ordinary classroom teaching is able to. We regard it as one of our most important tasks to help give children and young people the opportunity to learn about themselves as people, people with and without refugee experiences in their immediate environment and the world of which they are part. So, we strive to create a space for wonder and reflection and, particularly, a space, in which pupils can feel safe about sharing their thoughts with each other and us.

#### FLUGT AND COMMUNICATION

In FLUGT, the task of communication (in this context, mainly social media) is a particular challenge, because the aim of the museum is to be a forum for the theme of refugees viewed in both a historical and a current light. In both traditional and social media, when themes such as flight and refugees are on the agenda, the debate and tone are often unnuanced and perfidious. Lines quickly get drawn and the opposing views rarely leave room for the nuanced reflection that shows the people that the whole topic is about. That is why the communication of FLUGT is a balancing act, in which we constantly have to weigh the content, so that the strong attitudes and deep feelings the content may generate do not overshadow the stories we want to tell. At the same time, when communicating FLUGT, we have to strike a balance between different refugee flows, so that we can tell the site-specific stories about the German refugees and treat fairly the many refugees who have come to Denmark since then. Our communication must give them all a

voice.

Our approach to communication reflects the exhibits, which focus on the individual, so that specific stories become relevant and tangible, and are given a face, as part of our approach to activism. At the museum and in our communication, we must ensure broad representation: of those who have been refugees, of those with points of view on the refugee issue – for example, Venligboerne – and those with anti-refugee attitudes. We must represent all points of view, so that the communication also reflects the museum's desire to be a forum for debate – for everyone, including our visitors. This naturally entails a special responsibility on behalf of the people we represent – a responsibility we must honor as a museum: especially in that part of the communication that takes place in a dialogical space on social media, where the tone can easily become hateful and one-sided.

#### COMMUNICATION 2.0

We know that on social media, even innocent and quite prosaic topics can serve to escalate conflict and spark hate speech. So, the communication of FLUGT is a challenging task. Our aim is to provide insight and shift attitudes: not to provoke, hurt and offend, but to engender reflections and constructive dialog with both our users and visitors to the museum. Communication is thus both about providing insight into what it means to be a refugee, but also about creating a space for constructive dialog as part of our activist role. That is why we are very active in terms of where the limit is, of the extremity of the views we can accommodate and of how we avoid becoming an instrument of external agendas. Trenchant stances on the museum, the theme and the refugee stories we present will be crystallized in the comment threads on our social media.

When communicating FLUGT, we constantly need to relate to a media reality, in which content is something that constantly emerges in dialog with our followers. That is the particular challenge that FLUGT faces. On our own communication channels, can we orchestrate a museum activist approach, in which we present stories to followers and encourage them to come up with their own nuanced interpretation? We are totally aware that we are placing complex content in an arena where pseudo-debate and opinion relativism often eclipse democratic discussion. And even though disagreement about everything from contemporary political discourse to attitudes about quota refugees, for instance, are of course entirely legitimate, it is also this two-front war the museum aims to curb.

In other words, on social media our challenge is to continuously assess how, on one hand, to embrace the broad spectrum of attitudes and, on the other, to distinguish and draw a line, when a discussion runs the risk of getting off track: to introduce our followers to people and stories that make the topic relatable and topical, but also to insist on good tone, factual argument and orderliness.

Identifying what forms communication needs to take in order to embrace all these considerations is a continuous process. At present, we are striving for a kind of documentary approach, in which the presentation of a theme or a personal story takes a relatively objective form, so that the individual follower has the opportunity to read an opinion into the content. In the long term, this form will be developed as the museum evolves.

Because communication should also make room for the discussion of content. On our social media, our visitors should also encounter the space for debate that the museum aims to be. Do the conventions hold up? Are war and persecution the only "valid" reasons to flee? What about the many climate refugees we can expect in the coming years? If we want to influence opinions and attitudes, we must also facilitate spaces in which these can be exchanged and broken both online and physically. It is in this borderline territory that we define the communication strategies for FLUGT.

#### THE FUTURE OF FLUGT

When FLUGT opened in the summer of 2022, the approach to activism in the exhibits was mainly performative. We will continue this approach in the near future. This means, for example, that we still aim to give refugees a voice through the exhibits and continue to communicate well. So, we will continue to find strong ways of embracing the countless stories and attitudes so as to avoid supporting a black-and-white portrayal of the refugee crisis and refugees, aiming at a more nuanced version, in which numbers become people. We must continue to reach out to our visitors, so they gain insight into refugee issues and reflect on them – and perhaps even react to them. Similarly, we will continue to work with schools and youth education programs, helping pave the way for reflection and democratic dialog. We will also continue to work with refugees as informants in the context of special exhibits etc.

However, we must also be dynamic, programming activities and events targeted at the museum's visitors to provide them with insight into what it means to be a refugee and to flee. These can include events such as conversa-

tion salons and debate evenings that prepare the ground for reflections and spark good, qualified conversations. There also needs to be room for activities that target refugees, not only with the purpose of supporting their insight into and understanding of Danish society, but also to make room for their voices and provide them with a place to meet, where they can share experiences, with each other, the museum and our guests. The goal is thus to include a kind of operational activism at FLUGT.

However, one element must not and need not exclude the other – something that, it may be argued, happens in certain contexts. For example, the Berlin-based Multaqa project aims to attract more refugees and immigrants to German museums as safe places, where they can contribute, have a voice and help build bridges. For example, refugees lead guided tours in their native language for other refugees – an important and excellent way of involving them in the work of the museum's. However, this neglects other visitors to the museum, who neither speak nor understand the language spoken during the tours and who would also like to hear the stories the refugees are telling, based on their cultural insight.

Thus, it is also vital for FLUGT to continue to reach out to our visitors – be they tourists, locals or schools – and give them an opportunity to reflect and talk. KØN – Gender Museum Denmark in Aarhus has a similar direction, basing their work on women's stories and working with gender culture to create "curiosity, dialog, reflection and knowledge about gender, equality and diversity" (KØN – Gender Museum Denmark 2016). Thus, activism in FLIGHT must also – and in the long term – accommodate not only refugees and their opportunities to contribute and be active, but also the desire of each visitor to the museum to understand and make a difference.

#### THE NEED FOR AGILE MUSEUMS

Part of deploying the performative approach will be to ensure that the museum moves with society, retaining its relevance, remaining constantly topical and supportive in relation to the processes and public sentiments that emerge in society.

This means, for example, that we must be ready to react at short notice, as happened when the first Ukrainian refugees came to Denmark. The museum initiated emergency fundraising and documentation that helped to emphasize the fact that refugees have an important role and voice in our history. The fundraising project also included documentation of public sen-



timent, which is also part of the refugee story and was significantly different, for example, from when Syrian refugees arrived in Denmark. Whereas many Syrian refugees encountered resistance and negative actions – for example, when a Dane spat a group from an expressway bridge – the Ukrainian refugees were given a totally different reception. Danes met them with open arms and invited them to live in their homes, while the government enacted a special law to grant them a residence permit in Denmark (Esbjørnsen 2022).

The Migration Museum of Denmark in Farum has likewise focused on the idea of the agile museum and in 2022 introduced the idea of developing a museum “contingency box”, which would contain tools for museums that wanted to collate, document and co-create, when new refugees arrived in Denmark, as happened with the Afghan refugees in 2021.<sup>27</sup> The project, therefore, addresses a need, given that an increasing number of museums want to work activistically to help tackle challenges and problems in contemporary society.<sup>28</sup>

This also applies to FLUGT. It is important for us to translate this agility into events that can be used to give voices to more refugees, build bridges and qualify the dialog on refugees when special needs arise. Museums have the potential to be meeting places and forums, where together with others we can gain insight into and understanding of challenges and problems, and come up with solutions. A museum is thus one of the few places where there is still room for inclusive meetings and respectful, democratic conversations between people who may not agree (Hunt 2018).

One example of this potential comes from the Levine Museum of the New South in the United States. After the police killing of Keith Lamont Scott and the ensuing unrest, the museum invited the people of the city for tours and informal workshops. For one thing, this put the racially motivated reason for the murder in a historical perspective, paving the way for small group discussions that were “passionate, authentic and respectful” (Hill 2016). As Kathryn Hill, Director of the Levine Museum of the New South, put it: “...we understood that Charlotteans cannot address the issues at the core of these events – the issues of social mobility, institutional racism, and implicit bias – without understanding the long history that has given them root” (ibid.).

The example illustrates how museums can win by being agile and, on the basis of events, help create a safe space with

room for dialog on difficult and current topics. Similarly, museums also have an important opportunity to make room for possible disagreements. For example, after opposition from locals, many of who belonged to the far right, the Albertinum, an art museum in Dresden, invited them to discussions instead of simply rejecting them (Apperly 2020). The museum thus helped build bridges.

The example of the Levine Museum also reveals how history can help to both explain and create a safe base for discussing the present (Lynch 2019). We have had the same experience during guided tours of the former refugee camp in Oksbøl, where the story of the post-World War II German refugees automatically sparks thoughts and dialog about today’s refugee challenges. That is something we must and will continue in the future. With today’s huge refugee flows and their presentation as numbers, challenges and problems, such meetings and events may prove to be both important and necessary, if we want to make a difference to the way many refugees are portrayed.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

For several years, the English researcher, Bernadette Lynch has argued that museums must evolve in a more activist direction and thus help make a difference to the society of which they are part (Lynch 2019). Given the increasing trend towards museum activism in Denmark in recent years, and the increasing focus of museums on being something for someone, there is no doubt that this will be their way forward.

However, according to Lynch, it is not enough for museums to practice what she calls “performative activism”, in which they present vulnerable groups and their stories – the approach we adopted at FLUGT. Museums run the risk being activist on behalf of the vulnerable groups, thereby depriving these groups of their voice and the opportunity to help make a difference by working with the museum. Instead, museums must become operational and work to make a difference together with the groups they focus on (ibid.).

That is something that FLUGT must definitely make room for in the future. We will continue our mainly performative approach, but we must get better at including the operational approach, so that we also become a museum for refugees rather than solely a museum about refugees. This, however, will require a certain balancing act. FLUGT must not close in on itself, but continue to reach out to our visitors, constantly preparing the ground for insight, reflection and dialog as part of our activism.





People often listen intensively, but they also talk and have discussions during "Humans behind barb wire" in the former refugee camp on Oksbøl  
Foto: NaturKulturVarde

Performative activism thus plays a key role because it is a way of reaching out to our guests and can spark reflections and dialog, and because it is also important to make a difference for all our visitors, just as it is important to do so on behalf of all the refugees the exhibits are about, and the countless people who flee every single day. We focus on our visitors, because we believe that visits to museums can make a difference for them and influence the way they behave towards refugees, and the way they talk to or about them.

So, of course it is all about making a difference for refugees and helping to give them a voice, but it is also about reaching beyond that, welcoming Danes, tourists and schools to the museum and opening their eyes to the complexity, nuances and human aspect of the refugee problem. Thereby, we provide them with insight they can take home and use actively – not only in the context of debate, but also in close relationships with people who fled.

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Anne Sofie Vemmelund Christensen currently works at Fiskeri- og Søfartsmuseet (the Fisheries and Maritime Museum) in Esbjerg

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Malene Frosch Langvad currently works at Varde Library

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E.g., Tirpitz, which opened in 2017, subsequently with temporary special exhibits.

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"Flygtige fortællinger – samtidsdokumentation på de kulturhistoriske museer", application to the VELUX FOUNDATIONSN with the Migration Museum of Denmark, Vardemuseerne (including FLUGT), Bornholm Museum, Holstebro Museum and the Centre for Advanced Migration Studies (AMIS), spring 2022.

28  
E.g., Billund Municipality Museums, whose mission for their new museum will update the museum's remit, <http://billundmuseum.dk/nyt-museum/> (May 23, 2022) and Hjerl Hede, which will solve the current problem of lack of craftsmen with the project, 'Modern Hands', <https://hjerlhede.dk/modernhands/> (May 23, 2022)



# The Activist Potential of Feminist Art – Artworks as Agile Objects in Museum Communication

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## INTRODUCTION

KØN – Gender Museum Denmark is, like the Schwules Museum in Berlin, a cultural history museum that aims to tell the history of gender and create reflection and debate. The museum bases its approach on its collection, which contains a large number of testimonies – particularly from women – and countless ‘gendered’ objects from everyday life throughout history. Feminist art also features the history of gender and brings it up for discussion, but most often in art museums and galleries, in the public space or online, using other means and other media, which, however, also focus on many of the same issues in women’s lives through time, as those that KØN conveys in exhibits of life stories and everyday objects.

The aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand it wants to outline the history of feminist art as a parallel story to the cultural history presented at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark; on the other hand, it aims to investigate the role feminist art can play in activist, cultural history museums. I suggest that it would be beneficial if museums increasingly allowed the two stories to be intertwined. Therefore, the article first provides an overview of the history of feminist art – its media, topics, and expressions – but without pretending to be exhaustive or to project a canon. It then looks at three examples of cultural history exhibits, two at KØN and one at the Schwules Museum in Berlin, which, in addition to other objects, also feature art. The aim here is to investigate what art can contribute in relation to other types of objects, and what potential art can have in a museum context. I contend that art is an excellent ‘agile object’ (German & Harris 2017), which is particularly suitable for creating the reflection and deba-



te at which museums aim. First, though, I will explain what this article means by "feminist art" and how feminist art has evolved throughout history.

#### THE ACTIVIST POTENTIAL OF FEMINIST ART

In "Considering Feminist Activist Art" (2007), Mary Jo Agerstoun and Elissa Auther write that feminist activist art is at once critical, positive and progressive:

By critical we mean work that seeks to expose underlying ideologies or existing structures that have a negative effect on women and their lives; by positive we mean work that takes a stand, expressing its maker's faith in achieving results or positing alternatives; by progressive we mean a belief in the feminist tenets of equality and inclusiveness, a better world free of sexism, racism, homophobia, economic inequality, and violence". (Agerstoun og Auther 2007, vii).

Thus, in their definition of feminist, activist art, Agerstoun and Auther do not include art, which "although both critical and progressive, privileges open-ended critique over a positive form of politics." (Agerstoun and Auther 2007, viii). This context instrumentalizes art to act principally as aesthetic communication, implying a notion (or at least a hope) of a direct connection between the intention of the artist and the effect of the work on the recipient (also referred to as the "transmission paradigm", which I will broach later). However, closed works that present both problem and solution risk becoming didactic and instructive and may end up preaching solely to the converted. The vision of KØN states that the museum "wants to be the leading creator of dialog on the importance of gender and create insight, as well as engage and strengthen the will to an equal society" (KØN n.d.). In other words, the museum works actively on behalf of gender equality, but its principal task is to create dialog and discussion, rather than to urge visitors to think in a specific way. Most works of art are ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations. Thereby, they can prepare the ground for the discussion, which a museum like KØN seeks, to a greater extent than the closed, didactic works that form the basis of Agerstoun and Auther's definition. The starting point of this article is an understanding of feminist art as art that, in one way or another, critically reflects gender inequality and conditions of life, thereby creating discussion about these issues and ultimately makes us wiser about both ourselves and the society of which we are part.<sup>29</sup> In this context, all feminist art is regarded as activist to some extent, by virtue of the discussion and critical reflection that art can initiate in the recipient. Consequently, referring to art as "feminist" is independent of the gender of the artist or whether the artist themselves refers to it as

feminist. It is the capacity of art to bring gender and, in particular, the position of women up for discussion that defines it as feminist. As in Agerstoun and Auther's essay (Agerstoun and Auther 2007, vii), this implies a belief in the potential of art to contribute to social change. The interpretation of both feminist art and activism is merely more comprehensive than theirs. That is also why the title of the article is not "Activist Art", but "The Activist Potential of Feminist Art", because in its pure form activist art is generally defined as art that is "situated in the public arena with artists working closely with a community to generate the art" (Tate n.d.). This type of art is certainly an important part of feminist art, but it is only a fraction of it, and the focus of this article will be on the potential of the feminist art object in museums: the role of artworks as agile objects in museum communication.

#### FEMINIST ART – A NONHOMOGENEOUS MOVEMENT

Feminist art is not a single thing. As the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (1949–) writes:

There is no such entity; no homogeneous movement defined by characteristic style, favored media or typical subject-matter. There are instead feminist artistic practices which cannot be comprehended by the standard procedures and protocols of modernist art history and criticism which depend upon isolating aesthetic consideration such as style or media (Pollock 1987, 80).

Feminist art cannot simply be defined on the basis of categories such as style or media. Rather than its aesthetic expression, it is its gender political agenda that defines it as feminist. Feminist art really flourished with the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. Many feminist artists chose to express themselves in media other than traditional painting and sculpture: partly as a result of the openness to new media and forms of expression, for which the avant-garde movements of the 1960s in particular paved the way; and partly because painting and sculpture are embedded in a history of art dominated by men. Accordingly, many female artists broke with the formalistic abstraction of painting, which had set the trend for male artists, working more figuratively and using their own bodies in art – for example, in performances. Many of them also broke with the traditional artist role, which pays tribute to the individual, inspired "artist genius" (by the way, even today the term "genius" still seems to be reserved for men). As an alternative, they created collective events, such as the exhibit *Damebilleder* (Images of Women), organized by Kanonkubben, in 1970 in Copenhagen, who with happenings and audience invol-



Shigeko Kubota "Vagina Painting",  
1965 – performance 1965.  
© Kubota / VISDA



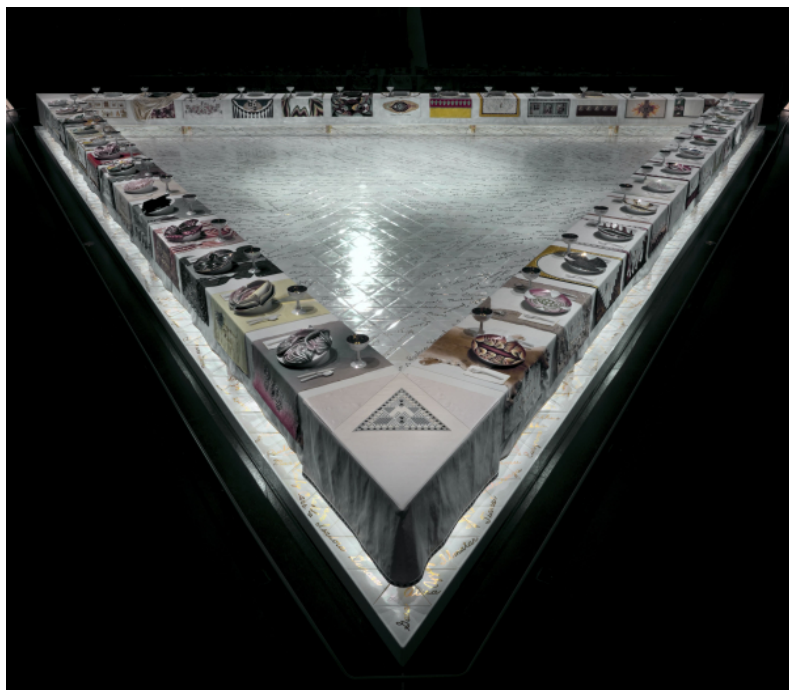
vement, put a sharp focus on contemporary gender roles (Bundgård 1970, 22–23).<sup>30</sup> Later, significant feminist artist groups have been, for example, Guerilla Girls (1985–) and, in a Danish context, Kvinder på Værtshus (1997–2009) or Aarhus-based Artillery (1999–2003) (Hinum 2004, 56).

Performance became a popular form of expression for many female artists, including the Austrian artist Valie Export (b. 1940) who, in *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* (Action Pants: Genital Panic) (1968), challenged contemporary passive representations of women in film and the tabooing of women's genitalia by walking through a cinema in Munich in bottomless pants; the Japanese artist Yoko Ono (b. 1933) who in *Cut Piece* (1964) sat motionless on a stage and left it up to the audience to decide whether or not to cut pieces of her clothes (MoMA Learning n.d.); or Japanese Shigeko Kubota's (b. 1937) *Vagina Painting* where she kneels and paints the floor menstrual red with a brush strapped to her lower body (Hawley 2016), thereby challenging and parodying the quasi-ejaculatory action paintings of male artists such as Jackson Pollock (b. 1912). According to Parker and Pollock, one of the attractions of performance was the opportunity to escape from the traditions of art,

which were already loaded with meaning, both in terms of motif-related connotations and social issues related to painting and sculpture as artistic practice (Parker and Pollock 1987, 39).

#### FEMINIST ART IN MULTIPLE MEDIA

Although a lot of feminist art is expressed through performance, workshops and other community-based projects, feminist art has never completely abandoned the object. Accordingly, feminist art exists in all media. There are paintings such as Frida Kahlo's (b. 1907) symbolic self-portraits or the Danish artist Stense Andrea Lind-Valdan's (b. 1985) works, painted using her own menstrual blood and a dildo as a paintbrush (2015). There are photos, such as Cindy Sherman's (b. 1954) ironic pastiches of the representation of women throughout history, often depicting Sherman herself in a variety of roles, or the works of Barbara Kruger (b. 1945), who often combines her photos with ironic aphorisms such as: "I shop therefore I am" (1987). There are installations, including the US artist Judy Chicago's (b. 1939) legendary *Dinner Party* (1974–79) – a large triangular dining table set with 39 plates in lavish vulvar shapes, dedicated to women throughout history. There are sculptures, such as the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois' (b. 1911) hu-



Judy Chicago: "Dinner Party" 1974–79.  
Står på Brooklyn Museum.  
© Brooklyn Museum / VISDA.

mongous spider mothers, or the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's (b. 1952) oversized kitchen utensils, including a giant, guillotine-like egg slicer – Slicer (1999) – which portray the kitchen and the home in general as anything but a safe, harmonious place. There is also a huge range of video works: for example, recorded performances by the Serbian artist Marina Abramović (b. 1946) who for more than 15 minutes aggressively combs her hair, while repeating "Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful" (1975), underlining the objectification of women in art both as artist and model; and performance-like works as those by the Danish artists Hanne Nielsen (b. 1959) and Birgit Johnsen (b. 1958) who, with expressionless faces, grate a pile of onions that simply fall on the ground, while the sting of the onions almost dissolves their faces. There are also magnificent films like the Iranian-US artist Shirin Neshat's (b. 1957) beautiful, intense depictions of women's life in the Islamic world, or experimental, technologically advanced films like those by the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist (b. 1962), who plays with both representations of gender and the position of the viewer, so you can watch her dreamlike, erotic works lying in beds or through little peepholes.

Feminist art can also be feminist more by virtue of the materials it uses than of its theme. There is thus a strong tradition of feminist art turning to craft, including embroidery, knitting, porcelain painting and crocheting. This type of craft was traditionally the province of women

and not regarded as art. As Linda Nochlin writes in her famous text, "Why have there been no great women artists?" (1971), there are a huge range of structural reasons why women have only been allocated a very limited place in art history: for example, the fact that for a long time they were not even granted access to art schools. Their place was in the home, where their opportunities for creative expression were largely craft-based. Judy Chicago's aforementioned, Dinner Party should be viewed in this context. The work is on display at Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, a venue for feminist art, theory and activism. They write about The Dinner Party:

It is a multi-media work that consists of ceramics, china painting, sewing, needlework, embroidery, and other mediums traditionally associated with 'women's work', and, as such, not generally considered 'high art' by the art world. In an effort to celebrate undervalued female creative production, Chicago consciously sought to reclaim and commemorate those mediums traditionally considered 'craft', as fine art ones equivalent to painting and sculpture. (Brooklyn Museum n.d.)

#### SOLIDARITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

With feminism in the 1970s, a new solidarity emerged in relation to being a woman and thereby being subject to a number of expectations and oppressive structures (Parker and Pollock 1987, 64). Conscious

that “the personal is political”, women began to share life experiences in basic groups, and the focus on close, lived life also features in art: for example, in the film *Tornerose var et vakkert barn* (Sleeping Beauty) (1971) by Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943) and Jytte Rex (b. 1942) – a montage of a number of women of various ages either dancing or recounting their lives and longings (Paldam 2022). Women stood together and supported each other, but it soon became clear that not everyone was facing the same oppression, and that feminism had hitherto been based primarily on the experience of white, heterosexual, middle-class women. Parker and Pollock write:

By the 1980s Black women, lesbian women, working-class women, Jewish women were rightly claiming that their position in a racist and sexist society gave rise to quite specific forms of oppression. Women’s shows began to reflect the solidarity and self-consciousness of particular groupings of women (Parker & Pollock 1987, 64).

This is also reflected in art: for example, when the African-American artist Carrie Mae Weems, in her photo series *Ain’t Jokin* (1987–88), features a photo of a black woman standing with a mirror, accompanied by the sarcastic caption: “Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?’ The mirror says, ‘Snow White you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!’” Since Weems’s photo and Parker and Pollock’s text, there has been greater awareness of intersectionality – intersections between oppressive systems that reinforce each other – and many feminist artists address not only being a woman but also their disability, ethnicity or class. Take three examples of work by Danish artists. In *Gudruns Livshistorie* (The Story of Gudrun’s Life) (2004), Gudrun Hasle (b. 1979) tackles her dyslexia. In her video *Absolute Exotic* (2005) Lillibeth Cuanca Rasmussen (b. 1970), who has Filipino roots, takes an ironic look at being viewed as a sex object on the basis of her ethnicity. In her performances and sculptures, Jeanette Ehlers (b. 1973), who has Caribbean roots, thematizes Denmark’s colonial past. For example, together with the artist La Vaughn Belle from the former Danish West Indies, she created the sculpture *I Am Queen Mary* (2018), depicting Mary Thomas, a black woman and heroine, who in 1878 fought for justice and equity in the former Danish West Indies.

These examples illustrate that feminism or women’s struggle resist a single, one-size-fits-all definition, and that the challenges are not the same for everyone who defines herself as a woman. Never-

theless, women as an overall category are still less well paid, more frequently subjected to domestic abuse and violence, and experience more shame in relation to their body and sexuality than cis men – to name just a handful of the inequalities that are still alive and kicking across national borders and cultures. In other words, we still need a women’s struggle.

## THE BODY IN ART

Many of the works mentioned, and feminist art in general, address themes such as body, sexuality, motherhood and home, including, in particular, a rebellion against the objectification and tabooing of women’s bodies. In art history, there is a surfeit of paintings and sculptures, orchestrated by male artists and their lustful gaze, which in varying degrees idealize women’s bodies. Female artists wanted to regain control of their bodies: to be active subjects rather than passive objects. However, as Pollock and Parker point out, figuration is laden with a history of opinions, uses and associations. For example, an image of a naked woman created to celebrate the sexuality, power and fertility of women can easily be misconstrued and perceived as a voyeuristic representation of a naked woman (Parker og Pollock 1987, 5). When a female artist such as Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943) says that you circumvent the discussion of object and subject when, as a female artist you use your own gaze on your own body (Wagner 2013, 5:10), it is therefore a half-truth. The fact that the sender of an image has a specific intention for it does not tally with what the viewer sees. Nevertheless, the reconquest by women of ownership of their bodies, including their own choice of where and how to exhibit them, is key to feminist art and the feminist movement. Often, feminist art gets very close to the body, as in *Red Flag* (1971), a photo by Judy Chicago, in which she is pulling a bloody tampon out of her vagina, or *Menstruation II* (1979), a performance by the Franco-British artist Cate Elwes (b. 1952), in which, in the course of three days, menstruating and dressed in white pants, she could be observed in a box where she wrote answers to questions on walls and windows. As Parker and Pollock point out, the work confronts the “cultural non-existence of menstruation” (Parker and Pollock 1987, 31), a theme that many feminist artists have addressed both before and since: for example, the young Danish artist Maja Malou Lyse (b. 1993), whose feminist activist work features on Instagram and in performances, videos and sculptures at established art museums such as Tate, Brandts or ARoS. One of Lyse’s Instagram posts features an image of a vibrator lubricated with menstrual blood, thereby tackling the culture of silence associated with two topics: menstruation and women’s self-satisfaction. Similar-





Katja Bjørn: "Chatol"  
© KØN - Gender Museum Denmark

ly, the artist Laetitia Ky, also active on Instagram and in established art contexts – for example, representing her home country the Côte d'Ivoire in their national pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale – advocates more openness about menstruation. Ky is particularly known for her hair sculptures, in which she has braided her long hair extensions into everything from women's symbols and irons to a bleeding vagina. Her pictures are always accompanied by long feminist captions. She addresses not only the taboo so often associated with talking about menstruation, but also the fact that in some places menstruating women are regarded as unclean and have to hide away in huts, while other women cannot afford sanitary pads. Yet another example of how women's challenges are far from being the same across countries and cultures.

**THE AGILE OBJECT IN THE EXHIBIT GENDER BLENDER**  
As illustrated above, there are plenty of feminist art objects, and in an activist museum context this is interesting, because although increasingly also host performances or participatory projects, it is still the objects that the vast majority of visitors encounter.

In KØN's permanent exhibit Gender Blender, visitors can listen to personal stories, read facts about topics such as gender equality, follow a timeline of gender in history, and see a wide range of "gendered" objects, which include everything from a pack of birth control pills and a Barbie doll to Chatol (Writing Desk), a work by the Danish artist Katja Bjørn (b. 1967). The entire exhibit encourages visitors to think actively and to take a stance: for example, by considering their own gender identity and marking it on an abacus, or via wall texts that pose questions such as: "Is gender a role you can play?" Visitors are also urged to contribute to the exhibit with their own stories, a joke, a drawing of their gender or a new object for the collection. But what does it mean that the exhibit, among other things, includes a work of art like Bjørn's? The work consists of an old bureau with lots of doors and drawers. Behind many of them is a video, which, with Bjørn herself in the leading role, refers, in varying degrees of explicitness, to gender. One video features a woman dressed in white cotton underwear, standing among ten naked babies lying on the floor. Several of the children are crying, and she lifts them up one after the other in an attempt to comfort them, but she seems increasingly tired and overwhelmed by the insurmountable task. Behind another door we see the face of a woman. She opens her mouth and suddenly – shockingly – accompanied by an intense noise, out zooms a swarm of flies. Behind a third door, we see her biting her nails, eating bogeys and

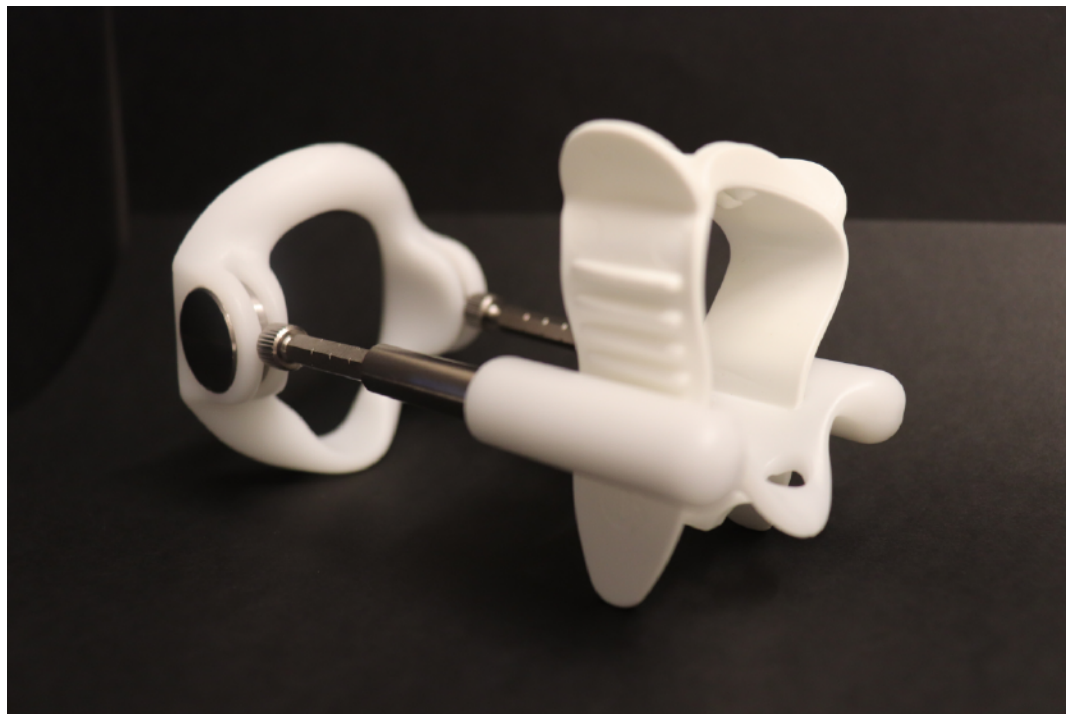
biting the skin of her cheeks, while in a large drawer we see a family rolling out, one after the other, round and round indefinitely. Another drawer reveals a calm sea, out of which a naked woman is rising. The woman picks up large stones from the beach, raises them above her head and throws them with an intense, aggressive roar. Finally, on the pull-out desk of the bureau we see a piece of paper and a hand that is writing personal, fragmented reflections almost like diary entries. The videos touch on topics such as motherhood, family and self-representation, but neither pose explicit questions nor provide answers. The weird, almost surreal scenarios of the videos, the intense soundtrack, the shock effect of the flies and the secretive doors and drawers of the bureau all help to pique the viewer's curiosity, encouraging them to ask a different kind of question than those brought up by the utility objects featured in the exhibit. Art history-wise, Chatol belongs to a tradition of feminist video art, familiar, for example, from the work of Pipilotti Rist, where the monitors are installed in unexpected places, allowing the viewer to interact bodily with the work – to open doors, bend down to take a look, to close drawers... We can view the work based on a knowledge of video art, but we can certainly get something out of it without that knowledge. In their article "Agile Objects" (2017), Senta German and Jim Harris write about object-based teaching in museums:

We see the starting point for teaching with objects not in the accumulated, existing knowledge they embody but rather in their capacity to submit to new investigation by students to whom that embodied knowledge is either unknown or irrelevant. In short, the object is not a passive receptacle for information but an agile tool for creative thinking and learning. (German & Harris 2017, 248)

German and Harris set a number of criteria for what makes an object agile and thus suitable for creative engagement and interpretation in museums. They list four characteristics of agile objects: (1) Objects must be sufficiently complex to call for sustained engagement. (2) Objects whose function is not immediately clear ensure engagement through the many interpretations that need to be explored in order to assign identity and reveal meaning. (3) Objects that are fragmentary and/or damaged encourage the student to consider the physical history and long narrative of an object's life. (4) Objects made of more than one material facilitate discussion of process – the design and manufacture of things – and meaning. (German & Harris 2017, 250)

These criteria very much apply to works of art. The gre-





nade part (1864) and penis extender (1995), displayed in Gender Blender, are not easily decoded at first glance either. They are certainly also agile objects with an enquiry, a story, a materiality and a mode of expression that are worth taking a closer look at. But whereas the grenade part or the penis extender raise questions about the object's use, the context in which it was used and the reason for its design, the work of art sets the scene for another, broader type of question. Just like other types of objects, the viewer can also ask about the historical context in which the artwork was created and how this context interacts with the expression of the work, but in addition art always contains more, which can be expressed through formal or sensory appeals, and there is never just one answer as to what it is. Many visitors have neither the historical knowledge nor the interest to really understand the objects they encounter, and German and Harris also oppose the view that "every object needs to be fully understood under every examination" (German & Harris 2017, 249). Visitors with very different backgrounds and knowledge can thus all get something out of the objects, but it is important to realize that each outcome will be different depending on their background and pre-understanding. However, German and Harris do not advocate simply letting the objects speak for themselves. They emphasize the need for educators who can help elucidate the network of meanings and stories the objects represent (German & Harris, 251-55), without con-

veying specific, canonized knowledge.

German and Harris do not regard works of art as particularly useful agile objects. On the contrary, they privilege the inclusion of almost all other objects over art. If you look more closely at their arguments for this rejection, however, it soon becomes clear that the rejection has to do with a certain art-historical approach to the artwork, and not with artworks as objects in themselves. The basis of their argument is thus:

an object that is utterly unknown to students can be the most useful in teaching. Thus, for object-based learning, the art-historical canon, the received knowledge about the historical progression of styles and artists (however constructed) is not particularly helpful. (German & Harris 2017, 248-49)

But firstly, works of art will often be as unfamiliar and alien to visitors as grenade parts and penis extenders. Secondly, no one demands canonized works. The above overview of art history is thus not a canon for feminist art, the entire basis of which is an erosion of hierarchies, in terms both of genre and material. Thirdly, there are many approaches to art other than one based on the history of style. As previously described, feminist art actually emerged in opposition to, and as a break with established, masculine art (canon), and



cannot be defined on the basis of categories such as style or media, since it is its gender political agenda, rather than its aesthetic expression, that defines it as feminist. It is as if German and Harris do not look at art at all, but just pigeonhole artworks as "a canonical group of objects valued for other reasons – aesthetic or technical quality, attribution, historical association, intrinsic worth" (German and Harris, 248–249), which thereby can have no relevance as agile objects. However, as with any object, the answers depend on the questions we ask. When German and Harris write that, instead of believing that we can understand each object in depth, we must instead approach the objects "according to the investigative priorities of [our] own subject" (German & Harris 2017, 249), then works of art are just as flexible and agile as anything else. If your focus, for example, is on understandings of gender, then feminist art is extremely suitable, without students or teachers needing to relate to history of style, aesthetic quality or the canon of art history.

However, art objects or not, it is the curator's flair for selecting agile objects that determines how an exhibit paves the way for reflection. These are considerations that have clearly been made in the curation of Gender Blender, which consciously prepares the ground not only for individual visitors, but also for school groups, teaching them in "discussion-based courses based on

pupil/student involvement," as the KØN website puts it. In Gender Blender the texts accompanying the various objects are typically descriptive, attempting to provide a sober account of the history of the object and the significance it has had for the genders and their interrelationship. The object most open to interpretation is probably Katja Bjørn's Chatol. But the curation and presentation of agile objects to visitors can take place in many ways. The next example is an artist-curated exhibit.

#### ARTIST CURATION

In 2008, the Danish artist Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943) curated the exhibit 64 sysler og samlinger – en kvindehistorisk scrapbog (64 Chores and Collections – A Scrapbook of Women's History) at KØN – at the time the Women's Museum. Justesen was born in 1943 and the collection consisted of texts and objects from every year of her life from 1943 to 2008. The collection did not relate strictly to Justesen's own life but followed her generation. It was a fascinating period piece and, as Sanne Kofod Olsen wrote in her introduction, comprised:

Objects that contain meaning and tell a story that extends far beyond the object itself. A manifestation of cultural history collected through fragments from a time, each of which contains its own element of significance (Olsen 2008).

"texts, museum objects, recipes and historical images." (Justesen 2008). Some had short descriptive titles such as Breast Pump or Eggnog, others alluded to a personal story: for example, the image of a cucumber that bore the text: "Every year for her birthday she wants pork with parsley sauce, and permission to eat a whole cucumber herself" (Justesen 2008). Neither the detached objects nor the small gobbets of story were further explained. This piqued visitors' curiosity. Was eggnog something you used to get all the time? Were cucumbers particularly expensive? Were they usually served in over-thin slices, or was the birthday girl's desire all about burying her teeth in a whole cucumber without worrying about having to share with others? There were no answers. The viewer had to try and create understanding by drawing on their own experiences or knowledge or by talking to other visitors. Justesen's curation also included works of art: for example, a drawing by Louise Bourgeois (1947) and a poster by Guerilla Girls (1988). In her Introduction, Kofod Olsen wrote:

It is not an art exhibit, but the way of communicating through images, texts and objects is to a large extent the form of communication of the visual world. The relic, the work of art, the everyday object become equal objects. It is a montage of things from real life. (Olsen 2008).

Whether works of art, eggnog or cucumbers, what is important that it was Justesen as an artist that had selected them. The emergence of avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism in the early 20th century expanded the concept of art to include readymades and found objects (*objets trouvés*), which artists did not create, but simply chose.<sup>31</sup> One of the reasons visitors to Justesen's 64 *sysler og samlinger* were curious about the likes of the eggnog, and started asking questions about it is because they assumed that the artist's choice was significant, as opposed to merely random. Had the sender not been a named artist, but, say, an anonymous museum employee who had found 64 different objects and exhibited them with no explanatory context, the collection/exhibit might have seemed merely arbitrary. Now we search for connections and meaning, the idea behind the choice. In a way this is a paradox, since the goal of the avant-garde was to shatter the status of the artist as an individual with a particularly privileged insight and sensibility, and to point out that anyone can be an artist. Nonetheless, it is precisely because we still adhere to a romantic notion of the artist, regarding artists as something special with an exceptional way of looking at the world, that we perceived Justesen's 64 objects differently than we would have done if they had been as-

sembled by some anonymous curator. Consequently, in Justesen's collection, each of the 64 everyday objects, artworks and recipes assumed the status of 'work'. They all became readymades or found objects and we wanted to understand them.

#### THE SCHWULES MUSEUM – A GENDER ACTIVIST WUNDERKAMMER

A montage of things, in which objects from different contexts are all given equal status, was not only the hallmark of 64 *sysler og samlinger*, but was also a feature of the exhibit 100 Objects: An Archive of Feelings (2020) at the activist-based Schwules Museum in Berlin. Like KØN, the Schwules Museum was started by activists in the early 1980s. For many years, the museum mainly focused on gay history, but in recent years – also like KØN – the museum adopted a wider-ranging remit. This is what they write on their website:

The Schwules Museum, founded in 1984 by progressive gay activists in West Berlin, has taken decisive, if incomplete and controversial, steps in the past years towards becoming a space where not only cis gay men but also women, people of trans experience, and other minoritized (and racialized) people in the queer community can work, curate, organize, and encounter their histories and visual cultures.. (Schwules Museum 2020).

Looking at the Schwules Museum's exhibits across the years, there has been everything from contemporary art and historical art, personal accounts – for example, in HIVstories: Living Politics – to popular culture in RAINBOW ARCADE – A Queer History of Video games 1985–2018, where visitors could not only see examples of and read about video games and their often misogynistic, gay or transphobic content, but also play a number of queer video games. In other words, like KØN, the Schwules Museum seeks to activate visitors, letting them experience and reflect in ways that break with a linear transmission paradigm, in which a museum dishes up knowledge or a message, which it then expects the visitor to understand as the museum had intended it to be understood. Communication is far more complicated than that, and KØN and the Schwules Museum clearly work to a much greater extent within an interaction paradigm, where meaning is created in interaction between people in a dynamic process (cf. Frandsen pp. 249–50). Such an interaction paradigm is also a premise for German and Harris's theory of the agile object in museum communication.

ted the exhibit 100 Objects: An Archive of Feelings, which they introduced as follows:

The cabinet of curiosities exploded! In spring and summer 2020, the Schwules Museum will turn the spotlight on its own collection. [...] we present the richness, diversity and fascination of our collection in 100 selected objects. ... 100 objects presents our collections in a new way: not arranged according to specific identities or historical eras, but according to affects, or feelings. What does an object make us feel? How did its creators feel? Its original audiences?(Schwules Museum 2020)

Out of a collection of 1.5 million objects containing everything from books, documents, paintings and photographs to drag costumes, the museum selected 100 objects, including gay magazines, a knit sweater featuring queer iconography, a beer coaster from a lesbian bar and a wide range of artworks, all examining the affects : desire, joy, care, anger and fear. Whereas a great deal of Gender Blender features an historical timeline told with 'gendered' objects, and Justesen's 64 sysler og samlinger featured an object for each of the years she had lived, 100 Objects at the Schwules Museum did not set out to create a linear narrative. With its selection of 100 objects, the exhibit may initially call to mind A History of the World in 100 Objects curated and explained by Neil MacGregor at the British Museum in London in 2010. Created in collaboration with BBC Radio 4, the exhibit included everything from utility items such as axes and tea sets to technology and artworks. Each of the exhibits 100 selected objects was accompanied by a 15-minute podcast, in which, on the basis of the object, MacGregor introduced us to the history of humankind (Multiple Authors n.d.). Although the Schwules Museum also selected 100 objects from its collection, the exhibit differed radically from A History of the World in 100 Objects, in that the objects were not selected to provide an historical overview, but to examine and evoke affect . As in 64 sysler og samlinger, objects of all shapes and sizes were mixed together, but at the Schwules Museum the objects had commentaries. On one hand, each item had been given a label with a feeling. On the other hand, there was a longer written contextualization of each item. So, visitors could approach the exhibit in several ways. They could simply see the objects and form their own impression; they could see the objects and their "affect label" and consider whether the object evokes a similar affect in them; or they could do both the former and read more about the object and its context. In this context, the different types of objects had different effects. A beer coaster from the SPIRITS lesbian

bar (Object No. 6), which for a period of time was located at the Schwules Museum, might well tickle curiosity, but did not in itself manage to convey the "Anger", which its affect label implied. It really needed the accompanying explanation, so that visitors could understand its implicit story. By comparison, documentary photos evoke more affect: for example, Object No. 5, Petra Gall's photo of the Walpurgis demonstration in West Berlin in 1983, which has become an icon of feminist, anti-violence activism, and which was also given an "Anger" label. The photo is a powerful, fascinating document, providing a glimpse of what feminist protesters looked like in 1983 and a sense of the atmosphere, solidarity and fighting spirit of the situation, with so many women surging forward, holding hands. But the picture quickly became exactly what it is: documentation of an historical event. That was not the case with the works of art: for example, the quasi-surrealist photo Rhea (2019) (Object No. 11. Label: "Desire") by the artist duo Red Rubber Roads – aka AnaHell and Nathalie Dreier.<sup>32</sup> It depicts a large, green, upright fabric bag in a green landscape. Through a crack in the bag, we see two female breasts on top of each other, both "looking out" at the viewer – "fragmented women's bodies, at once submitting to and evading the viewer's gaze. But it is clear that they belong together," as the description of the photo put it. The photo is humorous, strange and alluring, paving the way for endless discussions and questions – for example, about the representation of naked women in art, relationships between women and nature, and the representation of lesbian love. But the photo provides no answers. It remains open to interpretation and affective response. These are just three examples of different types of objects, but more could be mentioned with the same conclusion. Various everyday objects and documents may very well serve as agile objects, but the selected works of art in the exhibit are particularly suitable. In their complexity, openness and both sensory and formal appeal, they act as a prism for a wide range of discussions and issues and, as objects, are also ideal for evoking affect in the viewer.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Schwules Museum referred to their 100 Objects exhibit as a "cabinet of curiosities". The comparison with a cabinet of curiosities – also known as a "Wunderkammer" – is very apt. It refers to the earliest type of museum exhibit, which emerged in the 16th century, before art became autonomous and regarded as a special category. A Wunderkammer could display everything from paintings to wonderful objects from nature – for example, narwhal tusks and corals – ethnographic objects, finely executed handicrafts, sculptures, to clockworks and automatons.







