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*The Feminist Museum Hack:  
a pedagogy of seeing and possibility*

*1. Introduction*

In 2017 we created the adaptable, pedagogical, methodological and interventionist practice we call the *Feminist Museum Hack*. We use and continually re-make this practice in our university teaching, community workshop facilitation, and data-gathering in diverse museums for an international study on gender and museums. Central to the *Hack* are analytical and creative processes to unmask, interrogate, deconstruct and resist patriarchy as an «epistemology of mastery»<sup>1</sup> concealed in museums' practices of representation, considering images, placing and texts. Collectively, we learn to see how patriarchy produces, shapes and mobilises problematic understandings of masculine, feminine and "the other" and to explore the implications of our findings for gender justice and change both within and beyond the museum's walls.

As «gendered scholarship is deeply personal [...] *who we are*»,<sup>2</sup> and feminists are encouraged to disclose their situated knowledges, we begin this article with a discussion of who we are and our rather circuitous route to the *Feminist Museum Hack* (hereafter simply

<sup>1</sup> Lorraine Code, *Ecological thinking. The politics of epistemic location*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Susan J. Bracken, Heather Nash, *Gender and sexuality in adult and continuing education*, in Carol E. Kasworm, Amy D. Rose, Jovita M. Ross-Gordon (eds), *Handbook of adult and continuing education*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2010, pp. 351-358, p. 351, emphasis in original.

the *Hack*). We then move to our ongoing use of the *Hack* -which is grounded in feminist adult education, feminist discourse analysis, visual methodologies/literacies- and explain its ontological foundations. We apply international research data from art, culture, history, and military museums, we highlight the *Hack* as a feminist pedagogy of possibility, that which can become possible to change once relations of power are rendered visible,<sup>3</sup> to help others understand its potential and consider its use.

## 2. *Situating ourselves*

We are feminist professors working in faculties of education at universities in Canada. Kathy and Darlene teach at the University of Victoria in the province of British Columbia (BC). Nancy teaches at Brock University in the province of Ontario. Collectively, our broad areas of teaching and research are critical and feminist adult and teacher education, public pedagogy, gender justice, creative practice and arts-based and -informed research.

In 2009, Darlene and Kathy designed a study to undertake research in a variety of public museums in Canada and England. We admit this focus was a stretch for us, as we had taken to heart the legacies of these institutions as elitist, exclusionary, racist, colonialist and sexist, and therefore irrelevant to our feminist mission of gender and social transformation. We also saw them as dark gloomy places where, as the adage goes, once vibrant objects and stories went to die; as such, we felt they offered little critical or creative pedagogical value. Nonetheless, we had heard from community artists and activists that adult educators in museums were attempting to re-think their educational work to respond better to pressing social issues of our time so we decided to take up the challenge. Our first study explored explicitly how museum adult educators articulated and practised adult education within today's contexts of society and their own institutions. Amongst other findings, we discovered that almost all adult educators were female, they were on the bottom rung of the museum's hierarchy and priorities, and most had experienced the "patriarchy" of their institution, although few had articulated this even to themselves.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Linzi Manicom, Shirley Walters (eds), *Feminist popular education in transnational debates. Building pedagogies of possibility*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Darlene E. Clover, Kathy Sanford, *Knowing their place. Feminist perceptions and*

Nancy joined us in 2016, broadening our focus to include war and military museums. We designed a new study with colleagues from England, Germany, Italy, Portugal, United States and across Canada<sup>5</sup> concentrating on ways in which public museums are teaching, practising, visualising, imagining, and communicating about gender discrimination and (in)justice and the feminist adult education implications of these practices. Our intention was to look at “feminist” exhibitions, those that critically took up stories of women and gender; however, it soon became clear that a larger, more systemic problem within these institutions was at play which we could not ignore but in which we had little capacity to respond.

As we moved from institution to institution, we began to note what Whitehead calls «practices of representation»<sup>6</sup>- displays, artworks, exhibitions, explanatory texts/labels and object positioning within the museum exhibitions. These were highly significant because, despite the courses, seminars and tours on offer, museums’ representations (essentially their exhibitions) are the primary educational vehicles used to reach the thousands of yearly visitors. Indeed, while many may believe a museum’s *raison d’être* is purely preservation and conservation, they are by their own admission active education institutions, agents of knowledge construction, meaning-making and identity formation. In other words, their practices of representation, their scripto-visual (what we see as discourses and images) processes, are central to how they present, name, imagine, identify and story the world.

Feminist cultural theorists such as Martha Marshment, Griselda Pollock and Gaby Porter have long argued that museum representations were neither neutral nor objective nor agenda-free but rather ideologically driven and deeply gendered.<sup>7</sup> Even today in 2018 these

*understandings of women adult educators in museums*, «Journal of Adult and Continuing Education», 2016, n. 22, pp. 117-133.

<sup>5</sup> Colleagues included Ingrid Gessner, Laura Formenti, Micki Voelkel, Shelli Henehan, Lauren Spring, Jennifer Thivierge, Alexis Johnson, Lisa Merriweather, Kim Gough, Mary Jo Hughes, Tania Muir, Emilia Ferreira.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Whitehead, *Museums and the construction of disciplines. Art and archaeology in nineteenth-century Britain*, London, Gerald Duckworth & Co, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Martha Marshment, *The picture is political. Representation of women in contemporary popular culture*, in Diana Richardson, Victoria Robinson (eds), *Thinking feminist*, New York, The Guildford Press, 1993, pp. 123-150; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and difference. Feminism, femininity and the histories of art*, London, Routledge, 1988; Gaby Porter, *Partial truths*, in Gaynor Kavanagh (ed.), *Museum languages. Objects and text*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1991, pp. 101-118.

institutions continue to shape and fix particular gendered framings of what counts as knowledge and history, whose stories are worthy of telling because they are the greatest social innovators, the heroes and the artists. Conversely, by omission, stereotyping and essentialising, museums show and tell us who and what has little or no importance, save possibly as an appendage to this reified (his)story. Equally concerning is that firstly, most people come to the museum and uncritically absorb the narratives (and we were amongst them) and secondly, these institutions are considered to be the most trustworthy knowledge-legitimising establishments in society.<sup>8</sup> We can, however, learn how to question «who we see and who we do not see; who is privileged within the regime of specularly [...] whose fantasies of what are fed»<sup>9</sup> by what museums show and tell. If feminist adult educators such as ourselves are to expand our political, pedagogical agendas we need to provide people with tools «to analyse the underlying systems of power (such as patriarchy) that institutionalise and manipulate identities in ways that justify oppression, discrimination, and often violence».<sup>10</sup> According to Rancière, emancipation begins when we come to understand how viewing can confirm structures of power and domination as well as transform them. Visitors become able to see the powerful ideologies that reside behind and within what is being viewed and to understand how they are led to create “common-sense” notions of society and ourselves that privilege some over others. Emancipation takes greater shape when spectators understand themselves as having «the capacity to know and the power to act».<sup>11</sup>

But if we lacked the abilities, and had no real tools to critique museums’ representations –the seen and unseen making of male power, superiority and privilege– despite being highly educated, feminist scholars, and if we too trusted (or simply dismissed) muse-

<sup>8</sup> See for example Samuel Alberti, *Constructing nature behind glass*, «Museum and Society», 2008, n. 16, pp. 73-97; Rika Burnham, Elliot Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the art museum. Interpretation and experience*, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011; Robert Janes, *Museums without borders*, London, Routledge, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Rogoff, *Studying visual culture*, in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The visual culture reader*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 14-26, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Donna Plantenga, *Shaping the magic. Reflections on some core principles of feminist popular education*, in Linzi Manicom, Shirley Walters (eds), *Feminist popular education in transnational debates. Building pedagogies of possibility*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The emancipated spectator*, London-New York, Verso, 2011, p. 13.

ums, then we were not only accepting their problematic gendered narratives but participating in their making. For us, the pedagogical questions became: How do we learn (and then teach) to read beyond the trusted, authoritative context of the museum and its sleight of patriarchal hand? How do we unmask and decode what hides so cleverly and forcefully in plain sight? How can we instil a sense of agency to challenge and re-story the narrative through both critique and creativity? Our response is the *Feminist Museum Hack* but before turning to this practice, it is important to contextualise museum representations pedagogically, in the contexts of seeing, knowledge creation, meaning making and the construction, storying and imagining of gender.