The words "Wunderkammer" and "cabinet of curiosities" imply that the objects are in themselves wonderful and curious, and that they kindle wonder and curiosity in the viewer. Wonder and curiosity – and the ensuing dialog and discussion – are also the goals of the activist museum, and viewing the activist, cultural history museum as a Wunderkammer can be productive as an exhibit model beyond the 100 Objects approach. In the Wunderkammer, hierarchies between object types are broken down. While not being perceived as the same, they nonetheless appear side by side. Art is often viewed differently, with a different expectation of an inherent meaning (however obscure that might be) (cf. Kirsten Justesen's 64 sysler og samlinger), than an everyday object such as an apron, which in turn also differs from, and has a different capacity as an agile object than a documentary photo or an audio recording of a personal story. Objects are different – they can do different things, lead to different gazes and different types of reflection – but the interaction between them and the way they complement each other can be productive. Incorporating art objects does not mean that a museum commits itself to a specific, conservative, art-historical approach, as German and Harris presuppose. Incorporating art does not mean suddenly becoming "highbrow". Nor does art have to be merely visual. Like Katja Bjørn's Chatol, it can also be tactile, encouraging visitors to actively explore, and open and close its doors and drawers. It can prepare the ground for doing something, rather than just contemplation.

In terms of media, topics and approaches, the history of feminist art is extensive, rich and multifaceted. If there had been room in this article, I would have addressed the myriad of queer art that is just as interesting and relevant to this context. Like other objects in the here mentioned museums, art tells the story of the genders. It simply deploys different expressions and materials. Cultural history museums such as KØN – Gender Museum Denmark and Schwules Museum include art, both in temporary exhibits and in their more permanent exhibits, because art forms an active part of the story the museums want to tell, and thus naturally belongs in the collection. But at the same time, art is loaded with meaning, which, if the art is good enough, extends beyond the time in which it was made. Therefore, it is obvious to include art in activist museum communication as excellent agile objects. In one way or another, feminist art tackles gender inequality and living conditions. By preparing the ground for reflection, and for wonder and discussion about these

conditions, feminist art challenges norms and notions. Therein lies its activist potential. Feminist art is not a static category. It is an active part of history, which it both reflects and co-creates.

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The aesthetic experience has been seen by many aesthetic theorists in the 20th century as "the product of the concentrated encounter between the work of art and the viewer/listener – an encounter that has reflection and depth as its central parameter" and "aims to teach us about ourselves and potentially make us better citizens" (Pedersen 271). Such an understanding of the encounter with art is also the basis of this article.

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The exhibit was mounted by Kanonklubben, a professorless group of artists at the Royal Danish Academy from 1968 to 1970, who made films and various happenings. Some of the members of Kanonklubben initiated the Red Stocking Movement and participated in the first Red Stocking Action on Strøget (the main pedestrian street in Copenhagen) in April 1970. Members of Kanonklubben included Kirsten Justesen, Jytte Rex, Kirsten Dufour, Rikke Diemer, Gitte Skjold Jensen, Marie Bille and Lene Adler Petersen (Source: KVINFO).

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Objets trouvés and readymades are two types of objects that the artist does not produce themselves, but simply found and selected. They may seem similar, in that they both consist of the highlighting and exhibit of something already created, but an objet trouvé has a spiritual aspect. We see the amazing, wonderful aspects of an object, view it with new eyes, are moved by it, and highlight it for this reason, without this necessarily having to take place in a museum or gallery, whereas, to a greater extent, the readymade is a challenge to the art institution. It can also be selected for its particular beauty or special message, but the crucial thing is to exhibit it, thereby highlighting the interplay and tension between the everyday object and the art object.

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In Greek mythology, Rhea was a Titan, daughter of the earth goddess Gaia and the sky god Uranus.



# History of the Women's Museum – A Museum Created by Women About Women

## MERETE IPSEN

Co-founder and Former Director of the Women's Museum (now KØN)

## INTRODUCTION

The creation of the Women's Museum involved a wide-ranging network of women's movement activists, employment services and female researchers at the university and other educational institutions. Initially run by volunteers and with short-term leases, but faster than any of us dared imagine, the museum was established in 1984 as a collection point, a meeting place and an educational, research and information center for women. In the early 1990s it acquired permanent premises, regular public subsidy and status as a state-recognized museum.

The foundation of the Women's Museum Association in 1982 had a dual objective: to spotlight the cultural history of women and to create jobs for women. The start-up was supported financially by subsidy schemes for the unemployed. Unemployment at the time was particularly high among women of all ages – both unskilled workers and academics. Given that most of the women found themselves in this situation, the organization, collections and exhibitions of the museum reflected this class diversity.

Theoretically and politically, the basis of the museum was both radical feminism – a perspective that interprets and embraces women in a community across class, age, ethnic and educational boundaries and barriers – and socialist feminism, which stresses the importance of these differences in status, privileges, opportunities and power – including amongst women. Identification and diversity were each other's lifeblood. The Women's Museum was a workplace for women, showcasing their creativity, skills



and world views. A basic premise was that, unlike women's centers, the exhibitions, café and cultural events should be open to everyone – women, men and children – while everything exhibited in the museum, in contrast to other museums and cultural institutions, would be created by women.

The intention of the Women's Museum Association was to create a vibrant alternative to patriarchal institutions, counteracting the images of women as weak, passive and inferior. The goal was to view ourselves as active subjects. The methods were based on the premise that women are best able to describe and interpret the lives of women, that they are capable of anything and only external, rather than innate or internal boundaries, stand in their way.<sup>33</sup>

#### DOCUMENTATION AND COLLECTION: THE INVISIBLE, THE INTANGIBLE

The marked absence of women in the public engagement/interpretation work of museums, sporadically complemented by passive women to support active men and male activities, had not yet been critically thematized in feminist analyses. However, there has always been a rich tradition of new, special museums emerging in the museum world as a result of certain groups of people feeling under- or misrepresented in existing museums. So, the aim of the Women's Museum was to become a specialist national museum dedicated to the cultural history of women, influencing the sector on the basis of positive counter-images rather than a critique of existing ones.

The basis of the Women's Museum would be the invisible, most anonymous and under-described areas. The academic methods were interdisciplinary, and the concept of object was determined by life stories, emotions and society. The museum was more interested in undercurrents than surfaces, and in ambivalence and ambiguity. There has been a somewhat skeptical view of the widespread truth about advances in women's conditions, and women have never been referred to in the singular, specifically, but always in our situational, differentiated, often contradictory diversity.

In the traditional gender divisions of labor, large parts of female domains and products have been intangible or perishable, and women's cultures have only to a small extent been written. For women, it was the spoken word that passed on knowledge and feelings, skills and morals. Conversation and the spontaneous narrative tradition carry associations of good and bad, beautiful and ugly,

sin and shame.

As a rule, the tradition of oral history was a method that suited our purpose. We could give a voice to women who otherwise would not have spoken, women who would never have regarded their memories as something worth collecting. Consequently, one of our primary collection methods was oral history, in which life stories and material, object-based culture are intertwined.

This kind of collection became fundamental and also colored the project descriptions we wrote in our applications for grants from the job creation schemes that were initially our most important source of funding. The focus was housework and motherhood. Both of these basic women's areas were undergoing rapid change, and women's movement activists had a highly ambivalent attitude to them.

Two of us – a researcher and a young woman in a kind of employer/apprentice relationship – would visit the interviewees in their own homes. We generally paid several visits to build up trust and to encourage them to describe the darker aspects of their experience too. The motherhood project focused particularly on single mothers, whose pride in their own children and vulnerability in a world so biased against them added more dimension to the image of motherhood. At the same time, being a single mother was a premise for working at the museum. Accordingly, action research, in which identification and solidarity are a driving force, and subject and object are basically interchangeable, was embedded in the first collection and public engagement projects.

The museum gained a reputation for saying the unsaid and giving a voice to those who had been silenced. It collected things that no other museums had in their collections: worn, cut, darned, unwashed bloodstains, traces of violence, the wedding dress that was never worn – humble, mundane objects symbolizing the murkier aspects of life.

The skills and know-how of domestic life were presented alongside documentation on how women have fared in the public sphere, in education systems, in the city streets and at work, complemented by a focus on ground-breaking deeds and events, in which women found their way or fought their way into closed areas in politics or sports, as inventors, as artists or in paid work shaped to suit men, who had women to look after them and their children.



Selected objects and photos from FiJ and a wax baby created by the Chinese artist Chen Xi.

The collection of objects and the interviews were inextricably linked. Certain collections and studies documented entire families: for example, a group of farmer sisters from North Jutland, or mothers, sisters and daughters living in the same house in Aarhus for several generations. In this context, the tangible objects are imbued with feelings, memories, traditions and links between generations. Others documented female entrepreneurs, female inventors from the patent archives, or nurses, midwives and teachers. Documentation of the disappearance of home birth in favor of the hospitalization of birth in Fødselsanstalten i Jylland (FiJ) (The Jutland Maternity Home), the origin of which was to provide unmarried mothers with security during pregnancy and birth, was based on photos and the acquisition of delivery room and fire buckets, incubators and scales, beds and linen from FiJ prior to the move to Skejby Hospital.

Individual objects can possess major narrative value. The corset of a late 19th-century, fashion-conscious woman is a symbol of the restricted range of movement among women of the upper classes. The kitchen scale of the



Corset (1880s) with a poster about self-harm (2010s).

anorexic, who weighed everything she put in her mouth, reflects a kind of 'mental corseting'. The breast prosthesis of a cancer patient who had one of her bra cups filled to compensate for her loss; the repaired porcelain bowl, which the mother of a battered daughter had glued together to obliterate the sharp chips; the pressed bridal bouquet of the bride who was walked down the aisle by the very father who had sexually abused her; the 'kussomat', where any woman who felt like it could photograph her own genitals and observe how naturally varied women's private parts are: these are all examples of objects in the Women's Museum's collection and permanent exhibition, all documenting in various ways the importance of the body in women's lives. They are the result of an open collection strategy.

In the early years, when there were many of us, the commitment to, and range of the collection were huge. It is hard to say whether this commitment was undermined by Statens Museumsnævn (Denmark's national board of museums from 1976 to 2001) in 1998, when their assessment led to the conclusion that the museum had too many duplicates, or whether it was because we did not have the capacity to receive too many things, all of which had to be registered and stored, when we also wanted to concentrate on increasing visitor numbers. But today and in recent years, the intensity of the collections has waned. The intake and registration of objects are invisible to visitors, so have no bearing on outside interest. But

there is no doubt that this discontinuation of a wide-ranging, comprehensive collection was detrimental in terms of reaching new groups of visitors, who gain ownership of the museum by donating things to the collections.

Like the museum's own production of new exhibits, activity in terms of collecting decreased in tandem with a drop in the number of professionals in the collective management team.

#### PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: VIBRANT EXHIBITIONS THAT BRING THINGS TO LIFE

In the early years, the museum did not build a permanent exhibition, but presented special, temporary, thematic exhibits. Temporary exhibits provided freedom to create a varying exhibition language: from detailed reconstructions to stylized designs, and from a widespread use of copies to the presentation of exclusively original objects.

We made lifelike figures with the use of mechanical and audiovisual motion. In the rooms, objects and human figures moved on revolving stages. We created sounds, lighting and images that changed with the movement of visitors in the exhibition space. The 'human bodies', some with built-in motors, were modeled in chicken wire and plaster on real human beings. We used our own children's bodies for the figures of children. We programmed the sound and lighting to accompany visitors through the exhibitions. We wanted to show that





Reconstructed birth room with home birth. Collected and edited accounts of births alternating with sounds of increasing contractions were played from speakers under the birthing bed. From the exhibition Make Room for Life (1984).





Visitors could move around the letters 'U SKYLD' (Not Guilty) in IT'S not YOUR FAULT, an exhibition about rape (2010).

women excelled in the fields of mechanics and technology. We also encouraged people to be less reverent in their attitude towards a museum, making it easier for them to take in the often serious content of the exhibits, and inviting them to express themselves spontaneously and giving them the opportunity to laugh together.

Exhibits have multiple layers of experience and interpretation. With its reconstructed housemaid's room and delivery room, the first major exhibition – Make Room for Life – invited visitors into intimate spaces with sounds of loneliness, toil and pain behind a safe kitchen interior, where you could sip a cup of coffee on an oilcloth tablecloth. We were the real-life custodians, sitting next to the women giving birth and baking biscuits in the kitchen. Later exhibitions provided a comprehensive overview – for example, of an entire century in First One Way, Then the Other – or looked inwards – for example, in Family and Drudgery. Some were based on the wide-ranging collections and their registration process – for example, Boil, Saucepan, Boil – or on highly specific collections – for example, Wedding Dresses. In the exhibit At Night, in the glow of a torch, visitors encountered poetic, fanciful, experiential spaces with just a handful of symbolic objects in labyrinthine, condensed atmospheres. Art also played a significant role, even though art was not part of the museum's remit. It was important to describe the conditions of female artists, and their networks became important partners.

In the summer of 1986, in an effort to break with its local Aarhus connotations and demonstrate the museum's nationwide ambitions, we created a mobile branch and 'set up shop' for two two-week periods in two different

tourist locations in Vendsyssel in the North of Denmark. With selected exhibits in a 2150–ft<sup>2</sup> circus tent and a staff of 25–30 women and children in an adjacent tented camp, we went on the road to reach a new audience.

#### DIFFICULT TOPICS, AND ETHICAL AND METHODICAL CHOICES

The tabooed female body, women's antenatal anxiety and homophobia remained central topics, and sex education became part of the museum's program. For the later topic, we used a room, the door of which could be closed, so no one could listen in. Objects from the collection underpinned the fact that the Women's Museum could provide a plausible setting for this controversial educational theme. On the last Friday of each month, we handed out free condoms at the museum.

Discomfort and abuse. The ambivalence of life. Paradoxes in life choices. Clashes between classes. The aim was for the collection and exhibits to accommodate material about conflict, reflecting close discussion with informants and donors – even when it came to topics we wished did not exist. Examples include special exhibits about drinking and drugs, prostitution and trafficking, and rape. Interviews with former addicts and daughters of addicts, and with therapists who know that treatment for addiction is based on male lifestyle and is of scant help to women, painted a picture of how drinking and drugs brand a woman for the rest of her life, even when she is clean, and how children of addict mothers are more affected than if their fathers are addicts. The topic of trafficking as today's slave trade,



The museum has many women's movement posters from the 1970s. A selection hung in Women's Lives from Past to Present (2003–2014)

in which the global class society exploits and capitalizes on women's desires for a better life, was portrayed as a food chain for prostitution and the cultural objectification of the female body. The rape exhibition was created together with rape victims and therapists. Visitors could listen to the victims' experiences of pain, anxiety and self-blame in anonymized form.

What all these exhibitions had in common was people's urge or compulsion to hide their experiences. The museum sensitively attempted to shed light on those experiences in a way that would not re-traumatize the informants, but intensively enough to express the point of the exhibit. Concerns for visitors, who may have had parallel experiences, entailed a balancing act, so we did not always incorporate the toughest topics. In the childhood exhibition, you could hear a child who left home with his little brother, because his father thrashed the latter for defecating in his nappy. But the museum did not tackle the theme of incest, because we believed that children visiting the museum who had been victims of incest might recall their experience and feel powerless without anyone being aware of it.

The exhibition space is a powerful medium, and good exhibits can kindle intense, profound reactions. When tackling difficult topics in exhibitions, it is important to take an ethical stance in relation to those who have had the experiences.

#### FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME TO THE PRESENT DAY

In 1999, we changed the principle of spe-

cial, temporary exhibits, halving the available space for thematic exhibitions and opening the basic exhibition Women's Lives from Past to Present. We refrained from referring to it as a 'permanent' exhibit, but no longer did we devote internal resources or hire external resources to continue the relatively rapid changes involved in thematic exhibitions. The longer-term advantage was that we were able to create supplementary interpretation/public engagement material in the form of digital guides and virtual tours. Only very few productions of sound and slides were involved in the exhibition. Conversely, the tangible objects played a significant role.

The storerooms were bursting with objects that were ideal for the post-1800 topics in the exhibit. We loaned older items from other museums.

#### DOMKIRKEPLADSEN 5: DEMOCRACY, POWER AND MOVEMENT

It was the will of fate that over time we evolved together with the building we had originally had 1-year user agreements for. Shortly after state recognition of the museum, the building was totally refurbished for museum purposes, and around 2015–17 refurbishment was once again necessary. The aim was to ensure that the building with its granite staircase and golden handles would not appear too grand and forbidding but would serve as a physical setting for a public engagement/interpretation strategy that tackles power, democracy and movement, and stories about women who broke the glass ceiling and rose to positions of power.

The building is a cultural treasure in itself. The first fe-



Role Models were there to host the visitors at the exhibition, 2005.

male police officer in Denmark and the first female politicians in the city council are embedded in the building as historical evidence that women can accomplish the unexpected when they have the courage and are given the opportunity. In the lead-up to municipal, county, regional, parliamentary and EU parliament elections, we organized cross-party election meetings devoted to female candidates. We also dedicated exhibits to the anniversaries of women's suffrage in Denmark: their right to vote in municipal elections (2009) and their right to vote in parliamentary elections (2015).

Flexibility and a permanent setting are united in the old council chamber, in which the panels, chandeliers and some of the furniture date back to 1909 – the year in which the first woman became a councilor – now supplemented by rolling display cases, which make it possible to change the space into a hall for debate, concerts or teaching. A quote by the Danish novelist and feminist, Mathilde Fibiger *If Only I Was a Man* (1805) was used as the title for one of several educational programs on gender hierarchy, exclusion and inclusion. A new basic exhibition *Gender Blender* was constructed in the newly refurbished rooms – all thanks to generous grants.

#### THE REST OF THE WORLD

Throughout its existence, there has been an international dimension to the museum. As one of the first women's museums in the world, we served as a model museum and encountered great demand from abroad. The many new women's museums that emerged in the 1990s – and are still emerging – wanted to benefit from the experiences and methods of the Women's Museum. Having con-

tacts abroad is important for a museum, whose highly specialized field frequently calls for contact with colleagues elsewhere in the world.

Over the years, several official delegations, curious about the museum as an organization, exhibition venue and place of research, have visited the museum: for example, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C., a delegation from university and municipal council of Umeå, when the city was intending to open a women's museum in time for its status as European Capital of Culture in 2014, and the Women's Federation in China, where the state wanted a women's museum. The museum also received many invitations to travel and give talks. Though generally speaking this involved just one of us, sometimes many of us would go, and in 1985 the first-ever group of young single mothers went on a joint national tour.

Cultural projects in the EU and global collaborations engender respect for other traditions, refreshing the museum's insight into the conditions of Danish women. With a variety of partners, the museum has taken part in transnational projects, tackling themes such as immigrant families with newborns, women's culture from ancient times across the European wars, the wiping out of girl culture, partner violence among teenagers, women's





Meeting of the single mother project group 1984.

relationship with the economy and Muslim women's leadership experience.

Introducing Danes to ways of life from other parts of the world and boosting the museum's knowledge of differences and sense of community across countries and cultures are recurring elements of the museum's work. Art also transcends borders, and female artists from Spain, France, China, Mexico etc. have visited and exhibited at the museum.

From the outset, Danes with ethnic origins other than Danish have been involved in the museum in various ways. In 1985, a group of Turkish women resident in Denmark took over the museum and set up a living room and weaving room. Visitors were treated to a presentation of the women's personally selected objects, while their husbands sat in the wings sipping sweet mint tea. Somali women conveyed the horrors of circumcision, while representatives from Burkina Faso presented the roominess of small mud huts.

Since 2005, the museum has been running a mentoring network for women with refugee and immigrant backgrounds. Women with no knowledge of Danish culture or the Danish labor market are given a mentor, who shares her life experiences. This woman-to-woman relationship is rewarding for both parties, and over the years hundreds of non-ethnic Danes and Danish volunteers have met at the Women's Museum.

The mentoring network gave rise to Role Models, in which a dozen women with

different non-Western backgrounds created the exhibit Journey to Denmark, featuring personal objects from their culture of origin and their life stories. After its presentation at the museum, it was turned into a touring exhibit, presented in town halls, educational institutions and large workplaces. After serving as 'live custodians' at the museum, the women traveled around, telling their personal stories.

#### ORGANIZATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION: PROFESSIONALIZATION AND FORMAL RECOGNITION

During the early years, the museum's resources were based on labor market-related grants and temporary appointments. Job training and adaptation to the labor market for young women, and maintenance of the entitlement to unemployment benefit for the elderly, were accompanied by specifications for supervisors, who were given the first regular jobs. In an appreciative environment, the museum offered training in a wide range of tasks: from café work, care of objects and professional cleaning to exhibit construction and visitor service, and from registration and database work to a myriad of audiovisual technologies. During this phase, sometimes there were as many as 45 employees in the museum, all on various schemes. The day-to-day management was in the hands of the job creation project supervisors and those of us who switched to full-time employment after a few years, when we received the first cultural grants from Aarhus Municipality in the mid-1980s.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the museum was recognized as a special national museum and secured perma-



nent funding at the state's minimum level.

The desire for state recognition was a driving force in the Women's Museum Association, but the realization had consequences for some of the non-hierarchical principles of the museum's foundation. The flat model of the new direct democracy movement, in which everyone's voice was equal, was organized in the monthly 'Mass Meeting' – the supreme organ – and the 'Morning Meeting' – the coordinating authority. In a subsequent phase, the museum acquired a board, the Mass Meeting was discontinued, and the Museum Association's annual general meeting became the supreme authority.

Ministry of Culture Denmark has a number of professional and organizational requirements for a museum to be state recognized. There are requirements for collections and opening hours, a certain level of local grants, a secure building, a representative board and an academic, museum professional as director. The Ministry's spokesperson, Statens Museumsnævn (Denmark's national board of museums from 1976 to 2001) deemed that the collections, research and interpretation/public engagement were at the appropriate level and found the form of management interesting. In discussions with Statens Museumsnævn, the museum created a set of articles of association, which acknowledged the creativity and productivity of the museum's unconventional structure and found compromises between the requirements of the law and the ideology and ambitions of the museum.

Regarding the Mass Meeting, Statens Museumsnævn was more willing to proceed along the original path than we were, and allowed it to remain the supreme authority, as long as we kept detailed minutes.

Paradoxically, what the management needed was a group of people committed to serve as a sounding board for the day-to-day management team, rather than the Mass Meeting, at which – after the original wide-ranging attendance – the attendees now tended to change from one meeting to another. The result was an annual general meeting and the election of a board, in which the principle of consensus continued with an even number of members and with no chairperson. The board and management were coordinated, both referring directly to the annual general meeting.

The Women's Museum Association was given the majority of seats on the board; the rest went to representatives of Aarhus City Council.

We wanted to preserve our collective form of management and applied for exemption from the Museum Act's requirement for one director. The Ministry and the municipality supported this wish, as long as each individual in the collective management team could satisfy all the requirements in the Museum Act for a professional leader. Only 6 of the 9 managers at the time met these criteria.

The teachers disappeared. The working women, both skilled and unskilled, those with no formal education, who had been an important part of the staff in the first years of the museum, decreased in number. Gradually, imperceptibly for most people, noticeably for others, with few exceptions, the lesbians also disappeared from both the management team and the board.

The goal of creating jobs for women did not figure in the articles of association of the Women's Museum, but still existed in the Women's Museum Association – the museum's 'owner'.

Gradually, in a process of professionalization, the organization was consolidated. It could change, regardless of whether wishes for change came from within or from outside. The fact that the museum was recognized, while at the same time retaining its unconventional form of management, was a huge victory. We towed the Danish Museum Act line, did away with the Mass Meeting with no external pressure, were given special dispensation for collective management and created a consensus model with a coordinated board and management team. This was done in close discussion with Statens Museumsnævn, which later conducted a number of quality assessments. In their 1998 quality assessment, Statens Museumsnævn suggested that if the constitution of the museum's board included a chairperson we would gain greater clout. After discussing the matter thoroughly, the management team and board decided that the non-hierarchical balance between management and board would be broken if organization of the board included a chairperson. Given that the museum's compliance with the Danish Museum Act was of a high standard, the board respected our desire to continue with a non-hierarchical board.

#### HIERARCHIES

Formal and informal hierarchies gradually took shape. The unemployed women we appointed, in all their diversity, were valuable for the museum's sustained renewal. They raised inevitable



The cleaning lady, made of chicken wire and plaster bandage, was one of the first human figures we created. Visitors were quite shocked at how lifelike she was.

questions and contributed to new problem-solving, thereby providing an innovative environment. It was also profitable for many of them on an individual level. Some of them initially had low self-esteem, others were still affected by their experience of violence and abuse, and some were licking their wounds after an unpleasant divorce. The fact that all the women worked together meant that none of them had to cower and could breathe freely. When their employment ended, they went out into the mixed-gender community with far more self-esteem and confidence than they had when they arrived. This was highly valued by local authorities in the social and unemployment sectors. However, after the first few years of euphoria about creating jobs for lots of women, the museum also had to tackle internal conflict management.

As project managers, we became used to dignified parting with 'old' staff and the introduction of 'new'. That was the nature of things. When ending the fixed-term contracts, some of the women reacted angrily at the fact that we, and not they, could receive a salary and not have to return to the culture of control that was the downside of unemployment subsidy schemes.

Even the project managers had different wishes at the start. The limited project funding had to be managed in the best possible way. Some thought there would be money for more staff if everyone went part time. For others, a decent, full-time salary was paramount. Compromises were made, some shared a job, and some found work elsewhere. Changes in labor market policy after 1994 resulted in fewer people in wage subsidy jobs. This meant fewer staff and a change in the way the work was organized. Previously, we had shared all the jobs – even cleaning. The community was fractured when the managers were exempted from cleaning (apart from their own offices) to allow them more time for administration and research. A few years later, when increasingly fewer unemployed women were hired, and the museum expanded its area from approx. 13,000 to 19,000 ft<sup>2</sup>, we decided to hire cleaners.

The cleaning woman, dressed in a cleaner's tunic and placed in a discreet corner of the lobby, where she scrubbed the floor, was one of the museum's first and most treasured human figures. The guests respectfully avoided this lifelike character. She represented the necessity of cleaning work as the invisible, undervalued work, from which many women previously earned their money. This was also the kind of cleaning work we paid for and conveniently let happen at times when no one saw it, when our paid cleaning women came to the Women's Museum

after closing time, never becoming part of the everyday communities.

The logic of hierarchy was embedded in the organization of the museum. Could we have avoided this? The initial years proved that we could manage large financial resources, implement long-term plans and organize and share work with no regard for status. Each person contributed according to their ability, rather than according to position. By and large. Those who helped make plans and enter into agreements with external authorities and partners had greater influence than those who came later. Some were recognized in the collective leadership, others were not. But for a long time, we succeeded in adhering to a consensus model where you do not vote on something but listen to everyone before deciding.

#### FROM ASSOCIATION-OWNED TO SELF-GOVERNING INSTITUTION

The museum changed its organizational form from association-owned to self-governing. Gradually the management expressed the desire for a designated board. The municipality's department of culture pointed out that, now, generally speaking it was only small leisure clubs that were owned by associations. I do not recall any direct pressure, but a situation that was all part of exploring how the Women's Museum could become a self-governing institution, in which external institutions appointed members to the museum's board and took co-responsibility.

Over the years, the management team had become smaller. At the time the museum was recognized by the state, the management team consisted of 6 women; in 1995 of 5; and by 1996 of 4. Since 2002, there have been only 3. Over the years, the division of work became 'professionalized'. While research and public relations remained a shared responsibility, principal responsibility for finance, fundraising, staffing, collections and political-social activities was divided between the three of us, though adjusted on a daily and weekly basis in the consensus model's 'tripartite negotiations' within the collective. The collective leadership was both less wide-ranging and less dynamic, but the strength of the collective was conversation and discussion, and the fact that any strategy or decision, whatever the scale, could be tried out internally before being implemented.

We ended the association in 2011 after a long process of discussions between the management team and the board and having given advance warning to the association for a few years. The Women's





Yoko Ono's Wish Tree in the lobby of the Women's Museum (2004).

Museum Association had become both less active and less activist.

The cessation of the Women's Museum Association had been discussed at extraordinary general meetings. The board and the management outlined the advantages and disadvantages of both association and self-government. The members' desire to maintain connection to the museum and the opportunity they had had to support the museum with many successful years of its unusual form of organization were important for the continuation of the association, but the possible strength of inviting other institutions to appoint members to the museum's board and take co-responsibility for the museum's work won.

Could we have continued as an association-owned and operated museum? That is unlikely. There were very few actual movements in the 00s. Changing the broad organizational form of the Women's Museum was under consideration prior to the climate movement, the Arab Spring, Extinction Rebellion and MeToo, all of which presaged extensive new mobilizations. Maybe the Women's Museum was feeling somewhat isolated and old-fashioned in its final years as an association-owned institution.

We could also feel the crisis of 2008. The permanent operating grants, which were never large, were not reduced, but the opportunity for extra grants from foun-





Children concentrating.

dations dwindled. It seemed to us that the foundations were more interested in funding large, visible cultural institutions. We hoped that by 'streamlining' the Women's Museum, we could gain more access to funding. The final decision was made in 2011 – the year Denmark's first female prime minister took office, and gay couples became entitled to a church marriage.

The new structure of the board was ready by 2012. The Museum Association became the Friends of the Women's Museum and was given one seat on the board and the Women's Museum one (employee elected). The others were appointed by Erhverv Aarhus, LO, Aarhus University, Aarhus City Council and Mediebranchen. So, there was now an odd number, and for the first time a chairperson and vice chair.

The decision about the composition of the board was made in close discussion with the Municipality and Administration. We drew inspiration from the composition of other museum boards without investigating, for example, whether the Danish Women's Society or Mødrehjælpen would have accepted a seat on the board of the Women's Museum. This was something the Women's Council Denmark accepted a few years later, when the Friends of the Women's Museum was transformed into the Women's Museum Club, and this seat on the board became vacant.

Under the new board, as it now was, the collective leadership continued. We succeeded in obtaining additional operating grants in the National Budget, substantial funding for upgrading the museum's physical rooms and

increased operating grants from Aarhus Municipality for school services and later for our touring pop-up museum. The extra funding was of course a result of the management team's efforts, but it is impossible to ignore the seal of approval that a professionally composed board gave the museum.

Wide-ranging external contacts also continued. In the early years, the museum's space was filled with staff and volunteers in a motley jumble of working groups and small projects with the production of theater performances, audio slideshows, and small exhibits supplemented by courses in self-defense, croquis sketching, witchcraft and generational get-togethers, at which old people told children: "When I was a child..." This multifaceted internal production and public engagement/interpretation changed. Gradually, as the museum was consolidated, activist activities involved external organizations and partners. From its inception, the museum provided space for external exhibits by groups of women, whenever the theme was within the museum's remit. With fewer volunteers in the museum's everyday life, there was room for more women to organize dance, concerts and exhibits, and increased collaboration with other stakeholders in the city in terms of lectures etc. Recurring traditions of working with other women's organizations, trade union and cross-political groups to prepare for 8 March and

Mother's Day celebrations etc. helped perpetuate the energy that results from all the people actively involved in events and smaller exhibits at the museum.

## VISIONS, PRINCIPLES AND REMITS

The Women's Museum's relationship with the building changed over the years. Initially, we were grateful for the annual user agreements, which guaranteed us a roof over our head when we gained state recognition and then totally refurbished the building for museum purposes in 1992–93. However, we were constantly reminded that we might have to move out of the building to provide space for a city museum.

The museum lacked space. With progressively fewer referrals and volunteers, but relatively more permanent employees, the pressure for better staff facilities grew. The museum also wanted more visitors than the 40,000 or so visitors a year. The figures were nothing compared with those of our 'big' museum colleagues in Aarhus, so we also wanted to expand the exhibition area.

After the refurbishment in 1993, access from the main building to the original jail building was blocked. Symbolically, Yoko Ono's Wish Tree stood right there, inviting everyone to wish. Banknotes with wishes for love, women's power, peace on earth, new toys etc. grew on a fertile tree. One of the Women's Museum's greatest dreams was to gain access to the rooms behind the tree. That dream came true in 2005.

We applied to the Municipality of Aarhus for access to the leased adjacent building, referring to the fact that in 1992 the city council had decided to rent out its approx. 6,500 ft<sup>2</sup> for a period of 10 years to cover the costs of refurbishment. However, it was not so simple from the point of view of the city. The 10 years had passed, but the rental income had become a fixed part of the municipal budget. If the museum were to take over the adjacent building, we would also have to pay rent, which became possible when we developed separate interpretation/public engagement activities for children.

With support from foundations and an increase in our municipal operating grant, we were granted access, and in 2006 opened an exhibit about children for children. This exhibit redefined the museum's basic principle. We could have chosen to focus the exhibit on boosting girl pride in a world, in which – on paper – we have equality, but in which girls still lack the same encouragement to express themselves physically or believe in their own worth. But we took a wider-ranging approach by involving both genders and not concentrating on the life of girls. We wanted to get our message across to all children: hence, *The Histories of Boys and Girls*. We had a myriad of objects, photos and interviews

documenting the lives of girls. The collection of boys' memories, clothes and toys etc. for the exhibition started, and a number of girl and boy case histories from the 1850s to the 1990s were presented with objects on the basis of a kind of treasure hunt. The exhibit follows the historically changing conditions and expectations for girls and boys, from the perspective of different countries, class, size of family, work and duties, leisure and play. It shows classic girls' and boys' lives, mixed with case histories, in which some of the children's interests and objects reflect a second gender identity.

Children from institutions and schools visit the exhibit. It is also perfect for generational get-togethers. Objects evoke the past for parents and grandparents, who then assume the role of mediator, telling the children about experiences from their own childhood. We involved focus groups of children in the construction process, alongside early childhood educators, teachers and children's researchers. Focus groups of users and experts were new to us. What was also new was the millions of kroner we raised from foundations for constructing the exhibition with professional architects helping us with the design. After the opening, we conducted a user survey with observations and interviews of children in the exhibition. They loved it: both the girls and the boys.

## THE WOMEN'S MUSEUM AND GENDER FLUIDITY

The prediction from the outset was that the Women's Museum would be a nine days' wonder, far too limited to survive. Some said the name was wrong. It sounded aggressive. The goal was obsolete, the gender issue had once been relevant, but was now resolved and equality existed. Not only indirectly, but also directly, we experienced skepticism and attacks. For some men, hostility was surprisingly close to the surface – paving the way for ridicule. This latent hostility undoubtedly played a role in the patent heterosexuality with which the museum presented itself to the outside world, and the silence that surrounded lesbianism, both as an important historical topic and as a strong driving force in the Women's Museum's own development. It was important for the museum to establish and maintain trusting partnerships with gender-mixed museums, business associates, partners and public authorities.

In the museum's close working relationships, we succeeded in building respect and trust. The depth of this was revealed back in 1987, when the museum was subject to an aggressive smear campaign by the national press, kicked off by a couple of men who actively incited confrontation about the museum's foundation. Male civil servants

stepped in, strongly defending the qualities and benefits of the museum as a gender-separated workplace, where exhibits were always about and by women.

Over the years, the Women's Museum has also had many male donors. Proud of the lives and deeds of their mothers, sons have donated items from their mothers' belongings. Civil servants and male politicians have praised the Women's Museum as a workplace and museum institution. Craftsmen and service people have enjoyed coming to the museum. Female photographers have portrayed men, just as female visual artists have portrayed their warmth and tenderness for, and anger and fear of men. Transgender paradoxes related to forgiveness, AIDS and homophobia were presented as biblical scenes in *Ecce Homo*. The exhibition of Dame Edna's costumes began when, at the Skanderborg Festival, Barry Humphries mentioned the Women's Museum, and we invited him to curate an exhibition, regardless of what gender he chose.

Women, men and fluid boundaries between femininity and masculinity are embedded in the history of the Women's Museum, based on the history of women.

Aarhus City Council appointed the first men to the board of the Women's Museum in 1996, and this has happened almost continuously ever since. We welcomed them, and they have all been strong ambassadors for the Women's Museum in the sometimes misogynistic real world. Nevertheless, it was a change of course from the founding principle that the management and administration should be entirely in the hands of women. Later, the Ministry of Culture's focus on gender distribution, in extension of the 2006 Act on Gender Equality in Public Institutions, meant increased attention to the composition of boards. The vast majority of museums had male majorities on their boards, but the female majority on the Women's Museum board and in its staff seemed easier to pinpoint and declare outdated. At one time, we investigated the possibility of obtaining an exemption from the Danish Act on Equal Treatment, just as we once applied for an exemption from the Danish Museum Act's stipulation of a single professional leader. But we could not get round the Danish Act on Equal Treatment.

We are in favor of equality. But often we learned that there is a certain myopia when it comes to assessing equality. The generations of systematic exclusion of women from democracy and cultural life are not referred to when men do not feel represented and feel that women have taken over, whether in the fight for women's suffrage, in the Red

Stocking Movement, in women's shelters, on Femø or at the Women's Museum. "Men don't think they can visit the Women's Museum." We have heard that statement a thousand times.

At the Women's Museum, we never used the term 'the opposite sex'. From the outset, we were aware that it is demanding for both sexes to change the gendered expectations of the environment in which we live, which are entrenched in us from early childhood. But the basic view was that gender does not refer to innate characteristics of the biological sexes. We regarded masculinity and femininity as a continuum of transitions, in which each individual has a degree of opportunity to position themselves. The identity of a person is a more or less conscious interpretation of gender, and that can change from situation to situation for that same person.

The Women's Museum became one of the important gender segregated spaces, where the gender identities of the female universe could be seen in all their diversity. Despite formal gender equality in our society, gender continues to be linked to power, and gender-based hierarchies impact emotions and social relationships. But a critique of patriarchal power structures does not imply a conviction that one gender is better than the other.

For some people, the Women's Museum represented threat and provocation. This may be because men are gender blind and do not actually understand the structural power relationship between men and women. It may also be due to the fact that we are woven together in lust- and love-based relationships, which makes it painful for both men and women to see the relationship between the sexes as a relationship of power and possession, oppression and powerlessness – something women aired publicly once again in 2021.

In *Histories of Boys and Girls*, we abandoned the principle of radical feminism. Though the exhibit was created by women, it was about both sexes. Both girls and boys are fundamentally unaware of the invisibility of women's lives and historically changing women's movements, and of the fact that there are reasons to do something special if you want to focus on women's history. The unconscious exclusion of girls and women (and homosexual and ethnic minorities and disabled people etc.) is also going on today. Girls feel it. Boys do not experience it. So, boys often asked why they had to visit a women's museum.





With song and music, women and children dressed in clothes from bygone eras invited everyone to visit Domkirkepladsen 5, into which the Women's Museum moved in 1984.

## NEW REMIT

Based on a desire to boost and consolidate the museum's position as a platform for influence and recognition, the management team made a number of choices. In many ways, having the recognition of the museum by the surrounding community confirmed is driven by the desire to serve the community to which the museum belongs. Is the desire to be a meaningful, engaging museum that listens to the local community and dedicates itself to influencing contemporary life one of the main reasons why we sanded down the sharp edges of radicalism and steered away from provocative positions towards recognizable forms of organization?

The relationship between Gender and Sex in English-language women's research also characterized the domestic conditions, in which women's research was 're-christened' gender research. This also influenced the linguistic tone of the museum. As a result, in 2011 we rephrased the museum's vision:

The aim of the Women's Museum is to propagate knowledge about the importance

of gender and to take part in open discussion and mutual learning with users, women's institutions and environments, and other relevant partners by asking women for advice, involving the public and prioritizing 'social inclusion.

Up until 2016, the remit – the life and work of women – remained unchanged, but in the long run we did not maintain the explicitly feminist nature of the museum. We assimilated mainstream culture:

The museum will continuously evolve as a meeting place and venue for debate, information and experience, and accommodate an active research environment. We will maintain a consistent female perspective on everyday life and body, individuality and communities, past, present and future.

The collective management team always had a desire for change and innovation in tandem with reading changes in society. Creating jobs for women was originally a principal objective, but the absence of employment for men made it a stumbling block for the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces. The lack of men among visitors was





Celebrating the 25th Anniversary on  
31 October 2007.

also cause for concern. Perhaps we were too ready for change in 2016, when the quality assessment by the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces called for a change of remit – from a prime focus on women to gender in general.

In 2016, after several rounds of formulation by the board and the management team, we changed the focus of our remit to the cultural history of the sexes, but viewed from the perspective of women's history. Much had changed in the museum, but in all the cultural museums of the world, women were still scantily represented. In the accompanying 10-year strategic plan, we therefore emphasized that "the Women's Museum in Denmark would expand its remit but retain its name".<sup>34</sup>

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In 2007, in a speech to the museum, the then Mayor of Aarhus Nicolai Wammen said:

With a special focus on neglected groups – the invisible and the oppressed – the museum expresses a view of humanity, which I believe is of great credit to its founders and employees, and which generates respect for both the museum and Aarhus at home and abroad. Twenty-five years ago, it was not uncommon to experiment with collective management. In most institutions and companies, this form of management was not viable, but at the Women's Museum it survived and helped create the many impressive results that are highly respected in the museum world, among visitors, in the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces and in the City Council.

Over the years, aware of society's changes in culture and views of women, we made adjustments, both large and small. The history of the Women's Museum reflects the desire to be an open place where worn-out things can glow, and where hidden things can be seen: a place that helps women gain an active, visible place both in history and the present. The basic principles of the Women's Museum's pioneering era changed significantly along the way and, through its almost 40 years of existence, the museum relaxed several of its originally distinctive and key ideological positions. Over the years, our experimental, irreverent approach to the responsibility of a museum became less pronounced. Hierarchical structures evolved in relation to decisions and the division of labor, collective management was slowly and gradually phased out, and a revised remit, in which a multi-gender approach gained ground at the expense of the uniquely female, became the basis for the continued existence of the museum. Would it have been possi-

ble to adhere to the type of principles and methods on which the museum was originally based? Would we have been able to increase our grants and add all the space we finally acquired if the museum's professional strategies had not become more traditional?

There is no way of knowing. But with joy and respect, we can see that the world around us has once again become passionately concerned about women's issues. If it had been possible for the Women's Museum to retain its main focus on the diversity of women's experiences and skills, continuing as an experimental workplace for women, then the Women's Museum might have been able to continue its activist approach, reflecting women's movements both old and new, and the several 'waves' that have emerged since.

Museums must reflect their times. In recent years, attention to the bodily, gender-branded and cultural-historical characteristics of women has again been boosted, and new women's rights initiatives are emerging. Protests against the oppression of women started in the United States in the 2017 Women's March and spread to the entire Western world. So did the MeToo movement. Women in the cultural and business sectors focus on the absence of recognition. Motherhood has become a key theme in art exhibitions, literature and media debates. Puzzled, female artists are asking why museums do not purchase anywhere near as many works by women as by men.

'What a fabulous Museum! I wish we had one like this in New York,' wrote a visitor in the museum's guestbook in 2007. In fact, there is a new one on the way in Washington. In late 2020, Congress enacted legislation to create a national museum dedicated to the

history of American women, given that women's lives are still invisible, and women's experiences marginalized. 40 years on, the government of the United States is now expressing a need for what we, as a grass roots organization, accomplished in the 1980s, and which pretty quickly earned us recognition by the authorities in Denmark.

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I have backed up my memories with annual reports and other archive material, and conversations with Jette Sandahl, who was a member of the museum's management team until 1995. Much of the wording in the text about the first decade of the museum's existence is hers.

34

The quote is from the museums internal strategy for 2015–2025, p 2.

# Section

## 02

TESTIMONIES OF PEOPLE AND  
ACTIVISTS INVOLVED IN THE WORK  
OF THE MUSEUM ACROSS THE YEARS

**JULIE ROKKJÆR BIRCH**

Former director of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark

## INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the Women's Museum Association in 1982, the museum, now called KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, has been disseminating cultural history accompanied by voices that could supplement the physical objects with personal life stories. This was also a matter of necessity, because reminiscences of women's lives and work have been gobbled up – eroded – by time. This condition defined the collection of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, which contains vast documentation of oral accounts: intangible cultural heritage that we regard as equally important as the objects in the museum's public engagement and interpretation. The inclusion of personal stories (engaging in dialog with the outside world in general) is still an essential part of the museum's work, whether collecting objects, curating exhibitions, conducting research or devising public engagement/interpretation initiatives.

Even at the organizational level, the doors of the museum were open from the very beginning. On account of the fact that originally the Women's Museum Association was also an unemployment project for women (cf. Ipsen), the museum still has a socio-economic identity, which is all about creating alternative job opportunities for both particularly vulnerable and newly qualified unemployed people. The flow of short-term employees is demanding in a small organization, but one cannot underestimate the extent to which the museum benefits from these frequent breaths of fresh air from the outside world, reflecting that world's view of the museum and helping the museum to remain dynamic and relevant.

Over the years, many different individuals have contributed to the evolution and expansion of the museum, helping to make visible invisible cultural history and preserve it for posterity. But it is not only the museum's subject matter that such an exchange of knowledge enhances. In the interaction between the museum and the individual, that individual also undergoes a change as a result of the special self-reflection that occurs in their collaboration with the museum. In other words, "coming to the museum" and becoming part of its story is a unique experience.

The following section features a selection of personal accounts, which touchingly describe people's encounter and collaboration with the museum, illustrating the museum's special role as a "safe space" for "unsafe stories".



The following account was written by **IRMA PEDERSEN**, who came to the Women's Museum in 1984 for a 7-month work capability assessment. Originally published in the Women's Museum's 1984 Annual Report.

*My name's Irma Pedersen and I was born on January 15, 1930.  
After 7 years at school, I started helping out in a garment factory, which later led to me becoming a seamstress.  
Early on in my life I became aware that money and freedom are inextricably linked. After World War II, there were plenty of jobs in the garment industry, as everyone's clothes had become threadbare during the war.  
We worked according to a pay system that we called "piecework agreements", which was a bit of a matter of trust between the seamstress and the operations manager.  
Later came the so-called rationalization experts...  
After 22 years as a seamstress, my back was done in....  
Then I became a waitress and spent 9 years at the same workplace.  
There are many non-union people in that industry, and competing with young people who still have their strength is difficult when you're over 50.  
After 2 years of unemployment, it started to dawn on me that I probably shouldn't count on getting a job...  
Then fate came to my aid.  
I heard by chance that the Women's Museum Association was offering posts to long-term unemployed women. I applied and was accepted. Never in my life have 7 months passed so quickly.  
It was a workplace unlike any other I had experienced before. No day was the same. I would find myself singing on the way to work and looked around startled, wondering if anyone heard me and assumed I was a bit crazy.  
I learned a women's language that I had probably heard of but didn't believe existed. When we had to move to our current premises, I wondered a lot about how it could be done in practical terms. We had no money and we had to get the premises ready so that we could actually work there.  
But my concerns were groundless. Suddenly everything picked up speed, the work clothes came out and everyone was covered in paint, so you'd think there was a carnival in town.  
I will never forget the hard work we put in each day, and the transformation from dark, boring rooms to the bright ones we have today.  
Once the premises were in order, we got busy making a procession and exhibits for the Aarhus Festival. Now it was time for the city to see that we were serious about the women's museum.  
There was a buzz of activity everywhere and there wasn't much time. "We won't make it." Lots of people said that.  
What an experience when our procession on the main pedestrian street attracted 200 people to the Women's Museum Association, many more than we had hoped for in our wildest dreams.  
Since then, exhibits have gotten better and better, and our need for more space is increasing every day.  
Truly a vibrant workplace, with exciting activities that we can be proud of.  
Thank you for giving me that experience!*

**"It was a workplace unlike any other I had experienced before"**

The following account was written by **GRETHER SKÅNING**, a volunteer at the Women's Museum in 1986. Originally published in the Women's Museum's 1986 Annual Report.