### 3. Representation, seeing, knowing and meaning

Representation is one of the most powerful socially productive practices of our time.<sup>12</sup> When we represent we describe, depict, call something to mind or lodge something into our consciousness and imaginations. Representation is a signifying practice – it always means something about something else – that is acted out in institutional settings such as museums with the intent to influence knowledge and perception. For Whitehead, modes of representations are knowledges, and knowledges are both accounts and ways of accounting; knowledges are not simply «the results of perception, learning and reasoning; they are also processes of perception, learning and reasoning which produce particularised results».<sup>13</sup> Knowledges are therefore, discursive, “saturated” with power and, problematically, dependent on assumptions of truth.

Representational power resides in the seen because it is this sense, more than any other, that «is considered evidence, truth and factual, as sight establishes a particular relation to the reality in which a visual is considered».<sup>14</sup> Therefore, what we see, and the setting of this seeing, such as the authoritative context of a museum, together play a constructing and shaping role in terms of what we will see as reality. There is a «complex relation between the seen and the unseen» where the former is, «a means to conceal an underlying system of

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, Sean Nixon (eds), *Representation. Cultural representations and signifying practices*, London, Sage, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Whitehead, *Museums and the construction of disciplines*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Fiona Carson, Claire Pajackowska (eds), *Feminist visual culture*, New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 1.

meaning». <sup>15</sup> This is «the “message” which is the embodiment of the aim of any exhibition and a “code”, which is the medium of communication, be it text, photograph or object». <sup>16</sup> Unseen codes and messages, too, work actively to shape our knowing and meanings of the world, although as the term suggests, they are not optical.

A central aspect of seeing and the unseen in museums is positioning, or stagecrafting, the way representations in museums are placed, at times given exalted status that convey particular meanings. Within stagecrafting, too, is the act of placing objects or artworks in relation to one another to create a «dynamic field of vision, i.e. what the visitor sees with one gaze». <sup>17</sup> Positioning thus operates visually but there is also an experiential component that Forgan calls «engulfing». <sup>18</sup> Visitors are actually situated inside the placements – the “constructed realities”. This works to intensify their reactions to what is being featured and entice them to accept these materialisations as representations of reality. In other words, “spacial plays” have powerful discursive functions in emphasising, in some cases literally spotlighting and engaging us in the particular understandings intended by the placing, lighting and flow of movement through a gallery. This makes exhibitions critical “visualising technologies” and plays of force which, as they embrace us, act as highly convincing mediums of influence. <sup>19</sup>

Although scholars often use the term force, it is important to remember museums do not use force to make us see what they want us to see. As alluded to above, people (and we were included in this) visit museums expecting to see the most important artworks, factual stories, primary examples of human creativity, innovation, accurate historical accounts of society and ourselves as this is what museums have socialised us to believe they re-present. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, what we see is done through a tacit consent for «authoritative or definitive interpretations whose legitimacy brooks no challenge». <sup>21</sup> Yet for decades now, feminist cultural theorists and researchers have been chal-

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Coxall, *How language means. An alternative view of museums texts*, in Kavanagh (ed.), *Museum languages*, pp. 83-100, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Whitehead, *Museums and the construction of disciplines*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Sophie Forgan, *Building the museum: Knowledge, conflict, and the power of place*, «Isis», 2005, n. 96, pp. 572-585.

<sup>19</sup> Whitehead, *Museums and the construction of disciplines*; Lucy Steeds (ed.), *Exhibition*, London, Whitechapel Press, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Alberti, *Constructing nature behind glass*.

<sup>21</sup> Whitehead, *Museums and the construction of disciplines*, p. 31.

lenging the legitimacy of museums and their representations, which brings us a step closer to the *Feminist Museum Hack*. It is from them we have received our inspiration and have drawn to create the *Hack*.