*At the end of 1985, I resigned from my job in the municipal social and health department in order to retire.*

*After an orientation interview with 2 project supervisors at the Women's Museum about the museum's conceptual basis and practical way of working, I was assigned to the museum's registration group. I also became a member of the Women's Museum Association and got the opportunity to contribute to and influence the more general principles and decisions regarding the museum's conceptual basis and day-to-day operations.*

*In the time that I worked as a volunteer, I gained insight into and an understanding of the cultural-historical and educational efforts provided by those who were employed to take care of the museum's operations, including temporary exhibitions and other educational work.*

*There are many routine work tasks, things that have to be done in order for the museum to function. These include cleaning, tidying up, purchasing materials, baking and brewing coffee in the café, bookkeeping, hard work on exhibitions, refurbishing rooms, moving heavy objects, registering incoming objects, etc. I can't keep up with all the debates that characterize the basic democratic stance of the organization. But the ripples from the open and lively debate about all sorts of different phenomena affect everyone, and the special solidarity the place is contagious. It is great to work in a place where even the routines are constantly questioned and where everyone has the opportunity to be heard.*

*It can be difficult for me to put names to the faces of the ever-changing employees. But it makes an impression that so many can pull together and feel like members of a community, even though they come with very different prerequisites, and virtually everyone is located on the outer edge of the social system where, as we know, lots of people have a tendency to express themselves bluntly.*

*I have often seen former employees continuing to visit the museum. In front of them, despite my age, I feel like a novice. After all, they lived through the museum's pioneering period, a period when, as is well known, the fighting spirit and the desire to bring an idea to life helped overcome many difficulties.*

*Some people are afraid that the Women's Museum will be locked into a suffocating system of rules, regulations and circulars and subject to the control that institutions have to tolerate as a result of receiving state subsidy in order to operate. I believe that the very principle – the fact that this is a workplace for women – will be strong enough to keep the pioneering spirit alive and help overcome the restrictions that can easily throttle traditional institutions without losing credibility. Pioneering spirit is still needed. The individual, who cannot always see who actually "decides", experiences a basic sense of security in being valued and in being allowed to "speak up and out" if things go too quickly at the Women's Museum.*

**"The special solidarity of the place is contagious"**

The following account was written by **CONNI CHRISTENSEN, DORTE PORSGÅRD** and **ANE VIND**, who were employed as part of the very first single mother job-creation project in 1984. The text was originally published in the Women's Museum's 1984 Annual Report.

*As a young woman on the project, it was very affirming to experience that independently we were able to create something that could be used by people other than ourselves... We, who only had a lower secondary education and came from the regular labor market, suddenly experienced a completely new freedom, which provided great opportunities, but at the same time a great responsibility. For those of us who had been long-term unemployed, it revived our desire to start an education and really boosted our self-confidence. Dorte, for example, left us in the middle of the program to pursue her education. For all of us, work took on a new dimension of desire, quality of life and responsibility.*

*As single mothers, it is always difficult to combine children and work, but at the Women's Museum it was always possible to take your child to work if there were problems with childcare or something, and this benefited both our children and us! Just as we take our private life to work, we would take our work home, and when time was tight coming up to the exhibition, we were happy to work late into the evening. Naturally, we also had conflicts – for example, about work discipline and methods – but we also found support and close friendships with each other. We are of course disappointed not to be able to continue as employees on such an exciting and rewarding project, but of course we wish the young people on the new projects good luck, and hope that it will be as educational for them as it was for us.*

*“Just as we take our private life to work,  
we would take our work home”*

The following account was written by **ANE VIND** who was on the single mother project in 1984. Ane Vind wrote the account in the summer of 2021.

*I have taken a really close look at my memories of the Women's Museum and my time there. I remember the time as educational, engaging and useful, on several levels. Partly, of course, on the professional side: gaining insight into historical conditions, learning how to edit audio recordings to create stories, interviewing women whose lives were very different from mine, and experiencing the joyful moment when we felt a sense of community across generations.*

*My time at the museum also gave me an interest in people's diverse conditions, not only historical, but also contemporary social differences. Meeting other employees, on the various "job creation" schemes, was both thought provoking and educational. On a personal level (and professionally, as I now work with people) this was very useful and increased my understanding of people's differences.*

*Perhaps what I got most out of my time at the museum is the belief that the efforts of both individuals and groups can make a difference. The fact that we launched a movement, not always completely sure of the way it would go (far from it!), but with drive and indomitability.*

*Not everything went as we imagined, but we made things happen. The exhibit would open, even though your kid threw up on your party dress just before the silk ribbon was cut. Visitors were happy and curious and didn't notice the little mistakes, and what we thought was a mistake actually ended up paving the way for new insights.*

*When I look back, being a new, young mother was a vulnerable position to be in. I don't think I saw myself as weak or exposed, and that was probably partly because we were a group. We could see ourselves in each other and experience the strength of that. And feel that we could do something.*

**"We launched a movement"**



The following account was written by **ULLA THORUP**, who worked on the exhibit *It's NOT Your Fault* at the Women's Museum in 2010. Ulla Thorup wrote the account in the summer of 2021.

*In 2010, the It's NOT Your Fault exhibit opened at the Women's Museum in Aarhus, where I was involved right from the planning stage as someone who had experience of the subject – unfortunately, you could say.*

*The purpose of the exhibit was to show that it is not women's fault that they are subjected to assault and rape, even though the environment often labels them as accomplices.*

*The exhibit was very relevant, since it focused on rape and women's right to make decisions about their own bodies and not evaluate themselves in relation to men. The exhibit became very significant for me, as I had been raped in Los Angeles at the age of 17, and my circle of friends believed that I should forget the incident, as men were ruled by their desires and needs, and we women should or could not tamper with the natural order of things.*

*Women were often accused of dressed too provocatively or going home with a good friend – ergo the assaults were their own fault. Like many others, I am grateful that the exhibit got off the ground and was a great success, and hope that it was instrumental in dispelling women's sense of guilt and shame.*

*For me personally, the exhibit was an eye-opener, as I felt visible and acknowledged, and I hope the same was the case for other women who had been subjected to abuse. Consequently, I trained as a psychotherapist and became a volunteer at the Joan Sisters to support other abused women.*

**“I felt visible and acknowledged”**

The following account was written by **ELIAS SADAQ**, a poet and playwright who was born and grew up in Aarhus, and who contributed to the Gender Blender exhibit that opened at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark in 2017.

*Aarhus is part of my history, my DNA and my self-understanding. The city made me the person I am today, I have written my name on every curb, walked the narrow streets from Aarhus V to Aarhus C. I know every road, the inner city is my playground, the Latin Quarter, the Town Hall Park, Åboulevarden, Klostertorvet, Møllestien etc. In the heart of the city sits the cathedral like a huge giant, heavy and majestic, looming over the entire city and casting long shadows. Right next to it is a special, red-brick building. A building that has had many different guises. A small building that has always had great significance for the entire city. A small building that has had great significance in my life. My mother always referred to the little red building with respect and pride, a part of her history that later became part of mine.*

*Ever since I was a boy, I have always loved going to museums, loved walking around the rooms, losing myself in history. When I came to the museum for the first time, I did not regard it as my own, I entered as a visitor, as a stranger in a new home. That was before I understood myself and understood how the museum also told my story, my struggles and my victories. I did not understand how my story resembled the same story that the museum bore witness to. I only got to understand this one dark winter evening when Julie, a curator at the time, had invited me in after closing time, giving me an opportunity to tell my story, shape a language for my self-identity and perpetuate it as part of gender history. An anonymous testimony, a long conversation, a small Dictaphone, a safe room, bright lamps and warm floors. I remember it like it was yesterday and yet as if it was another life.*

*I told Julie that I was gay and Muslim, that I had difficulty loving myself, that I was afraid that my God, family, friends and the world around me would not be able to love me, that I felt infinitely invisible, alone and wrong.*

*It was the first time I had shared my story in that way, yet I was never nervous in Julie's presence, I experienced a rare respect, understanding, real curiosity and attention to my situation and my courage. It was through this conversation that we found a language, created a space, a physical visibility for an invisible minority. I donated to Julie and the museum my own little blue Koran, which, together with my story, under a pseudonym, was to be part of an exhibit entitled Gender Blender. An exhibit that addressed minorities, in terms of gender, body, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Some weeks later the exhibit opened to the public and I turned up in the lobby in a state of excitement. I came alone in the morning and stood next to the heavy stairs to the first floor. If you have been to the museum, you will never forget the impression of the entrance, the patterns on the floor, the painted ceiling, the two heavy stone columns by the stairs and the unmistakable feeling of the shiny, cool wooden railing that guides you up to the interior of the museum. A building that exudes history in every corner.*

*On the first floor was the exhibit and my contribution, and a pair of headphones connected to a display case with text boxes in which my Koran was presented. I looked over my shoulder several times to make sure I was alone before putting on the headphones. As the worry about my voice being recognized disappeared, I breathed a sigh of relief, relaxed and got absorbed in the story. I was proud.*

*Not only of the fact that my own contribution, but that my story too had found its place in a sea of other voices, minorities, women, men, those across the spectrum, those who did not identify with a gender.*

*The exhibition made me view myself differently. I discovered that I belonged to a special group of particularly alienated, particularly marginalized individuals. A group of individuals who, in our own way, had broken with norms related to gender, sexuality and identity across ethnicity, belief and class. I felt part of a community, a sense of kinship, I was stepping into a legacy of activists and freedom fighters.*

*A few months later, I came out to my family, friends and the outside world. Today, there is no doubt that the museum's presentation and treatment of my story, my life and struggle, helped give me the courage to stand up for myself, and to use my voice to give visibility and role models to others in the same situation. I could tell my story. I wasn't invisible. I was found, linked forever to history in the museum, in Aarhus, in my home.*

*We live in the age of values. Every day, great battles and confrontations take place, challenging the principles and norms of the past. I feel a flow, a reckoning from a generation to which I myself belong, which is predominantly interested in taking a stand. A generation that demands change, that wants to shift the bar, create more space for all lives, for women, men and those who refuse to be restricted by the concept of gender. The fight for equality is intersectional and in the transparent century, we see ourselves and each other for the first time connected across the spectrum of gender, religion, sexuality, ethnicity and political belief. "No one is free until all are free" and "an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere". That is my conviction. Although we experience internal strife and do not always share common values and contribute in various ways to each other's oppression, my generation's fight for freedom will always stand on the shoulders of those who came before, be it women's liberation or the LGBTQ movement. In this context, I sense growing pains, resistance and discomfort on the part of an older generation that finds it difficult to keep up with the changing times. Our collective history is being reversed and considered. Statues are taken down and road names changed. Questions about how we must account for the mistakes and shortcomings of the past are entering the public debate for the first time. We used to regard feminism as a movement only for women. Today we view it as an idea that embraces equality for all. In the same way that today we understand that it is not enough just to think racism is wrong, but that we must actively speak out and declare ourselves as anti-racists. We are having conversations about consent for the first time, the dividing lines are getting sharper and sharper. We are giving ownership of the body back to the individual and accepting that all bodies must be loved regardless of size, shape and/or disability.*

*Everyone has an opinion on everything and everyone has become an activist in their own little life. In the 21st century, it is a privilege to be apolitical. But how should culture relate to this development and these trends? How do you convey this development without getting caught up in a particular point of view.*

*This is where museums become a mouthpiece and link between lived life, society and history. Personal stories take the lead in the encounter between activism and level-headed, academic communication. The display cases are filled with human experience. The perspectives are diverse and reflect reality – a reality that threatens the established norms and narratives – a reality that, if possible, causes discomfort and calls for change. It is in these display cases that we encounter the unknown and can confront change or see ourselves in the mirror for the first time. In the same way that I have seen aspects of myself reflected in ancient paintings and sculptures in art museums, which in their own way convey a reality or a desired reality. Actually, I never saw myself as an activist, not until people started calling me that. I was always a boy who wanted to change the world around me because of the injustice I witnessed, whether racism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, social control or misogyny. And when I spoke out against injustice, I was always put down, and silenced by teachers, friends and family. It was not until I reached my twenties that I discovered the word “activism”, partly through my work in the museum. Suddenly my life and work took on a different context, authority and meaning. They were legitimized and acknowledged as historic activities and tools in a historic building and found common ground among other activists. I am convinced that personal stories and narratives change the world around us. Normal people, not unique individuals, just people with an inner drive who want to change themselves and, as a result, the world around them. The fact that museums have an opportunity to document these lives and make them topical by giving them a platform, only contributes positively to social change and social transformation. Everything in one’s life can change with a walk round a museum with defining moments and experiences. The interpretation is the viewer’s own, silent conversations they have with themselves, and you never know what you will find in a display case that might inspire people and might change the world forever. This is what museums can do and this is what museums must do. Remind us of the past and help change the future.*

“I could tell my story. I wasn’t invisible. I existed”



The following account was written by **CHRISTINNA**, a burlesque dancer who contributed to the Gender Blender exhibit that opened at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark in 2017.

*"THE WOMEN'S MUSEUM". There it is in meter-high iron letters above the entrance. I step gingerly over the threshold, in anonymous jogging clothes, lugging a suitcase that is, in reality, far too heavy, as its humble, worn plastic wheels thump against each and every ancient granite step up the grandiose staircase. A staircase that decades earlier carried the weight of important men, but now carries the flame of hope for the few who become the many when we stand together. My dressing room is the exhibit room up under the roof. Here, in the hallowed halls where cultural capital drips from the walls, I smear my body in oil and glitter, and glue on false eyelashes. I jump up and down a few times to check that my pasties are staying where they should be, taped to cover my dangerous female nipples. After all, I shouldn't inadvertently give the audience more than they paid for. Finally, I zip up the sequined dress and pull the long, glistening rhinestone gloves up over the elbow. One half of my job is to put on clothes – the other half is to take them off.*

*Now I can hear them clapping. That means I'll be on soon. I wait expectantly in the twilight of the white stairwell, lit only by the moonlight outside. Then the heavy, varnished wooden doors open. The music plays, the lights shine. I step confidently into the old town hall, where they have come to see me dance. Come to watch me undress. In the flesh, as they say. And I enjoy their gaze. Finally, I can be myself. More than myself, I am even more me, here, in the light. Not many museums voluntarily invite a stripper inside their thick walls, but at the Women's Museum they do – and it's not the first time I've been here.*

*In fact, I have appeared at the Women's Museum repeatedly in different contexts over a number of years as a stripper. We also call it burlesque. It is a contemporary type of performance in which dance, theater, striptease and satire all come together in a way that challenges our senses and our (gender) norms. It challenges our ideas about what bodies can be sexy. What sex actually is. And who finds you sexy. For me, it is a place of freedom where my sexuality and my sensuality are my own. I define the framework, I set the boundaries and I exercise my sexuality in a way where the control lies with me. I am sexy – as a subject and as a person. I wish everyone had that freedom. Granted, we can't all work as strippers and burlesque performers. But we can all try to express our sexuality and gender identity in the way that is most ourselves.*

*Research shows that the more we are allowed to express our sexuality and gender identity exactly as it is, the less shame we feel and the better we feel. I feel the Women's Museum is part of the solution to this. It is a place where we can (perhaps for the first time) find someone like us, and where we can perhaps learn to understand those who are absolutely not like us. Only with understanding and acceptance can we move forward, as people and as a society. And as we say in my industry: "The show must go on."*

*I'm just your average unfashionable, cisgender, heterosexual, slim, conventionally beautiful, relatively young, able bodied, well educated, white middle class woman. The only thing that would have been worse was to be a man too. I don't even have an invisible disability to boast about. I've only had the most fashionable and common ailments such as stress and moderate depression. The only thing that boosts my*

*diversity is the fact that I'm a stripper, which I guess is a kind of sex worker. I'm also a librarian. But even "stripper librarian" is somehow a cliché.*

*Don't get me wrong. It's not because I haven't had any problems. You bet I have. I have had my own personal problems, but probably no more than many other (women). I have been in a psychologically abusive relationship, been molested in my own bed, while out and about in the city and on charter trips by customers, waiters, taxi drivers, strangers and friends. I also find time and time again that the restrictive norms of gender also limit me. The whore-Madonna trope and the sexual double standards are alive and kicking. Both in my working and dating life, my work as a burlesque performer has presented challenges. People want the stripper, the academic or the housewife but, guess what, I come as a package solution – or rather a package problem. I am all those things. Humans are all those things and many more. We cannot be reduced to well-defined, demarcated stock cubes.*

*The women's activists were the first to declare that privacy is political and I heartily agree. "Private" IS public. Without us, the private ones, there is no public. Politics is created so that we can organize our private lives, both together and individually. Things are certainly better for women now than they have been for many centuries, but as Nynne says in popular culture: "Could be worse – but could fucking well be better."*

*On the second floor of the museum hangs a picture of my face. There are actually two. The first is a truthful depiction of "I woke up like this". Me, without makeup, without filter, with no photoshop. The second is me in full show makeup, posing like a movie actress from the old days. But they are both me. I am neither more nor less woman nor more or less me in either of them. I'm hanging there because, on a spectrum of gender expression, I profess to be hyper-feminine. Super feminine. A real girl-girl. Woman with a capital "W". Traditionally feminine. I signed up when the Women's Museum posted an announcement on their Facebook page looking for representatives of different gender expressions, gender identities and sexualities for their exhibit on gender, Gender Blender. In all my cis mediocrity, I perhaps represent a kind of majority among minorities. The librarian stripper strikes again.*

*And there I am, alongside a drag queen, a bodybuilder, the gay Muslim and the trans woman, as one image of what gender can do. And that's what KØN – Gender Museum Denmark can do. There is room here for all of us. Those who are mega common and those who are uncommon – at least without one being labeled as better than the other. A museum that is not out to push women out of the picture, but on the contrary tries to create a framework with room for more kinds of women, more kinds of people. Me too. You too.*

*Today, a majority of Danes believe that we really have equality – in fact, many believe that the fight for equality has gone too far. #MeToo and all that. But what we forget is how incredibly fast it all went. How far there is still to go. We forget that for centuries women were nothing in themselves. They were a piece of property handed down from father to husband, the same way a farmer sells a sow to the butcher. The sow has no say in the matter. We forget that it is only barely 100 years since women got the right to vote. It is only a little over 30 years ago that two people of the same sex were allowed*

*to enter into a registered partnership. And not even a year has passed since Danes finally got a consent law that ensures something as basic as active consent in a sexual relationship. And on many other fronts – racism, sexism, discrimination – the past year has only shown us that we still have a long way to go.*

*Bad museums only look back and show us the past without dealing with it. They preserve history. Many museums look back, but also explain the past to us in a modern context, shedding light on history. Only a few museums dare to look ahead. To hope. To dream. To be a part of history. KØN – Gender Museum Denmark does. And just as many people initially labeled the women's struggle of 1968 as extreme, hysterical and unnecessary, history is now repeating itself. Critics say intersectional feminism is made up of violent asexual feminazis out to burn patriarchal, capitalist society to the ground. And, bearing in mind what the last year/century has offered us in the crumbling ruins of patriarchal, capitalist society, I can only say: "Pass me a fucking match."*

*"I'm sexy – as a subject and as a person"*

The following account was written by **SHABNAM, SAHAR, FARESHTA, SHAYMAA** and **ELLA**, the group of Muslim women who curated the Muslim Women exhibit at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark in 2019.

*A museum remembers a society, the culture, the women, the gender, moments from our world, a small moment in one's reality that becomes immortal in the age of technology. The old city hall, the old police station, the old Women's Museum, KØN – Gender Museum Denmark remembers a lot of stories, tales and accounts about us all. Often a group of women has been overlooked, forgotten, missing from the stories that the museums have told to society. The Muslim woman. When stories about the Muslim woman are forgotten, it only increases the appetite for more.*

*Being a woman has always been part of our identity. Being a Muslim woman has always been a part of us too. What both have in common is that they have always been present and parallel to each other. For us, it has not been about choosing either or. Both can and should be allowed to coexist. One of those women has often been represented, while the other remained invisible in the stories and exhibitions that we ourselves have walked around and looked at. When the Muslim woman got a voice, it rarely came from herself. The voice was created by others around her. Until one day we stumbled across the news that the former Women's Museum was looking for a Muslim curatorial group to portray the Muslim woman in a pop-up exhibition. We breathed a deep sigh of relief, and our thoughts were given free rein to shape all the endless possibilities for what the exhibit could contain and contribute. The motivation was kindled by appetite – for representation, voices, nuances and colors. All ages, all faiths, all countries, all the trivial little quirks from everyday life that were lacking. Couldn't they be accommodated in the pop-up exhibition?*

*The five of us in the curatorial group were all very different. We were tasked with conveying the poetry, art, everyday life and nuances behind the Muslim woman in Denmark. The passion for the project was clear throughout the six months in which we brought the exhibit to life together. We were different in terms of our background, age, education, ethnicity and the ways we practiced religion. Our common denominator was that we were Muslim women in Denmark who had lacked a voice, been overlooked and misrepresented. Together, through art, poetry, testimonies, letters, and objects from our everyday lives, we assembled what we had missed. Our voice. The lack of representation in public discourse and the media over the years has led to the polarization and stigmatization of the Muslim women we usually look up to. The strong, intelligent, courageous, fearless women who carry mountains on their shoulders. The voices that we have heard through childhood and our own have been missing in society, culture and art.*

*Creating a voice in a creative space can create many nuances. Conveying words in a poem can give a story and new meaning to the person who reads it in their own voice. Thereby the language can take on a new narrative each time the poem is seen with different eyes. An object can show how similar and different everyday life can be for the Muslim woman. Books can create a space for the Muslim woman in literature and*



*provide time for reading both fiction and non-fiction. Books that had been banned elsewhere in the world were given space in the exhibition, as a testimony to the voices that had otherwise been concealed. A film with questions can create new reflections on the way we articulate and create curiosity, categorization or stereotyping of an identity for a given person. Visually, it can illustrate to people that the Muslim woman behind the voice will not be the same every time the same question is asked, that it can show the difference in the stories that also characterize the answers.*

*The pop-up exhibit was ready in December 2019. In the curatorial group, we had collated the voices we had received in various formats. We wanted to share the platform with as many Muslim women in Denmark as possible. The identity we wanted to create for the Muslim woman had to accommodate a larger space with the nuances and differences that belonged to this. It became an exhibit in which the women could recognize themselves. This was clear when we held an opening where the pop-up exhibit was allowed to be presented and shown. The voice was neutral, it was recognizable and it could support the Muslim woman in all her facets.*

*We did not arrive at that until all the women throughout Denmark had passed on their voice, stories and reflections for the identity we built together and through the exhibit. The atmosphere at the opening fizzled with expectation. Among the guests there were a number of familiar faces who had contributed to the exhibit. The curatorial group explained the thoughts behind the exhibit before it was presented and opened up to the world that was to receive it. Curious, people wandered around, looking at all the poems, letters, films and books. Everyone was positive about the many voices the exhibit contained and displayed. The Muslim woman had been presented in all her ambiguity, and she had been welcomed.*

*We had high hopes for the exhibition, the aim of which was to spotlight the voice that had been overlooked and lacking for so long. To show a voice that was created by the Muslim woman. But even though the voice had grown in self-confidence and could stand on its own two feet in a pop-up exhibit with high hopes for the many places it would reach throughout the country, it could not combat the pandemic that forced the entire country into lockdown. The biggest challenge came after the opening. Just as the bird was ready to fly from the nest and out into the big wide world, the pandemic closed down everything and put our dreams on hold. After the disappointment of the lockdown and the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic – which still exists – a glimmer of hope flared up when KØN – Gender Museum Denmark reopened. Would the pop-up exhibit featuring the Muslim women's voices, stories and reflections get a place at the museum?*

*An exhibit such as this can contain many voices, and it has the ability to pass on a story to the person who observes it. It can create a space for a story that the museum has not told and remembered before in society, culture and art. It can create new definitions, and the moment an exhibit encounters another person, it creates a special moment. It can be a vulnerable space, and it requires a safe framework to pass on so many different stories, where the voices are preserved and together can contribute to a shared, nuanced voice. A museum plays a key role when it comes to collating and conveying an identity. It is a role that we must always be aware of when we step inside.*

*When we walk through an exhibit and listen, the voice that defines that space becomes part of our voice. When we step out of the museum again, we have a part of that voice with us. Giving an exhibit a voice is fascinating. Thanks to other people, it can change both a view and a narrative and recreate itself, and yet remain a reality that reminds us of how important it is for the past and the present we carry around in us to create a space for each other. A space created by women who, with each of their voices, could give a stronger voice to a woman who has otherwise always been overlooked and misunderstood. We do not understand ourselves until we understand each other and recognize that our stories can be both similar and different.*

*The Muslim woman has always been talked about, but when has the Muslim woman herself spoken with her own voice? And what is the nature of that voice?*

*These were the questions we took as our basis when we sat down at the first meeting of the curatorial group – Shabnam, Sahar, Fareshta, Shaymaa and Ella – together with Louise Rognlien. We were just a handful, but the Muslim woman we needed to show society amounted to more voices than all of ours put together. We wanted to create a diversity that could show the nuances implicit in the voice of the Muslim woman. That she can be driven by different elements, that she can be represented in more ways than the voice that the public has chosen for her.*

*We were women, each with our own story, but we had a common goal – to create a new identity together.*

**"A museum remembers"**

# Section 03

THE TOOLKIT OF THE  
ACTIVIST MUSEUM





# BODY and SEX in a Museum – Activist, Discussion-based, Norm-critical Sex Education in a Museum of Cultural History

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## START-UP AND DEVELOPMENT

How to develop our museum so that it keeps up with the times? How do we apply our knowledge and the objects in our museum to benefit new generations? And how can we contribute to the personal, social and democratic upbringing of young people? This was a key question we asked ourselves at the Women's Museum in Denmark (now KØN – Gender Museum Denmark) in 2014, when we decided to develop a service for schools that could complement, in particular, the elementary school curriculum and eventually the upper secondary education curriculum too.

We got in touch with teachers in our locality and asked them to which subject areas they would like us to contribute our knowledge and methods. It soon became clear that sex education needed a boost. The teachers described their reluctance to tackle the subject, their uncertainty about content and methods, and the challenges of incorporating sex education into existing subjects.

Since 1970, sex education has been compulsory for all grades in Danish elementary schools. However, given that sex education is not allocated its own lessons in the timetable, but is supposed to be incorporated into existing subjects, and given that many teachers have no training in sex education (at time of writing, it is an elective of about one week's duration in teacher training programs), the amount and quality of the sex education varies greatly. Time and again, studies over a number of years have revealed that sex education is under-prioritized in schools. The latest study by the Danish

Ministry of Children and Education shows that teachers do not know enough about the framework for sex education, and that pupils receive inadequate teaching, especially when it comes to issues such as rights, boundaries, norms and diversity (Følner et al. 2019).

Meanwhile, society today requires up-to-date sex education that can provide pupils with tools to tackle the complexity and changeability in which they grow up. Today, more than previously, there are completely different opportunities and conditions for gender, body, sexuality, identity and types of family, and to a much greater extent than previously gender is up for negotiation and change (Graugaard 2019). Up-to-date sex education needs to address these conditions, support pupils in their identity formation, providing them with individual and social competences such as self-esteem, self-knowledge, empathy, acknowledgement and respect for others. It needs to tackle the reality of the young people and provide open discussion about their values, norms and opportunities for action (Wøldike et al. 2013).

Given the museum's remit – the cultural history of the sexes – and professional expertise in the subjects of gender, body and sexuality, it made total sense to devise a sex education program that could supplement sex education in schools. We wanted to make use of cultural history, the objects in our museum and the museum's space to create a different kind of sex education from that which takes place in the classroom. As far as we could see, in early 2014, sex education was a relatively unknown phenomenon in both Danish and foreign museums.

We held initial brainstorm meetings with people from the museum's network, professional organizations, the municipality and representatives of other local museums with the goal of further investigating the need, getting them interested in collaborating and gleaning ideas on how we could proceed with the project. The Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces gave us a grant of DKK 300,000 for project development. We then set up a working group, made up of professionals from elementary schools, museums and professional organizations.

We then got started. Between 2015 and 2016 we devised and tested different content and methods in collaboration with the Natural History Museum Aarhus, three local 8th grade classes and their teachers, plus

a consultant from Normstormerne (an outreach project under the aegis of AIDS-Fondet – a Danish organization dedicated to prevention and information about HIV/AIDS).

We were very ambitious. We wanted:

- To develop a sustainable norm-critical, action competence- and dialog-based concept that involved the pupils.
- To question society's recognized notions of normality by contrasting it with the historical context and the lives of young people.
- To take the identity formation of young people seriously, perceiving them as competent actors in and co-creators of education.
- To avoid hierarchical and reproductive statements, maintaining open dialog based on pluralism, active participation and self-reflection.
- To provide pupils with a sense of the fact that they are created by history, but also create history on the basis of the choices they make.
- To make use of the museum's cultural-historical objects to pave the way for difficult and sensitive topics of conversation about gender, body and sexuality.

The funding for the project enabled us to explore many avenues, and we often ended up in dead ends. It took time to find a concept that accommodated the principles of norm-critical sex education that also featured pupil involvement. The museum was concurrently in a process of change, expanding its remit from a focus on women's history to a broader focus on the history of the sexes, and the museum's subject matter needed to be expanded with the collection of objects that would reflect greater diversity. The progress of the project gave the museum valuable experience vis-à-vis developing the methods and content of sex education and cooperation between schools and cultural institutions – experiences that we drew on in our further work on developing current sex education provisions.

After the project grant expired, the museum continued the development on its own, and in 2017 we were able to offer the current version of the BODY program to schools. Two years later, the SEX program was ready. In 2018, the museum opened the exhibition Sex Education Throug-

hout the Times. Featuring a wide-ranging and diverse range of subjects, it spotlights past and present attitudes to topics within the fields of gender, body and sexuality. The space serves as both a classroom and an exhibition venue and provides a valuable basis for sex education at the museum.

The BODY and SEX programs are intended as a supplement to sex education in schools. Both based on the competency of Gender, Body and Sexuality as outlined in the booklet *Fælles Mål for sundheds- og seksualundervisning og familiekundskab* (Common Objectives for Health and Sex Education and Family Knowledge), the programs cover the following competence objectives and skill and knowledge objectives:

After grade 9.	The student can assess norms and rights for bodies, gender and sexuality in a social perspective.	Norms and ideals		Sexual rights	
		The student can analyze gender, body and sexuality in contemporary, historical and global perspectives.	The student has knowledge on cultural and social norms and ideal concerning gender, bodies and sexuality.	The student can discuss sexual rights in Denmark and globally.	The student has knowledge about their rights in relation to body, gender, sexuality and family.

From "*Fælles Mål for sundheds- og seksualundervisning og familiekundskab*" [Common goals for health-, sexual and family education], Ministry of Children and Education 2019

## EIGHT DIDACTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Sex education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark is based on eight fundamental didactic and pedagogical principles. They are based on ‘principles for good sex education’ drawn up by the Danish Family Planning Association (DFPA) (a nationwide association that works to ensure the right to sexual well-being, reproductive health and sexual education) (see Stavngaard 2019) and the teaching guide in the specialist booklet *Fælles Mål for sundheds- og seksualundervisning og familiekundskab* (Common Objectives for Health and Sex Education and Family Knowledge) (Danish Ministry of Education 2019). Thereby, we ensure that the sexual education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark lives up to today’s pedagogical and didactic expectations of sex education. The basic principles have their origins in museum pedagogy and in object didactics – features of teaching at a cultural history museum. The basic principles thus reflect the vision, spirit and origin of this particular museum. In addition to the principles mentioned below, sex education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark is based on the broad positive concept of health, which presupposes an understanding that lifestyle and living conditions play a role in health, regarding health not only as the absence of disease, but also as the promotion of physical, mental and social well-being (Ministry of education 2019; Stavngaard 2019).

The eight basic principles serve as guidelines and are used whenever the form and content of the museum’s sexual education needs to be redeveloped or rethought. The principles are described below.

### **PRINCIPLE NO. 1: Teaching based on a pedagogical view of young people as competent agents**

The pupils are competent, knowledgeable agents. They are experts in their own lives, and they are co-interpreters and co-creators of the social and societal norms and values of which they are a part, and which they experience in their own bodies (Simovska & Roin 2018, 76). Their thoughts, opinions, experiences and attitudes are therefore of crucial importance for the teaching.

Regarding the pupils as competent agents is not just about making the teaching meaningful for them and granting them co-ownership in the teaching. It is equally about the fact that, by participating actively, the pupils can enhance the teaching, elevating it to a higher level. In a class, there can be big differences in the socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds of the pupils. Likewise, in our meeting with clas-

ses from all over the country, we notice big differences between the classes, depending on where in the country they come from. We must regard this diversity of student voices as a strength. If we involve young people as co-creators of the educational process, sex education can pave the way for a diversity of experiences, values, attitudes and norms (Simovska & Roin 2018, 236).

In specific terms, this means that for the teaching at the museum pupil involvement is an integral part of its content and structure. From the outset, pupils are invited to join in the teaching process. We tell them that we regard them as experts in the life led by today’s youth. We know something about cultural history and we can imagine what it is like to be young today, but they are the experts. When pupils contribute their thoughts on a topic during the lesson, the teacher welcomes their contribution with genuine interest and curiosity. This involves asking open questions (i.e., open questions that do not have a given answer, cf., Dysthe 1997), and the pupils’ contributions are used in further discussions. The cultural history content of the teaching was selected to suit the life and world of the pupils. Thereby, we open the pupils’ eyes to cultural history and inspire them to contribute their own thoughts, attitudes and values.

### **PRINCIPLE NO. 2: Teaching based on dialog, pupil involvement and multivoicedness**

The museum’s teaching is based on a socio-cultural view of learning: Learning is fundamentally social. Learning occurs in interactions and relationships between people situated in a specific context (Dysthe 1997; 2012). In the context of teaching, this means that learning occurs in the encounter between people and particularly in the encounter with other people’s perceptions and views. The latter is referred to as “multivoicedness”: the diverse voices of the pupils must be included and perceived as a core value and a resource, rather than a threat (Dysthe 2012). Based on this view of learning, we created a dialog-based, participatory program that prioritizes multivoicedness as an overriding didactic principle.

We believe that the active participation of pupils in the teaching is a prerequisite for the ability to develop skills that promote health and well-being. If you can create space for dialogic communication with room for multiple voices, this is already a major achievement. Pupils have to engage in dialog with each other, with the material and with the teacher. This dialog-based teaching paves the way for active participation and provides co-ownership and commitment.



In specific terms, this participatory, dialog-based teaching and its focus on multivoicedness results in several didactic approaches in the museum's sex education: The pupils are considered competent agents who contribute a multivoicedness that is regarded as a resource (cf. Principle No. 1). They are invited from the start to be co-creators of the teaching. The museum educator uses authentic questions, welcoming the contributions of the pupils and including them in the teaching. We limit the time spent on one-way communication: for example, where the teacher instructs the class, or where the teacher speaks to individual pupils, while the rest are passive. In the second phase of the teaching, which features group work consisting of a Star Race in the exhibitions, the teacher relinquishes control and allows the pupils to enter into undisturbed discussion with each other as they encounter cultural history and the museum's objects. We have found that this facilitates fruitful conversations between the pupils.

Participatory, dialog-based teaching mirrors the museum's vision of creating dialog about the importance of gender, creating insight, engaging and boosting our desire for an equal society.

### **PRINCIPLE NO. 3: Teaching based on a norm-critical approach to the material**

Norms are unwritten and tacit – but generally recognized – expectations and rules that tell individuals what, within a given culture or subculture, they should look like, and how they should be and behave towards each other. Norms set the framework for what we perceive as normal and desirable within the given culture, and what we perceive as abnormal and undesirable. While norms may serve to maintain social and societal communities, they can also restrict, discriminate and oppress (Roin & de la Motte Gundersen 2018, 276). A norm-critical approach to teaching is about making visible, and critically taking a stand on the norms of which we are all a part.

Norm criticism originated in Sweden as a reaction against the pedagogy of tolerance, which until recently was applied to sex education (Björkman et al. 2019). Tolerance pedagogy is about the majority learning to tolerate the minorities who are perceived as deviating from the norm. In sex education, this meant, for example, treating LGBT+ as a separate topic, or inviting homosexuals to come and tell the class their personal stories – so that the class would come to understand and tolerate gay people (Roin & de la Motte Gundersen 2018, 277).

Norm criticism regards norms as socially constructed

and embedded in a given social, cultural and historical context (Roin & de la Motte Gundersen 2018, 276). Norm criticism views diversity and differences as a strength and aims to counteract exclusion and discrimination. Nowadays, several sexuality education courses, in varying degrees, deploy a norm-critical approach to content and method (see, for example, DFPA and LGBT Denmark's teaching programs). Similarly, Fælles Mål for sundheds- og seksualundervisning og familiekundskab (Common Objectives for Health and Sex Education and Family Knowledge) outlines an approach focused on diversity as a resource:

The subject is based on a diverse approach to gender, body and sexuality. In this context, a 'diverse approach' is rooted in the belief that people are unique, recognizing the individual differences that characterize people's ways of expressing their gender, body and sexuality. A diverse approach is the opposite of a uniform, stereotypical approach to gender, body and sexuality. We regard knowledge of diversity as an essential prerequisite for the pupils' opportunities to contribute to inclusive, democratic communities both at school and in society. (Danish Ministry of Education 2019).

A norm-critical approach to teaching content is not entirely new for KØN – Gender Museum Denmark. Given its origins in the Red Stocking movement and women's history as its field of activity, the museum, has always involved some form of norm criticism. From the outset, it was the intention of the museum to focus on society's power structures and provide a different perspective on history: an alternative to the traditional patriarchal storytelling, in which the man is the human being, and the woman is the gender. Like the Red Stockings, the museum wanted to put paid to restrictive gender norms (which at the time, for historical reasons, mainly meant fighting for women's rights and opportunities, but also breaking with traditional male roles). In line with societal development, the museum also expanded its field of activity and focus, so that today it adopts a broader view of gender and gender roles.

The norm-critical approach is an overriding didactic principle in sex education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark. In concrete terms, this means that the content and subjects of the teaching pave the way for shedding light and taking a critical stance on norms of gender, body and sexuality. We introduce pupils to the concepts of norm, taboo and ideal and, in their encounter with cultural history and cultural historical objects, they become familiar with the origin and changeabi-

lity of norms and discover examples of norm-breakers in history. The content of the teaching reflects diversity in relation to the view of gender, body and sexuality, encouraging new ways of looking at the subjects. We are also aware of the way we communicate with the pupils, and of the language both they and the educator use to describe themselves and each other.

The norm-critical approach is challenging and requires continuous reflection on our language, the content of the teaching and the educator's and pupils' reactions. Educators are known – quite unconsciously and with no ill will – for reiterating restrictive gender, body and sexuality norms. For example, we often find that the teacher compliments a girl's slimmer appearance when she puts on the corset (which is one of the cultural history hands-on objects we use in our sex education), while they laugh at a boy's hourglass figure if he dares to try the corset. The educator thereby reiterates the notion of gendered body ideals.

#### **PRINCIPLE NO. 4: Teaching that develops the pupils' action competence**

According to Fælles Mål, the purpose of sex education is for pupils to develop skills to promote health and well-being for themselves and others (Ministry of Education 2019). This purpose is referred to as "action competence" (Roin & Simovska 2018, 70). If teaching is to develop pupils' action competence, it must not only be based on giving pupils knowledge about consequences and causes, but also give pupils knowledge about action strategies and alternatives: in other words, to boost the pupils' ability to see new possibilities for action for themselves and others and increase their competence and motivation to create change (Stavnsgaard 2018).

In terms of the museum's sex education, this means that, together with the educator, the pupils discuss various issues and come up with suggestions for options for action that can solve or tackle these issues. Our aim is to illustrate that a given problem can be handled on several levels and in several ways. What can a pupil do by themselves and together with their peers? What can the educator/school/parents do? And what can society/politicians/legislation do? We find that generally pupils tend mainly to address the issues on the individual level, rather than on the structural level. Here is one example. When asked (on the subject of body shame), "What can be done to make young people feel less ashamed of their bodies?", many pupils answer: "Learn to be satisfied with yourself" or "Eat healthily, exercise, go on

a diet." In these answers, the pupils focus on the individual level and direct the problem towards themselves. We want pupils also to see the structures and norms in society that may make us feel ashamed of our bodies, thereby realizing that a given problem (for example, body shaming) is not merely an individual problem, but can be viewed, debated and solved on a societal level. In this context, we aim to make the pupils aware of their role as agents in society and history-makers – based on the choices they make.

Teaching that focuses on developing pupils' action competence reflects the vision and work of the museum. As a child of the Red Stocking movement, the museum is fundamentally activist and makes no secret of wanting to change the world. The museum's teaching must also reflect that.

#### **PRINCIPLE NO. 5: Rights-based teaching**

Human sexual rights (which are based on the UN's 1948 Declaration of Human Rights) are part of the conditions of life that affect a society's health and well-being. Rights-based sex education concentrates on making pupils aware of their rights in relation to their gender, body and sexuality. The focus is also on a respect for diversity. This approach enables pupils to promote both their own health and well-being and those of others. Rights-based sex education also contributes to pupils' democratic formation and citizenship (Danish Ministry of Education 2019).

In terms of sex education at the museum, this means that pupils investigate and discuss gender, sexuality, diversity and sexual rights in Denmark. Sexual rights are placed in a cultural-historical context – we have not always had rights with regard to our gender, body and sexuality. For certain topics, we provide a global perspective (for example, abortion rights and homosexuality). Rights-based teaching reflects the subject area and mission of the museum.

#### **PRINCIPLE NO. 6: Teaching that incorporates cultural-historical objects**

Its objects are a cultural history museum's greatest strength, and the use of these in teaching is perhaps the most visible example of the difference between museum teaching and school teaching. Objects serve as testimony to our ways of thinking and living, and they make the people, history or material of the past alive and present (Fisher & Langlands 2017). Objects add a degree of sensuousness to teaching that is difficult to recreate when teaching in a school context. They are visually and tacti-

lently stimulating, providing a kind of immediate, non-verbal encounter with the past. Nor do they require any special prior knowledge. They can be "read" by everyone in different ways and experienced on a cognitive, physical and emotional level (Boritz 2011; 2018). Objects create attention, empathy and imagination, and arouse curiosity and wonder. There is something insistent and self-assertive in the way they reach out to us – they want something from us.

In sex education, historical objects can open up topics that feel specific to the individual, but which at the same time have a general character. With the objects as a common reference point, a safe distance can be created, which makes it easier to talk about sensitive topics such as gender, body and sexuality (Fisher & Langlands 2017). The objects can tell stories about how others have gone through the same thing as you, about the norms of other times and how people broke with them, and about those who dared to lead the way. Historical objects related to gender, body and sexuality can reveal cultural and historical diversity and movement, which can provide young people with a new perspective on today's views on the same subjects.

KØN – Gender Museum Denmark bases its sex education on the museum's objects. In the 'Star Race' – the second stage of the BODY and SEX programs – pupils are introduced to a series of items that deal with different themes. In each entry, the theme opens up with an object. Each station in the Race contains a number of historical or contemporary objects that the pupils can touch, try out or explore.

If an object cannot be touched, we use artefacts (i.e., copies) or demo objects (authentic objects that are not registered in the museum's collection). We do this because objects have a particularly powerful effect when handled. Tactile experiences provide a sensory experience and are embedded as memory in the body. For example, when we run into pupils several years after a teaching program at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, they can often still remember the bodily sensation of being laced into a 19th-century corset.

#### **PRINCIPLE NO. 7: Teaching rooted in cultural history**

In terms of subject, the remit of KØN is the cultural history of the sexes from the Middle Ages to the present. Cultural history looks at how society, its people and the relationships between people have changed over time. In our sex education, we use cultural historical content from the 19th century until today.

What can a historical perspective do? People act in the present based on experiences from the past. History can give us ideas as to where today's gender, body and sexuality norms come from. History is full of accounts not only of people who had to conform to the norms of society at the time, but also of people who broke with them. A historical perspective can provide pupils with insight into, and create an understanding of our current society's norms, taboos and values (Fisher & Langlands 2017). Thus, cultural history gives pupils an experience of cultural anchoring: the fact they are both products of history – created by history.

Society's gender, body and sexuality norms are often regarded as natural and self-evident. But in the encounter with cultural history and history's norm-breakers, pupils can recognize that this obviousness was not always the case. On the contrary, attitudes towards, and thoughts about gender, body and sexuality also changed throughout history (Fisher & Langlands 2017). In this way, history can also show pupils a historical change: the fact that they are history makers by virtue of the choices they make.

In terms of the museum's sex education, this means that the cultural-historical perspective forms the basis of its content. Each cultural history account that we present to the pupils has been carefully selected. What do we want the pupils to use the story for? What can it tell us about the lives we lived back then and today? How is the story relevant to the world of the pupils?

Sex education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark is that it works in the field of tension between past, present and future. The past is put into a contemporary context, becoming relevant to the world of the pupils, and together we reflect on the future. How do we imagine it will be and what do we want from it?

We are aware that historical accounts of norm-breakers must not simply serve as "stories of heroes". We must all be able to or need to see ourselves in them. Breaking with society's gender, body and sexuality norms, and the responsibility to do so must not rest solely on the individual. We often find that the pupils are very individualized (see examples of this under Principle No. 4). They turn the issues inward and take the blame (for not being equal, for example). When we use the norm-breakers of cultural history to shed light on the struggle for, say, sexual rights, it is therefore important to shift the focus from the individual level to a structural level, and

then talk to the pupils about the possible communities that can create change. We find that raising the conversation from an individual to a structural level gives pupils a new perspective on their lives.