#### 4. *Feminist Museum Hack*

For us, the terminology “museum hacking” is a form of creative and productive disturbance that breaks into the accepted norms and codes of museum narratives. We have taken up the verb to hack because it literally means to enter without authority or authorisation. Animating the creation of the *Feminist Museum Hack* are a number of interwoven questions: What silences do museum representations reveal? What erased identities are they exhibiting? How do we illuminate the museum’s powerful authoritative gender codifications, framings, narratives and imaginings? How do we penetrate the “masculine gaze”? How do we challenge and stimulate capacities to see, to read, and to critically question museum language, images and their relationality? What types of inter-textual readings would be of most value? What would a critical, embodied, emancipatory problem-posing practice look like? How are women’s stories told and by whom? Which women’s stories/arts get told/shown? How are women described, defined, imagined, placed and positioned? What has been altogether absented? What does the museum narrative tell us about the world around us and what is valued in the world?

We considered how we could re-story or re-write the museum’s narratives in our own visual and activist ways -the spectators gaze as an emancipation pedagogy of possibility. This would be for us a feminist oppositional gaze whose aim it would be to defy, resist and re-assemble what we are programmed to see, made to see, and thus believe about the world and even, ourselves as women.

Succinctly, the *Feminist Museum Hack* is an embodied, pedagogical, methodological, interventionist practice used to render visible the grand patriarchal narrative ubiquitously represented in museum exhibitions and to interrogate and challenge how museums maintain their own invested interests. To use the *Hack* in the variety of existing museums (i.e. doll, photography, industrial, war, military, textile, ethnographic/history, and art museums), we had to make the tool responsive and adaptable. We also wanted to include creative practices that could stimulate others’ ways of knowing, learning, and perceiving. We turn now to outline the foundational discourses and various components of the *Hack*, weaving in findings and voices of *Hack* participants to bring these to life.

5. *Feminist adult education, discourse analysis and visual methodologies/literacy*

As the *Hack* is both a pedagogy and a methodology, it draws strength and creativity from three areas: feminist adult education, feminist discourse analysis and feminist visual methodologies and literacies.

«Pedagogy and learning have become vital spaces of encounter» and it is within this context that the gender histories which have otherwise been subject to enforced forgetting have «the chance of being written».<sup>22</sup> Feminist adult education is a process of writing, telling, making, storying and imaging the world's history and present from the standpoint of women. It is a practice of intentionality, meaning it «intentionally bring[s] a decidedly political learning agenda to the table and [reaches] toward the kinds of political action and learning that are necessary» for social and gender transformation.<sup>23</sup> Feminist approaches to adult education offer a language of critique, a means to explore and analyse the origins and mechanisms of women's subjugation, silencing and exclusion. Issues of voice, listening, knowledge, power and agency are central. As a practice of deep and critical questioning we explore whose and what knowledge counts and who has the right and power to tell the story or name the world. Stories are an important means to «resist patriarchal racist constructs».<sup>24</sup> In addition to critically questioning the ideologies, structures and practices that fuel various forms of gender oppression, feminist adult education is also a language of possibility, a process of learning that enables and empowers women to throw off the shackles that have silenced them and enables them to see themselves as agents in the world's historical and contemporary narratives. Engaging in arts-based and other creative practices of imagining the world provide ways to magnify the voices of those who have been obscured in patriarchal structures of power and privilege. Another key aspect of feminist adult education is to find ways to ignite an appetite for the feminist project by instilling a sense of legitimate rage at the persistence of patriarchal assumptions. While rage itself does not produce change, it is where hope

<sup>22</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The aftermath of feminism. Gender, culture and social change*, London, Sage, 2009, p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Leona English, Catherine Irving, *Feminism in community. Adult education for transformation*, Rotterdam, Sense Publishing, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sherene Razack, cited *Ibidem*, p. 11.



lies; «and of course, *making anger hopeful* is an educational task».<sup>25</sup> Adult education is fundamentally about knowledge -uncovering it, acquiring it, and challenging dominant forms of knowledge and knowing.

As hegemonic patriarchal power is sustained through the ubiquitous medium of language through which ideas, ideologies and societal expectations are transmitted, a second foundation of the *Hack* is feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). FCDA is a practice of analytical resistance, «a political perspective on gender, concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology» in discourse. A feminist approach allows us to ask questions that would otherwise go unexplored in terms of how women are viewed, illustrated and written about. Language and texts are thus analysed for how they «sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women».<sup>26</sup> Through our various hacks we also explore museum discursive constructions (or exclusions) of those who do not fit neat gender binaries, using gender more broadly as an interpretative category to interrogate this imbrication of power and ideology that is not always at first apparent.

The final aspect of the *Hack* is feminist visual methodologies. Problematic ideals of masculinity are often fashioned through “discursive visibility”, which «make[s] certain things visible in particular ways and other things unseeable [within a particular] field of vision».<sup>27</sup> Feminist visual methodologies, often confined to “art”, draw attention specifically to this visibility in terms of how it structures images that perpetuate and naturalise masculinised notions of gender. In the museum, discourses are articulated through a range of «visual and verbal images [...] and also, through the practices that those languages permit»; intertextuality «refers to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts».<sup>28</sup> From a pedagogical perspective, we term this

<sup>25</sup> Ian Martin, *Adult education, lifelong learning and citizenship. Some ifs and buts*, «International Journal of Lifelong Education», 2003, n. 22, p. 575, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Michelle Lazar, *Critical feminist discourse analysis. Articulating a feminist discourse praxis*, «Critical Discourse Studies», 2007, n. 4, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Carson, Pajaczkowska (eds), *Feminist visual culture*, p. 137.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

visual literacy, the capacity «to read and respond to visual images [...] the opportunity to make meaning from imagery with similar levels of complexities as in spoken language».<sup>29</sup> A museological feminist application of visual literacy is political and questioning; it deeply probes depictions (including stagecrafting), exploring and problematising, for example, how gender is represented.

### 6. *Questioning*

The *Hack* revolves around a series of questions (such as those introduced earlier) adapted to suit the genre of the site and to date we have always ‘hacked’ within museums, although this tool could also be used with virtual museum exhibitions and displays. Some questions are quantitative, using the deceptively simple word: count. For instance: Count how many of the artworks are by women and how many by men? How many stories are about women and/or told by women and how many are about men? If not for paintings by the artist Emily Carr, for example, the National Gallery of Canada would be nearly devoid of women’s artworks. In Tate Britain, we looked for all the works by women, and discovered only eight nestled amongst the hundreds. In a Canadian history museum, not one woman’s image or story appeared in a long gallery until well toward the end of the entire exhibition and she came as a pin-up in a poster. As one student noted “there are more animals in this museum than there are women”.

As “women” is not a homogeneous, essentialized category, *Hack* questions also ask us to look at the number of works, displays or stories by or about trans-women, lesbian, Indigenous, older, working class, Black, or differently abled women. In a gallery in northern England, the only artwork not depicting or by White Britons was a sculpture of a Black male, positioned high above our heads, all but out of sight. This quantitative questioning has already begun to raise the hackles of people who had never before seen the blatant exclusion of women or racism: «Oh look», one student quipped satirically, «finally a non-white, but of course he is male». It has also opened up conversations in which we can interrogate the category of women, intersectionality and the silencing of non-gender binaries.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Holloway, *Visual literacies and multiliteracies. An ecology arts-based pedagogical model*, «Language and Literacy», 2012, n. 14, p. 150.

### 7. *Interrogating the scripto-visual: Honing a feminist oppositional gaze*

How are men and women described or constructed in the labels or curatorial statements? Who creates the curatorial statements? What types of adjectives are used? What role are the labels and other texts playing? What is being stated, suggested or left out? Whose voices are being represented? Who is speaking? These are but a few of the questions we use to provide an opening to analysing the explanatory texts and labels that accompany exhibitions, artworks and objects.

In some circumstances, the *Hack* allows us to see how language creates “truth” by taking an authoritative position that precludes any other interpretation. It also illuminates museum’s use of “neutral” words such as “people” when in fact they are only referencing men.