#### **PRINCIPLE NO. 8: Teaching in an alternative learning environment**

The museum space is often described as an alternative learning environment. But what can this space do differently from a classroom? The building and exhibitions of the museum are not merely passive backdrops for teaching but play a key role in terms of the learning and experiences the pupils have during their visit to the museum. It is said that the museum space voices pupils (Boritz 2018, 197). What "voices" a room is what our senses perceive in the moment – light, colors, sounds, smells, materials and proportions. The encounter with the museum building sparks many immediate impressions and initiates reflection even before the educator starts talking to the pupils. In this perspective, the museum space is far more than just words and content – it is a setting for the perception and awareness of the pupils. The museum space can have both a positive and a negative effect on the learning experience. (Boritz 2018, 197–199).

In terms of sex education at the museum, this means that we are aware of both the desired and undesirable effects of the different spaces in the museum on the pupils. The exhibits play a key role in the teaching and, together with the objects, create the setting for the experience and learning of the pupils.

We soon discovered that the large, publicly accessible exhibition spaces hampered a safe, rewarding discussion about gender, body and sexuality. Sex education, which aims to do far more than simply provide information, requires a space, in which pupils can meet with each other and with the teacher without disturbances and common "rules". At the same time, we did not want to reproduce a traditional classroom that the pupils already know. Accordingly, we converted one of the exhibition rooms into an exhibit and learning environment, which we use as a base for the teaching base and which is closed to the public when the pupils are in class. This became the Sexual Education Throughout the Times exhibit, which has dual function: on one hand, kindling reflection on the importance of sex education in a contemporary and historical context for our adult museum visitors; on the other, serving as a teaching space for our pupils. In the first and last stages of the program, we use the room and close the doors.

#### **BODY AND SEX – STRUCTURE AND CONTENT**

In order to make the above principles more specific, the following section describes the structure and content of the museum's two current sex education programs: BODY and SEX. The BODY program (offered to 7th–10th graders) and the SEX program (offered to 8th–10th graders) both last 90 minutes and are based on the same overall model, consisting of three parts. We outline the 3 parts of the KROP program below.

#### **PART 1: Initiation, contextualization and clarification of concepts (25–30 minutes)**

The educator welcomes the pupils in the museum's lounge. The pupils are briefly introduced to the museum and to the content and structure of the program. We also discuss how cultural history can be used to help us understand our present and relate to our future. The educator creates a framework for the dialogical space and the participation of the pupils in it, and we discuss the role of the pupils in the teaching and their importance for its quality and content. The class teacher has previously divided the pupils into five groups. We hand out a key hanger with a distinct color to each group, so that the pupils, the teacher and the educator can see which pupils belong to which group.

We then proceed into the exhibit Sexual Education Throughout the Times. We introduce the pupils to the room, giving them time to look at the numerous objects. The doors are closed to the public, so the teaching room becomes the pupils' room and the base for sex education. Together with the pupils, the educator conducts a short body-based icebreaker, which addresses the overall topic (body), and helps activate the pupils. The icebreaker also provides the educator with valuable knowledge of the dynamics of the class. Are the pupils secure or insecure with each other, and do they or do they not have the desire and courage to participate?

Afterwards, everyone (including the class teacher) sits in a circle in the room. For this purpose, we use stools that can easily be stacked so that the floor can become free again. Through dialog and based on authentic questions, pupils address the concepts of norm, taboo and ideal. At the end of Part 1, we introduce the pupils to Part 2 of the program – the 'Star Race'. We stipulate the rules and objectives of the game. We also introduce the pupils to the exhibits they will be using in the Star Race.

#### **PART 2: Group work in the exhibits (40–45 minutes)**

In the Part 2, the groups go on a Star Race featuring items among the museum's exhibits. In the Run, at the





Fra forløbet KROP, hvor eleverne blandt andet reflekterer over historien og vor tids kropsnormer

base, each team has its own round board – a bit like a Trivial Pursuit board. Every time the pupils complete a particular station, the educator hands them a “wedge of pie”, which they can hang on their board.

The stations direct the pupils to selected objects in the museum’s exhibits. The objects create the framework for the pupils’ discussions about the subject. The content is based on the criteria shown in the illustration on the following page.

The stations in BODY address the following topics:

- Body ideals
- Body norms for masculinity and femininity
- The tabooing of genitals
- Gender and clothing norms
- Transgenderism
- Hair and hair removal norms
- Skin norms
- Nakedness and shyness
- The tabooing of bodily fluids
- Body activism
- The body in the public space and on social media
- The pornographic body

The stations in SEX address the following topics:

- Sexual equality
- Boundaries
- Masturbation
- Contraception
- First sexual experiences
- Porn
- Sexual orientations
- Seksual practices
- Digital sexual assault
- Abortion rights
- Sexual assault

Pupils choose stations based on their interest. Each group usually manages 3–4 stations. The educator stands in a central place in the exhibit and distributes the hands-on objects that the pupils need to use along the way, also motivating and helping the pupils whenever necessary.

### **PART 3:**

#### **Action competence-based questions (20 minutes)**

In the final part of the process, we return

to the base (The Sexual Education Through the Times room), where the pupils stand in groups at their station. Each group now selects the item they think was the most interesting. On the back of the piece that belongs to the item, there is an action competence-based question that the pupils have to address. They are asked to come up with their take on what is needed to change the norms, taboos and ideals for the body that may restrict us (cf., Principle No. 4 in the section on basic pedagogical and didactic principles). The educator moves from group to group, motivating, challenging and helping them. Finally, we have a short joint summary.

#### **THE CHALLENGES OF SEX EDUCATION IN A CULTURAL HISTORY MUSEUM**

In what follows, we look at our concerns regarding some of the conditions that the above text either did not describe or only slightly touched upon. These concerns are based on our experience of sex education in a museum space and may serve as a series of reflection points, to which cultural institutions can relate, if developing a sex education program.

#### **How much should pupils be allowed to take over in the exhibits?**

Sex education that focuses on dialog, multivoicedness and pupil participation contains a certain degree of chaos and noise when pupils’ discussion gets going. The objects and subjects often lead to loud conversations between the pupils, who giggle, laugh and exclaim loudly – even in the public exhibition spaces. This can create dilemmas in a museum. To what extent are the pupils and other guests allowed to take over and disturb the exhibition spaces?

#### **How to illustrate norms without reiterating norms and creating stereotypes?**

Pupils arrive with diverse attitudes, values and experiences, and we cannot expect them to experience gender, body and sexuality norms in the same way or in the same way as us. We do not know the pupils in advance. This creates a number of dilemmas and requires careful consideration in terms of what cultural history can and should be used for. How to discuss and introduce cultural history’s gender, body and sexuality norms without reiterating them?

# Star race stations



- ✓ Based on a historic object in the exhibition
- ✓ Contains a touching/doing exercise
- ✓ Has at least one activist or action-oriented question
- ✓ Represents minority groups
- ✓ Challenges existing bodily norms without simply rearticulating other, similar restrictive norms
- ✓ Breaks with and clarifies norms and taboos without offending the pupils



### **What is the role of the teacher, and how do we include them in the teaching process?**

The teacher's approach to museum teaching is very important vis-à-vis the benefits and motivation of the pupils. By participating, the teacher also has the opportunity to create a bridge between the teaching that took place before the museum program, the museum teaching itself and the teaching that will take place afterwards. Thereby, the pupils experience the museum teaching in a larger, non-fragmented context, which makes an impact on their engagement and response to the material.

Although the museum's educator is responsible for sexual education at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, the class teacher has an active role throughout the process. The educator constantly informs the teacher of their role and function. Nevertheless, we often find that the teacher opts out – for example, by visiting the museum's exhibits while the pupils are engaged in group work, or by assuming the role of passive spectator while the museum educator talks to the pupils. How do you ensure that the teacher is included in the teaching process from start to finish?

### **How to train a museum educator?**

Norm-critical, dialogic and pupil-centered sex education places high demands on the skills of a museum educator. In addition to comprehensive professional knowledge of cultural-historical and contemporary perspectives on gender, body and sexuality, the museum educator must have knowledge of the pedagogy, didactics and methodology of sex education. Sex education is a complex field to teach, and this means the museum educator must be thoroughly trained. How to equip a museum educator to tackle sex education, and how to ensure the quality of that education?

### **Is it possible to create a safe space within a museum space?**

Gender, body and sexuality are difficult and sensitive topics, and sex education is by nature unsafe to participate in. The didactics of sex education therefore speak of "the safe space", which is all about creating a safe or safer learning space for the pupils (cf., Stavngaard 2019). It is the educator's task to create such a learning space. This can be done, for example, by ensuring that the pupils know what is going to happen, and together establishing a number of rules that govern the way we talk to each other. We also do this in our sex education programs at KØN – Gender Museum Denmark. But is it actually possible to create a safe space for

all pupils in a publicly accessible museum space with a museum educator whom the pupils do not know? What framework can you offer the pupils, and how does the exhibition space affect them – for better or for worse? And how do you create a safe space in a class where the pupils do not feel very secure with each other?

### **How much can we actually achieve when we only have the pupils for 90 minutes?**

Pupil participation and dialog-based activities take time. So do cognitive processes, so it would be wonderful if a class visited us several times. There are also some classes that do, but for the most part we only have them for the 90-minute duration of the class. Although we have high hopes about what the teaching can achieve, we have to ask ourselves: How much can we achieve when we only have the pupils for a very short time? We do not exactly change the pupils' world, but we hope we can give them a number of distinctive impressions and spark open discussion about, and reflection on gender, body and sexuality, which will extend beyond the museum visit. This also includes everyday activism and the museum's desire to change and create new understanding.

THE POTENTIAL OF MUSEUMS IN A TIME OF CHANGE  
Contemporary studies on young people's perceptions of gender, body and sexuality show that there is still a long way to go in terms of sexual health and well-being. For example, in a study carried out by VIVE (The Danish Center for Social Science Research) 64% of young people state that they are unhappy with their bodies (Dahl et al. 2018). This study also points out that young people are subject to different norms vis-à-vis how they can and should use their bodies and sexuality (both online and offline) depending on their gender. In other words, young people find that there are more restrictive norms regarding how girls can show off their bodies and how many people they can have sex with than there are for boys (ibid). At the same time, a brand-new report shows that almost four out of ten LGBT+ pupils do not succeed in elementary school (Juhl 2021). Likewise, almost on a daily basis, the media publish stories about digital sexual harassment of young people (see e.g., Birk 2021), about frustrated teachers who do not feel equipped to handle sex education (see e.g., Sørensen 2019) or about high school pupils who go on strike to spotlight the need for sex education in youth education programs (see e.g., Kudsk 2021). All of this proves that young people today really need topics within the fields of gender, body and sexuality to be articulated.



Sex education is more important than ever before and should be regarded as one of the most important formative subjects in school. Even in a country like Denmark, which is historically a first mover when it comes to the right to abortion, women's lib and sexual liberation, and which foreign countries often perceive as an equal and open-minded country, the studies make it crystal clear. We need to improve the standard of sex education in elementary and secondary schools and youth education programs. Currently, the quality and scope of sex education is attracting great political attention in Denmark, and it will be interesting to see what the future brings.

In this context, museums can play a major role. With its subject area, exhibition space and professional expertise, KØN – Gender Museum Denmark has great potential in terms of addressing, qualifying and mobilizing action with regard to societal issues related to gender and equality (Birch 2019), thereby contributing to the sexual health and well-being of children and young people. Other museums could benefit from taking a leaf out of the same book.

The museum also has a role in an international perspective. Like the sexual rights of women and LGBT+ people, in many countries sex education is under increased pressure. In this context KØN – Gender Museum Denmark and other Danish museums can serve as models for foreign museums, because they dare to use their subject area to support efforts for better sex education in their country.

Hereby, KØN – Gender Museum Denmark helps to achieve Global Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality) and to create social change that can make an enduring mark on society.

verdensmål 4 (kvalitetsuddannelse for alle) og 5 (ligestilling mellem kønnene) og er således med til at skabe en social forandring, som kan sætte et aftryk i samfundet.



# They See Us Rollin' – Mobile Museum from Vision to Reality

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## INTRODUCTION

Museums are dynamic. Though their most important task is to be relevant today, they may also be ahead of their time, raising the bar for the future and using the past as leverage. In 2014, the Women's Museum (now KØN – Gender Museum Denmark) was ready to take a giant leap. We hired audience developers and gave the museum a new visual identity. In 2016, something groundbreaking happened. The remit of the museum (the "constitution" of a state-recognized museum) was expanded from the history of women to the history of genders. This expansion was reflected in the exhibit Gender Blender in 2017 – the very year that #MeToo reared its head and hit the United States like a sledgehammer.

In 2017, according to the 2016 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index, the most gender equal country in the world was Iceland, followed by Finland, Norway, Sweden and Rwanda. Denmark, on the other hand, ranked 19th (in 2021, 29th) (Schwab, Klaus et al. 2021). In tandem with the wave, popularly referred to today as "fourth-wave feminism", that would restore gender and equality as a key topic in public debate, KØN – Gender Museum Denmark upgraded its public engagement and interpretation activities, based on a vision of being "the leading creator of dialog on the importance of gender in society... past, present and future." Gender and gender equality must remain on the agenda for a new generation – and not just within a museum building.

THE VISION: A MUSEUM SATELLITE FOR  
DIALOG ABOUT GENDER

In 2018, the Danish Agency for Culture

and Palaces defined non-museum users as persons "who have not visited a museum in the last two years or more." 39% of the population were non-users: "...predominantly (...) people with a short educational background." (Jessen 2018). Meeting non-museum users outside the museum was paramount when devising KØN – Gender Museum Denmark's mobile, pop-up museum that same year. As a state-recognized museum and public service agency, KØN – Gender Museum Denmark has a wide-ranging societal obligation. The museum must always strive to be relevant to as many people in Denmark as possible, making its knowledge available and facilitating access to new knowledge.

In the years leading up to the 2018 pop-up project, the museum had already dipped its toe in the outreach water. In 2016, the museum featured an installation at the North Side Festival in Aarhus. In 2017, the museum set up an exhibition section at the Classic Car Race motor event in the Memorial Park and at the Pride Parade on the Officerspladsen square in Aarhus. The museum also created a laundry workshop – "vask som i gamle dage" (laundry in the olden days) – at DOKK1 – Aarhus's Central Library and multimedia center. The audience groups the museum encountered at the four different events varied immensely, and the experiences formed an interesting basis for the future.

Just as out-of-house exhibitions had helped shape the museum and challenge the museum format when the Women's Museum was founded in 1982, there was now a strong desire to create a more permanent mobile platform for meeting non-museum users and reconnecting with that part of the museum's historical roots. Once again, the project made interaction with audiences outside the museum a priority.

The idea was a mobile pop-up platform: a museum taster and dialog satellite to spotlight the cultural history of genders in the city's streets. The platform could kindle thoughts and prompt audiences to ask inspiring and challenging questions. What does it say about us when we refer to "female cunning" and "masculine courage"? Or cissies and tomboys? The idea of a new pop-up museum was to move the museum out of the building and get a real sense of the gender debate – if not spark it.

The multi-pronged description of the objective of the project hinged on several potentially positive effects.

The main goal of a pop-up museum was

to teach people about gender, gender equality and the cultural history of the sexes, as an extension of the museum's remit and public engagement activities, which were undergoing rapid development in late 2017, when we devised the mobile museum. The objective of a pop-up museum was also to increase the museum's visibility and whet the appetite of new audiences for visiting the museum. At the same time, though, the mobile museum should also work as a museum experience in itself, and increase the range of the museum, meeting people on their own territory, with an eye to reaching new audiences, expanding the opportunity for dialog and making the gender debate relevant in new contexts.

Designing contextual museum content was an important priority. For example, when the museum popped up in an event context, it needed to tap into the other interests of that specific audience. Why had they gathered for this particular event, and what would make the gender issue particularly interesting to them? So, for example, when the museum popped up at the Aarhus Food Festival, it featured the theme of "Food and Gender", posing questions such: Is the way to a man's heart really through his stomach? And should food preferably taste just like the food mum used to make? The conceptually adapted content should make it harder for the individual to say: "Gender's all very well, but what does it have to do with me?" Instead, it should provide a surprising and curious take on a current field of interest that might lead visitors to further reflect on the topic of gender and equality.

#### PROCESS AND PRACTICE: THE NEED FOR WHEELS

The vision was crystal clear. KØN – Gender Museum Denmark wanted a mobile, pop-up museum to present the cultural history of the sexes. The creative challenge was then: How? Looking at the Danish museum landscape in 2017 revealed that a small handful of museums at this time had toyed with the same idea. However, most of the pop-up museums that the other museums at the time had set up (e.g., Museum Ovartaci's "Ovartaci Fields", the Museum of Copenhagen's "Fortiden Fremkaldt" (Evoking the Past) and Randers Museum's "Kunst i kassen" (Art in the Box)) were large-scale initiatives and accordingly limited in terms of mobility: for example, placed in containers that provided space outside the museum, but were only mobile with the use of a crane and heavy vehicles.

In the process, and with an ever-increasing desire for a high degree of mobility and flexibility, it gradually became clear: the museum needed wheels. But what form should they take? A trailer, a caravan, a cargo bike, a



scooter van or something completely different? These considerations led to more conceptual and theoretical questions. What can a museum be? How small can a museum be? What actually is a museum? These, and many more questions had been dealt with elsewhere on many occasions before (ICOM 2007). During the development phase, the new pop-up format provided us with an opportunity to revisit fundamental questions about museum practice: meta-questions that are fruitful for an institution to ask at any time, if they wish to develop.

The museum ended up outlining three principles for the upcoming platform:

- The pop-up museum had to be a changeable platform that would enable us to design and completely reshape content according to the exhibition context, thereby guaranteeing a high degree of relevance.
- The pop-up museum should have a high degree of mobility – to move around freely in urban spaces and small streets, away from the physical building of the museum and its central location in the city center. The pop-up museum should also be flexible enough to scale the format up and down to suit the location and the space
- The design of the pop-up museum needed to facilitate the use of historical objects from the museum's collection. This specifically meant an integrated glass-covered display case that could safeguard the objects. Given that collecting and objects are the essence of the museum's work, it was important for the museum to qualify the pop-up museum as a "real" museum by being able to include items from the collection.

By 2017, the small Italian, Piaggio Ape scooter van had become a familiar sight in major Danish cities, fitted out as sales vehicles serving takeaway coffee in the street. The format had a visual and practical appeal for the pop-up project. If it was possible to turn the enclosed truck bed of a scooter van into a coffee bar, why would it not also be possible to turn it into a museum? The same idea had cropped up elsewhere in Aarhus's cultural life, and a few months before our pop-up museum, Aarhus Municipality Libraries had launched their Mobile Library – a mini travelling library in a Piaggio Ape van.

In any development work, exchanging experience with

external partners is invaluable: being curious and open to asking for advice, and listening to accounts of other people's processes. Cultural institutions can collaborate to help make each other better. That was exactly what Aarhus Libraries and the Mobile Library team did when our museum approached them. They opened up, generously invited us in, and even offered driving lessons in their scooter van. Their generosity was exemplary. After our driving lessons, there was no doubt. A Piaggio Ape would form the physical framework for the pop-up project and give the project its wheels.

Having decided on the platform, the museum was now ready to proceed with the content of its public engagement and interpretation initiatives. How could the pop-up museum present the themes of gender and gender equality and make them relevant, fascinating and reflective, with a modest exhibition space of just 2 m<sup>3</sup>? The museum laid down three principles for exhibitions and public engagement/interpretation content in the pop-up museum:

- Relevant cultural-historical objects should always be integrated as part of any exhibition concept, in order to anchor the public engagement/interpretation in history, which should in turn be used to spark reflection on the present day.
- Activities and interaction should always be included, inviting the audience not merely to "visit a museum", but to "touch/make a museum", kindling a new kind of museum experience and approach to knowledge.
- The foundation of the pop-up museum should be the creation of new knowledge and reflection among audiences. While the format should provide an entertaining experience, it should also generate new knowledge about gender and equality for our visitors. Entertainment and knowledge should go hand in hand.

Work then started on "taking the museum out of the museum", condensing a powerful museum concentrate – the tiny part of the museum we could take out into public spaces – that would still be recognized as, and refer to KØN – Gender Museum Denmark and its exhibitions, atmosphere, sensory perception, tone of voice, visual identity, etc. When devising its exhibition concepts, the museum was methodologically inspired





by the processes of design thinking, which is also well described by other museum professionals (Silvers 2014).

In this context, the creative development process takes place continuously in interaction with, and with the observation of users. A good idea quickly leads to a mock-up – a trial balloon – put to the test in dialog with users at an early stage in the process. The encounter between fledgling editions of the mobile museum and the audience formed the basis for further development. Public engagement/interpretation texts were rewritten, activities adapted and along the way, certain elements were removed completely. The pop-up museum was usually staffed with a museum educator, who not only observed the audience's interaction with the museum van from a distance, but also entered into dialog with the audience about their experience. At the same time, though, the museum van could also serve as an installation, parked unstaffed in indoor locations such as libraries. The physical presence provided an invaluable feedback loop for further development.

As a concept, the pop-up museum needed to be sufficiently flexible to facilitate the ad hoc planning that was necessary, if we were to respond to current public debate on the subject of gender and ongoing requests from external stakeholders for collaboration and invitations to participate in events. Our ambition to vary and adapt exhibition concepts meant that we would need to produce all content in house. It became an ongoing task and creative challenge to get a lot out of a little, and a little to look at out of a lot. The project was rooted in the basic conviction that even more mini, analog formats with the right idea and concept could have a wow effect and provide the Eureka moments that are the mainstay of any meaningful museum experience. The personal encounter and discussion should also complement and enhance the public engagement/interpretation. In an increasingly professionalized museum world, many of today's museums present advanced technological and spatial total experiences. As a result, audiences expect a lot from a museum visit. So, it was a challenge to consider whether, with its mainly analog devices and micro aesthetic, our mobile museum could actually capture visitors' interest.

#### THE FINAL RESULT. 3, 2, 1... HERE WE COME!

On April 20, 2018, the museum issued a press release titled *They see us rollin'*. About two weeks later, the then Deputy Mayor of Aarhus, Camilla Fabricius, cut the red ribbon around the mobile museum in Mathilde Fibigers Have behind the museum building. The pop-up museum was now a reality and ready to roll out into urban life.

In specific terms, the pop-up museum consisted of a converted motorized scooter van. On the truck bed, which had been adapted so that one side could be opened, we had built a white wooden interior – a white cube insert with fold-out solutions, shelves, walls and boxes. A large, glass-covered display case for objects could be pulled out, and a screen for film and digital content could be folded out from the side. On the truck bed, we could also transport separate exhibition walls, public engagement/interpretation posters, roll-ups, sandwich boards etc., so we could expand an exhibition beyond the public engagement/interpretation options provided by the space of the vehicle itself. The set-up was designed to be scalable. The mobile museum could be expanded or minimized. We could transport as much or as little as we needed. It could be adapted to suit the physical, site-specific space.

From the start, the exhibition concept was an extract of our major Gender Blender exhibition for use in more context-neutral locations such as town squares, malls etc. The exhibition concept thus emulated the kind of permanent basic exhibition featured in museums in general. In addition, we constantly devised new exhibition content as we entered into new agreements for participation in events and visits to different partners – providing, as it were, ongoing special exhibitions.