Going further, whilst men are described as having agency and control, leadership skills and creating peace, an oppositional reading of the scripto-visual often shows that when women are featured in an exhibit, they are often recognised only for their appearance. For example, at the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), Queen Nefertiti, despite being considered «one of the most powerful women ever to have ruled» in ancient Egypt,<sup>30</sup> is described merely as «the wife of Akhenaten», with the panel titled, *Portrait of a Beauty*. The focus is not on Nefertiti’s accomplishments, but on her beauty and her husband. In a connected way to the language used at the RBCM, in an art gallery in England we took note of how often male artists were described in terms of their artistic talents, whilst women were described in connection to a famous or important male –husband, father, or son. We have also explored the juxtaposition of words to emphasise ideological messages being conveyed. For example, returning to the Egyptian exhibit, Ramesses II is described as *The Great One* while Hatshepsut (also a great leader), is lower to the status of *The Divine Consort*. What makes him great is clearly, his gender.

### 8. *Minding the affordances. Stagecrafting and relationality*

What attracts your attention in the exhibit, gallery, or museum and why? How does the setting work to story what is important and

<sup>30</sup> <<https://www.biography.com/people/nefertiti-9421166>>.

engulf you in that narrative? What visual relationships are created through positioning, lighting and so forth? These questions draw our attention to affordances, the ways in which environments affect us. A study of museum architecture, demonstrated «it embodied permeance. It was designed to make a symbolic statement»<sup>31</sup> about its own power and authority, but equally, the power and authority of its representations. Affordances also work to claim authority beyond its ability to impose its will. Stagecrafting, as described earlier, is the setting or positioning of objects.<sup>32</sup> Together, stagecrafting and affordances affect the stories that are told and the ways in which visitors interact with and make meaning from museums and exhibits. For instance, in war and military museums, some exhibits focus on women. These exhibits could be perceived as beneficial in that they dedicate that space in order to highlight women's stories. However, they also segregate women, creating the impression that women are only important in isolation. These exhibits, in Canadian military museums, also tend to be situated next those that stereotype and *other* women, such as those that deal with the home front, children, or the enemy.

A *Hack* question such as «What is the unifying story or narrative of the museum and how is it being told?» brings together text, visuals and stagecrafting as it explores ideological and theoretical assumptions. The gaze is not necessarily ocular and is not, as some claim, concerned only with spectacle but relies on mental perceptions. The discussion here includes the ways guests and hosts view, grasp, conceptualise, understand, imagine, and construct each other.

### *9. Becoming creators: Re-storying, direct agency, poetic resistance*

Central to feminist adult education are the ideas of agency and resistance which include a «conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations [through an] oppositional analytic».<sup>33</sup> Viewing in the museum is still predominantly limited to

<sup>31</sup> Michael Giebelshausen, *Museum Architectur. A brief history*, in Sharon MacDonald (ed.), *A Companion to museum studies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 223-244, p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> Arndís Bergsdóttir, *Museums and feminist matters. Considerations of a Feminist Museology*, «NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research», 2016, n. 24, pp. 126-139.

<sup>33</sup> Chantal Mohanty, *On race and voice. Challenges for liberation education in the 1990s*, «Cultural Critique», 1989, n. 14, p. 208.

passive spectatorship, absorbing pre-packaged displays and exhibitions. Central to the *Hack* is the idea of participation as a means to challenge the authority of the museum, to create new visuals and to promote a sense of agency within and around museum messaging. To be a creator, in the sense of the *Hack*, is to become a participant in the story of the museum by disrupting and de-centring its hegemonic narratives. To date we have used two forms of intervention.

When working with museum educators, we gain permission to use coloured post-it notes upon which we as researchers or *Hack* participants write comments and questions or create new labels. Post-it notes also capture conversations participants have about, for example, representations as problematic visualising technologies and codes of illusion:

A: There are no women in this exhibition.

B: I saw a woman.

A: Really?

B: Well, there was a tea service and a lacy fan.

A: You saw that as a woman?

The post-it notes are attached to display cases or beside artworks to create colourful visual disruption, a method of questioning existing curatorial statements as well as rewriting them. As hackers, we both take up space and take back space dominated by authoritative “factual” language, challenging the ubiquity of the “semantic authority” of museum texts and the hegemony of what appear to be “facts”. Sometimes these post-it notes are read by visitors. While some appreciate and peruse them, others feel we are defacing the museum and they can become very insulting. These museums have great power, as we have noted.

We also write poetry and short stories as a creative way to practice dissent and resistance. Found poetry uses phrases drawn from the language of labels and curatorial statements or exhibition catalogues, combining them in a way that crystallises their meaning and/or gives it a critical edge. Poetry’s «political task is a visionary one, the work of making way for new worlds».<sup>34</sup> Further, poetry «matters because it can waken us to realities that fall into the realm of the political».<sup>35</sup> Feminist poetry is important because for women

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Fisher, *Outside the republic. A visionary political poetics*, «Textual Practice», 2009, n. 23, p. 984.

<sup>35</sup> Jay Parini, *Why poetry matters*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008, p. XIII.

it «enables an overcoming of the “intolerable or incomprehensible” [...] to find the “strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” [...] to challenge “institutional dehumanization”». <sup>36</sup> In relation to the use of fiction to disseminate research, fiction can demonstrate complexity, encourage understanding, and engage in a societal critique. Short stories therefore fictionalise our findings in order to assist others in thinking about museums in alternative ways. They make the exhibits come alive and take perspectives that differ from the curated stagecraft and statements, illuminating women’s narratives with feminist undertones.

### *10. Final words*

As feminists have long reminded us, museum representations -their visuals and narratives- are powerful, pedagogical devices of knowledge and meaning making, and gender identifying and legitimising. Museum exhibitions present the world in particular masculinised ways which means some stories get told whilst others are ignored. Yet this absenting, silencing and essentialising of women often goes unnoticed although it has a powerful influence on how women envisage themselves as actors and agents. In other words, depictions of a world that revolve around hegemonic colonial patriarchy have served to inscribe a history that is at best incomplete, perpetuating a binary gendered world that has major implications for women and “the other”. We recognised as feminist adult educators the need for a new response and thus designed the *Feminist Museum Hack*. The *Hack* allows us to engage students and community members in practices of seeing the “unseen” and imagining a more gender inclusive world. Through the *Hack*, we take back the power of visibility to encourage a feminist oppositional gaze able to re-view, re-read, and re-imagine reality as it could and will be otherwise.

<sup>36</sup> Audrey Lorde, cited in Viv Golding, *Museums, poetics and affect*, «Feminist Review», 2013, n. 104, p. 91.

*Abstract:* Come possono le educatrici femministe usare le gallerie d'arte e i musei per promuovere la consapevolezza di genere e il cambiamento? La nostra risposta è stata *Feminist Museum Hack*, una pratica pedagogica, un metodo analitico, flessibile e attivo che usiamo nell'insegnamento nelle aule universitarie, nel lavoro laboratoriale di comunità, nelle ricerche e in musei di varia tipologia in Canada e in Europa. In questo articolo discutiamo di come il metodo si impervi sulle teorie della rappresentazione e sulle metodologie visuali e discorsive femministe, con l'obiettivo di smascherare, interrogare, decostruire l'epistemologia patriarcale che si nasconde nelle immagini e nelle narrazioni delle mostre, nonché di produrre e indurre una comprensione problematica del maschile, del femminile, dell'"altro". Come pedagogia della possibilità, l'*Hack* stimola il potere della visualità attraverso uno sguardo oppositivo femminista in grado di vedere, leggere e immaginare il mondo come se potesse essere diverso.

How can feminist adult educators use art galleries and museums to promote gender consciousness and change? Our response has been the *Feminist Museum Hack*, an adaptable pedagogical, methodological, analytical and interventionist practice we use in our university classroom teaching, community workshop facilitation, and researches and on a variety of museums and galleries across Canada and Europe. In this article, we discuss how the *Hack* draws on theories of representation and feminist visual and discursive methodologies to unmask, interrogate and deconstruct patriarchy's epistemology of mastery that lies concealed in the visuals and narratives of exhibitions to produce, shape and mobilise problematic understandings of masculine, feminine and 'the other'. As a pedagogy of possibility, the *Hack* stimulates the power of visuality in the form of a feminist oppositional gaze able to see, read and imagine the world as if it could be otherwise.

*Keywords:* musei, hacking femminista, sguardo oppositivo, analisi del discorso, metodologie visive e artistiche; museums, feminist hacking, oppositional gaze, discourse analysis, visual and arts-based methodologies.

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