The pop-up museum rolled out for the first time on a visit to the Bruuns Galleri shopping mall (where we could simply transport it up on the goods elevator!). Over the next few days, visitors could pop by and get answers to various questions. Does your shampoo have a gender? What does "queer" mean? How far has gender equality come? What does being born a girl, boy – or something else – mean? They could see cultural history objects related to gender and body (and we could tell them the story behind them), read the latest gender news from the daily press in billboard format, use a crank handle to roll through a historical timeline of events in gender cultural history, win a gender quiz or play the Gender Blender board game specially devised for the pop-up museum. They could sketch their gender, get a gender tattoo, give their opinion on current political gender debates by throwing a ball into the appropriate plastic pipe, try on a 19th century corset – you name it. For anyone who wished to find out more about gender, they could take home postcards listing the top five TED talks, books and podcasts.

up museum was upscaled and completely different. The museum van was located outdoors and there was a room for another exhibit. Visitors could discover a miniature world, with the home as a backdrop for everyday scenes, while the pop-up exhibit presented dollhouses from an entire century. The oldest dollhouse dates back to 1890. An extra layer of public engagement/interpretation dealt with gendered toys, the cultural-historical origin of the dollhouse and its socializing effect, channeling the interest of girls in the direction of home and interior design.

Conversely, for the student Regatta in Aarhus University Park, the museum had to downsize so much that the format again changed shape. There was no museum van, and visitors were treated to a pop-up activity. Content and interactions were taken out of the museum van and transported on a cargo bike, so the museum educators could cycle slowly through the crowd. We devised a university-based gender quiz, and the museum educators rewarded any contestants who wanted them with gender tattoos. These temporary tattoos, specially produced for the pop-up museum, provided a tremendous opportunity to get close to the audience. The intimacy that arose, as the educator pressed the transfer and cloth against the guest's skin and waited for it to take, led to further questions and answers about gender and equality, usually based on the quiz, often leaving visitors astonished.

From the outset, the goal of the mobile museum project was to pop up in every conceivable and unimaginable place. Variety of location and target groups was a subsidiary goal in itself. We wanted the pop-up museum to feature an element of surprise that would pique people's curiosity – at events, street parties and festivals, in libraries, large firms, markets, and in urban spaces both central and tucked away etc.

In its first season from April to October 2018, the pop-up museum managed to visit 17 different locations, sometimes for single days, sometimes for several weeks at a time, attracting around 4,500 visitors. From places such as the Bruuns Galleri shopping mall, the Dome of Visions incubator, the DOKK1 central library, other cultural attractions such as the Ovarthi Museum and the Tivoli Friheden amusement park to urban spaces such as Kloster-torv, Bispetorv, Godsbanen and events such as 1 May, the Regatta, Ladywalk, Pride Parade, the North Side Festival, Aarhus Volume Street Party, the Headroom Festival and Aarhus Children's Theatre Festival.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Experience from the project reveals that its high degree of interaction enabled the mobile museum to engage audiences outside the museum for spontaneous dialog and museum use. The project has not formally identified how many visitors to the pop-up museum could be defined as non-museum users. So, we do not know how many visitors to the pop-up museum have also visited KØN – Gender Museum Denmark. However, the numerous one-to-one interactions between visitors and museum educators led to informal, conversation-based encounters, which indicate that the museum was definitely in touch with new target groups and expanded their knowledge and awareness of the museum. The project also had other positive effects. The dynamic nature of the pop-up museum boosted our brand in general, created physical visibility in the city, generated content for the museum's online platforms, formed new collaborations with other cultural stakeholders and, most importantly, kindled meaningful conversations for reflection on the topic of gender in the encounter between museum users and educators.





The Pup-up exhibit at Bruuns galleri, where guests could vote on political topics, 2018



# Everyday Life, Nuances and Representation – An Exhibit About and By Muslim Women in Denmark

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## INTRODUCTION

Muslim Women – Everyday Life, Nuances and Representation was all about being a Muslim woman in Denmark today. The objective was to present a genuine, nuanced and diverse narrative about the everyday life of Muslim women, authentically and informatively.<sup>35</sup> I coordinated the exhibit in collaboration with a working group of five Muslim women who served as curators of the exhibit, as part of the research and public engagement project Gender Blender and my PhD project.<sup>36</sup> In this text, I will address both the work that went into the exhibit and the final result as part of contemporary museal and academic trends and an expression of a tendency among young Muslim women to seek nuanced self-representation.<sup>37</sup>

The basis of the project was an investigation of the self-representation of Muslim women, both as a methodological study of the negotiation process in the co-creation of knowledge production, and as a political compensation for the stereotypical objectifications and simplifications that Muslim women experience in contemporary, public discourse (see e.g., Cooke 2007; Farris 2017; Hussein 2019; Scott 2007). I view this as part of a growing trend, in which minority women and Muslim women are speaking out in an attempt to correct, expand and nuance the simplistic representation that “sticks” to their bodies (see e.g., Cooke 2007; Abu-Lughod 2013; Jamil 2019).<sup>38</sup>

The exhibit and the project expanded on a growing trend within the research world, where terms such as “practice”, “action”

and "artistic" have become key methodological bases (Nelson 2013): for example, in the context of museums and work on exhibits, in which the practices, methods and knowledge of a museum become an integral part of the research process (Bjerregaard 2019). This was also one of the primary objectives of the Gender Blender project.

#### THE GOALS AND CONTENT OF THE EXHIBIT

From the outset of the process, the working group had several themes and wishes, principally related to their desire to present "a totally normal everyday life". The idea was that everyday life should include the real nuances and internal differences among Muslim women, which could thus nuance the notion of "the Muslim woman", and the fact that intimate, small and mundane aspects of life could help demystify and provide insight into their lives, as a basis for knowledge sharing and bridge building, all with the purpose of reaching "majority Denmark" and providing representative opportunities for minorities to view themselves.

On one hand, the working group wanted the exhibit to speak to other young Muslim girls, by selecting and framing things they had missed when younger – particularly the lack of mirroring opportunities in culture. On the other hand, they wanted to speak to "majority Denmark", demystifying, complicating and nuancing established simplified notions, by sharing knowledge in an easy, accessible format. With this twofold purpose and target group in mind, three terms – everyday life, nuances and representation – played a key role when selecting the elements and materials for the exhibit. All the curators wanted to include as many voices as possible, focus on intimate and interpersonal aspects, reiterate stereotypes humorously and ironically, and to provide information and maybe indicate where one could learn more about the different themes.

The exhibit featured objects that in different ways represented the everyday life of the women. Women from the working group were present to answer some of the questions Muslim woman in Denmark are frequently asked. Visitors could explore virtual knowledge production in a selection of Instagram profiles and Snapchats that were sent to us. Visitors could read poems, and letters written to their younger selves sent in by Muslim women from across Denmark, read relevant literature, tried on a scarf or tried their hand at a quiz. The final exhibit was light, accessible and inviting, aimed at attracting a wide audience, though very much targeted at a younger

generation. It embraced diversity and ambiguity, and the numerous individual elements all underscored the overall themes.

#### MUSEAL TRENDS AND THE ISSUE OF CO-CREATION

Det var vigtigt for mig som projektkoordinator og for To me as project coordinator and to the women in the working group, it was important that they should be the actual curators of the exhibit, and thereby responsible for designing and selecting its overall framework, the individual sections and the aesthetic look of the selected material. The key elements of the work on the exhibit – co-creation and democratization of knowledge – are part of a number of trends within today's museum world, which over the last few years have paved the way for greater inclusion in museums, examining the limitations and exclusionary framework of museums with a more critical eye.

During the summer of 2019, in collaboration with the KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, I posted an announcement, seeking volunteer curators. The sole requirement was that they should be able to define themselves as "young Muslim women". The announcement was shared on the museum's website and on social media, and I quickly received a number of declarations, support emails and applications from interested women. The five women I was lucky enough to include in the working group – Ella, Shaymaa, Sahar, Fareshta and Shabnam – were all very different, acute and creative, and totally aware of the potential pluses and pitfalls of the exhibit. I discovered that in many ways they had been preparing for a long time – long before I even posted the announcement. At the first meeting, one of the women said: "Muslims become aware very early on that they are Muslims [in Denmark]", expressing how Muslims today are compelled at an early stage to be aware of their identity and position in society. This underpinned the justifiably concurring self-awareness of the working group, their analytical reading of their own situation, and thereby also their responsibility vis-à-vis their work. You can read more about the experience of the women in the working group in *The Museum Is One Who Remembers* in Section 2 of this book.

During the autumn of 2019, the working group met about every other week, usually at the museum, to discuss all sorts of issues, form and content etc. The exhibit opened on 18 December that same year and was actually supposed to tour Aarhus during 2020 – visiting high schools, libraries, galleries and festivals. But this was limited by the COVID-19 pandemic and the partial lock-





down of society. However, in the autumn of 2020, parts of the exhibit were presented at Gellerup Library.

What I had been looking for in my post was "curators" to work on an exhibit, and several of the women in the working group emphasized that it was this element of autonomous management that appealed to them. From the outset, they agreed that they did not want the exhibit to be about them as private individuals. They did not want to come across as "representative role models" or "institutional tokens" of established notions. They wanted to be responsible knowledge producers. As Sherry Arnstein expressed it in her term "ladder of participation" (Arnstein 1969, 216–224), these nuances are key to the question of what real democratic participation is actually like. She elucidated how, for example, "consultation" ended in a form of "tokenism" that was not really about democratization and power distribution. By extension, the members of the working group were positioned and understood as "partners" in the preparation of the exhibit: for example, by stressing their title – "curators".

In recent times, "curating" has been recognized as an active, creative and political position, in which a curator is increasingly viewed as a creative, controlling subject in the design – referred to as "the curatorial turn" (O'Neill 2012). This emphatic professionalization of the role of curator helped clarify the women's decision-making rights vis-à-vis the exhibit, shifting the focus away from the members of the working group as individuals, and underlining the fact that they were producing subjects. As mentioned, this can be read in the light of several growing trends in the museum world and critical museology (Shelton 2013, 7), where "co-creation", active participation and the democratization of knowledge production and public engagement initiatives are paramount to the work of a museum (see, e.g., Sandvik 2011; Carpentier 2011).

However, these recent trends also raise questions about the persistence and real influence of hierarchies (cf., Sherry Arnstein). As initiator and coordinator of the project, I was inevitably part of the process. I selected the curators, attended all meetings and was responsible for the practical organization as a mediator between the working group and the museum. As a PhD student, I was also paid during the process, while the members of the working group were volunteers. This disparity cannot be ignored, but it was a condition I was not in a position to challenge at the time. In financial terms, it was important to me that any expenses the

working group had would be covered, and that there were food and certain benefits for them. Despite this real and positional bias, I had no creative control over the process and tried my best to accommodate the ideas, wishes and demands of the curators. The exhibit should therefore be viewed as a result of the ideas of the curators.

Several researchers associate these recent trends in critical museology with the reality of contemporary heterogeneous nations with a diverse population group, where a comprehensive, nuanced representation has become even more immediate for cultural institutions that wish to be relevant to the entire population, thus including more voices, stories and worlds of experience (Johansson & Bevelander 2018; Damsholt 2012, 33–46). This is also linked to a growing interest in, and recognition of, the historical role of museums in the consolidation of national narratives, which excluded and exoticized certain sections of a population (McLean 1998, 244–252). The pre-history of museums is rooted in the so-called "cabinets of curiosities" or "wunderkammer": private, family- or institutionally-owned collections, which contained, for example, objects from European grand tours (Herle, 2016; Bell 2017, 241–259). The process of collecting was inextricably linked to the self-declared right to collect and classify and, when public museums were created in the 18th century, these colonial forms of knowledge became consolidated (Bennett 1995).

The institutional setting for the Muslim Women exhibit was KØN – Gender Museum Denmark. As illustrated throughout this book, from its inception the museum was all about criticizing norms and aimed to create space for unheard, offbeat and marginalized people and issues. In many ways, the original justification and foundation of KØN was to correct the exclusionary flip side of museums as institutions (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; McLean 1998, 244–252), by working for the recognition of the relevance and history of women and women's lives. On that basis, KØN – Gender Museum Denmark was aware at an early stage of mechanisms of oppression other than gender, and included a diversity of women's voices and stories. Relevant to the story, of which the Muslim Women exhibit was a chapter, are: *Bir Bakis – An Exhibit About and By Turkish Women* (1986), *The Veil – Middle-Eastern Women's Clothes* (1996), *Born in Europe* (2003–2004) and *The Journey to Denmark* (2008–9). The first, *Bir Bakis* resulted from an initiative on the part of some Danish-Turkish women, just four years after the foundation of the museum association and can best be described as a modern "take-over", with the Danish-Turkish women occupying the museum's rooms to paint a picture of their

everyday lives. The recognition of active participation and co-creation can thus be said to have been part of the museum's identity from the very beginning.

The material framework for the Muslim Women exhibit was KØN's mobile, pop-up exhibit format – a small tuk-tuk designed by the curator Sara Bradley to create a mobile museum on wheels. This means the exhibit format can be transported around and quickly unpacked and repacked, so the museum can take exhibits out into the city – in new situations and with audiences other than the museum can usually embrace. This fast, flexible exhibition format can pave the way for smoother interaction with audiences. It is far less controlled than the museum by institutional and historically established regulatory practices, which can easily come across as intimidating, exclusionary or obsolete.

#### EVERYDAY OBJECTS

In the back of the museum van, we filled a display case with various objects from the everyday life of Muslim women, selected by the curators. The motive of this section was to continue the museum's tradition of using objects and the recognizable exhibition element of the "display case" (Sandvik 2011). At the same time, the objects they selected juxtaposed mundane, cultural and religious aspects, to shed light on the diversity, complexity and normality of their everyday lives.

Objects were part of the entire process – not only because we discovered the power of objects to create dialog, but also because the display case was a recognizable, and not unproblematic, element in the museum space, connected to the history of the museum.

We chose to mix different types of objects, to create a "material conversation" between things that are often separated into different categories, but which tend to get totally mixed up in everyday life. The display case contained various "halal products", such as nail polish, candy and a notepad listing telephone numbers of halal restaurants in Aarhus, all symbolizing the religious element of everyday practices. There were beauty and health products, such as henna, kohl and vitamin D pills, which reflected cultural forms of expression and the simple challenges posed by the dark, Danish winters. Classic religious objects ranged from a prayer mat and a Koran to non-alcoholic drinks, a job application, a wedding invitation and sanitary pads, which denoted personal challenges, structural problems and prejudices, and a scented candle, because it was a constant element in one of the curators' homes. In the conversation, we aimed to create a multifaceted, nuanced picture of everyday normal

objects, which could create intimacy, curiosity, understanding and intriguing conversations around the display case.

A display case or archive elevates a "traditional museum object" from a "thing" into a particularly valuable, representative, exotic or prehistoric "object", regardless of its original purpose or value. This process and the arbitrariness associated with it become explicitly and potentially parodic in a contemporary exhibit such as ours. The working group also spoke about the paradox involved in their selection of objects for the display case, in that the selection ended up exoticizing elements of their normal everyday lives. Several of them stressed the fact that it felt strange to select things from their daily life, thereby lending them an elevated status as static "objects" in a display case. But it was also a fun process. In their selection, they caricatured the objectification, at once highlighting the value of mundane things and insisting on their everyday application.

By juxtaposing mundane objects with cultural and religious ones, the "exotic" objects were demystified as part of everyday life, while the juxtaposition became a wry reiteration of the museum tradition and the cabinets of curiosities. In the light of the theories of Judith Butler, one could say that the wry reiteration and parody implicit in the inclusion and juxtaposition of "strange" and everyday objects indicates and sheds light on the recognizable framework of culture, and thus contains a subversive potential (Butler 1990).

#### SELF-REPRESENTATION, PLATFORM SHARING AND EMOTIONAL LIFE

The content and justification of the exhibit were reflected in an increasing production of knowledge by Muslim women who speak up, nuancing, amending, expressing or expanding on the narratives that surround and "stick" to them in everyday life (Rognlien 2020, 159-169). As coordinator, I wanted to facilitate and engineer a genuine representation, facilitated by the fact that the Muslim women themselves were the senders and producers, rooted in the thesis repeated by many young, Muslim women, that there is a lot of discussion about them, but rarely with them on their own terms.

The curators devised the overall framework of the exhibit, in accordance with the exhibit's own defined objective and target group and decided which themes the exhibit should address and how they should be conveyed in different formats. From the very





Udsnit fra udstillingen, hvor gæsterne kunne lære at style et tørlæde på flere måder



first meeting, it was clear that a number of themes and challenges would be the mainstay of the exhibit, and they remained with us throughout the process. We also chose to include them in the title of the exhibit: everyday life, nuances and representation. There was broad consensus that the exhibit should not be political or polemical, but intimate and small, thereby hopefully creating recognizability and kindling discussion.

A common feature of the process was the desire of the working group to share the platform they had as curators of the exhibit with other Muslim women. That desire was repeated in different situations, linked to different elements of the exhibit, and for the curators the inclusion was also a way to secure the nuances of the exhibit's narrative, by involving as many different voices as possible. But it was also about enabling more women to get their voices heard and represented. Honouring the desire of the curators, we created a new post on the museum's website and social media, seeking contributions to the exhibit from Danish Muslim women. We received several contributions, and several contributors emphasized the fact that the reason they wished to contribute was because the exhibit had been created by Muslim women. As one contributor put it, it was "us by us." We received, poems, small stories, pictures, Snapchats, Instagram profiles and letters written to their younger selves. It was in the "poem" category that we received the most contributions. Writers, Instagram poets and women who had never before shared their scribbles sent us their poems. So, the curators agreed to exhibit as large a collection as possible, and the van's main compartment featured a display of this extensive collection of poems. Muslim women from several places in Denmark sent us their poems. While some were hung in frames like small works of art, most were framed in Perspex and placed in a box so that you could take them out, hold them and possibly read one, slightly apart from the other visitors.

Some of the curators emphasized how a depiction of the emotional life a poem depicted – with its intimate, personal quality – was one of the things they had missed in their upbringing. Meanwhile, other teenage girls could see their emotional lives mirrored in poetry, art and film, this was something the curators and many other minority women had lacked. According to them, herein lay a potential to fill a representational gap, and explained why we received as many poems as we did. An increasing number of minority women and Muslim women in the Scandinavian region are also writing collections of poems. We exhibited several of them both in the poetry collection and in our small library.<sup>39</sup> This increase is part

of a longer literary tradition, in which poetry has provided a language for stigmatized or marginalized groups, but which also reflects the desire to talk about intimate, emotional issues that bring us close together as human beings. A poem becomes a desire to build interpersonal bridges, or at least break down some barriers.

The curators themselves also had a very close relationship with poetry. One of them stressed that all the things she lacked in her youth constituted the reason she wrote poems herself, and that she was especially inspired by other minority women poets. At one of our first meetings in the working group, all the curators brought an item that meant something special to them. One of the curators brought two poems – one she had written herself and one by Tove Ditlevsen. A third wanted to contribute an artistic poem to the actual exhibit. On a canvas, in a network of repeating sections, she had written in Afghan "mother, daughter, sister, wife" in succession. The title of the work was Human. This critical, loving work featuring categories, names and identity, was a recurring feature in many of the poems we received. Two examples include these poems by Madiha and Sadaf, the opening verses of which I reproduce here:

**MADIHA:**

A Veiled Vision

Human  
Daughter  
Sister  
Wife  
Girl friend  
I am so much  
I am a woman

**SADAF:**

I Am a Muslim Woman

I am a Muslim woman.  
I am loved. I am hated. I am oppressed.  
I am liberated.

What these, and many of the other poems in the exhibit articulate is the friction and tension implicit in the categories of identity that "stick to" the bodies of Muslim women. There is something confining about the prejudicial label, which can be restrictive but also transformed into a form of empowerment or resistance (see, e.g., Braidotti 2002, on "feminist figurations"; Cooke 2007, on the potential of the "Muslimwoman" label). The interaction in this productive discomfort was what the exhibit set out to embrace. The poems served as a potential mirror and an experience of authentic representation for the target group of young Muslim women. At the same time, they sparked dialog and a basis for understanding aimed at the other target group – majority Denmark – who could see the universally human associa-

tions of the poems.

#### THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

As this text illustrates, both the exhibit and the work leading up to it expressed several contemporary trends in the museum and research world and the production of knowledge by Muslim women. The exhibit itself contributed nuanced knowledge within a polemical field characterized by stereotypes and prejudices, and was thus an example of how, by including the voices of those in the debate, one can create authentic representation. The exhibit included new voices that had not previously had a platform. Several women felt it was positive to be seen and heard on their own terms or terms set by people whose lives were similar. Thereby, the exhibition project also contributed significant knowledge about a growing field in the encounter between the museum world and the world of research, which is associated with the co-creation and democratization of knowledge and knowledge production, and its activist or political potential.

However, it is important to be critical of the issue of real inclusion and the flattening of hierarchies, and the subversive potential of the project. As pointed out above, bearing in mind Sherry Arnstein's views, it is important not to exaggerate the democratic and co-creative element. The working group was relatively unified in terms of age, education level and upbringing. Furthermore, participation presupposed knowledge, or a network with knowledge of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark in order to see the post. Herein lie the obvious pitfalls in terms of consensus and negotiations.

The temporary nature and location of the exhibit should also be viewed with an element of caution. The format of the exhibit – using the museum's pop-up concept – was based on the desire to take the exhibit out into the city, in an accessible format. However, its small, to an extent fragile expression, placed next to the beautiful, solid brick building of the museum, inevitably sent certain signals. Naturally, we hope that the processes kindled by the exhibit, and the insights we highlighted, will become an integral part of the future work of the museum.

Finally, there is the question of the bridge-building, activist, subversive potential of the exhibit. Is the responsibility of Muslim women to build bridges to "majority Denmark" a relevant point for reflection? Several people pointed out how minorities

are often expected to provide information for the majority, and this takes time, work and energy (Ahmed 2017). The exhibit was about everyday life, which at first glance may not seem political or activist, but since the Muslim woman's body and life are politicized in itself, displaying their everyday life can become a subversive act. Feminism and the women's movement showed how private things were and are political, and Marxist theory emphasizes that "everyday life" is where ideology imperceptibly surrounds us. Despite the fact that the curators did not want the exhibit to be about "politics", in the age in which we live, this is in itself a political stance.

35  
Thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer for their excellent and interesting comments and suggestions for previous drafts of the article. Parts of this chapter will also appear in my PhD thesis, in which I deal with the work on the exhibit and its result in more detail, in the context of the issue of representation and subversion. I also discussed the exhibit in the article: "A Curatorial Laboratory" in Mikkel Thorup, Rithma K.E. Larsen and Emma Helena Glasscock (ed.) *Idéhistorie og Antropologi*, Aarhus and Copenhagen: Background (expected publication 2022), in which I analyze the process to more from a critical, methodological perspective.

36  
*Gender Blender was a research and public engagement/interpretation project – a collaboration between KØN – Gender Museum Denmark, Aarhus University and THE VELUX FOUNDATIONS, in which I was a PhD fellow.*

37  
The distinction between "self-presentation" and "re-presentation" comes from Mohanty (1984). She tackled the objectification that takes place of "women from the third world" in Western women's representation of them.

38  
The analytical term "stickiness" is Sara Ahmed's (2004).

39  
Just think of Sumaya Jirde Ali, *Kvinner som hater menn*, 2017; *Melanin hvitere enn blekemiddel*, 2018; *Når jeg ser havet, slokner lyset*, 2021; *Naiha Khiljee, Kære Søster*, 2020; *Nilgün Erdem, Pudder og ph.d.er – feministiske digte fra mine tyvere*, 2017; *Fatimah Asghar, If They Come For Us*, 2018; *Sara Saleh, Wasting the Milk in the Summer*, 2016; *Maryam Azam, The Hijab Files*, 2018.

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Practice, theories and actors

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