The Feminist Museum Hack as an aesthetic practice of possibility

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Abstract

This article outlines the central components, foundations and key activities of the Feminist Museum Hack, an investigative, pedagogical, analytical and interventionist tool we have designed to explore patriarchal assumptions behind the language, images and stragecrafting (positioning, lighting) of museums and art galleries. We also share findings from a study of student and community participants who employed the Hack in a museum in Canada and an art gallery in England. While differences existed due to institutional genres, findings showed participants' ability to see and to reimagine absences, objectification, fragmentation, and double-standards and apply these to the world beyond the institution's walls. As a form of pedagogy of possibility, the Hack encourages critique, just ire and the imagination. As it hones visual literacy skills it emboldens participants to challenge the authority of the museum narratives and to engage in creative practices of agency and activism.

Keywords: Aesthetic pedagogies; feminism; hacking; museum

Introduction

Museums and art galleries, as ubiquitous cultural features of the global landscape, render visible the relationship between education and aesthetics. Visitors to these institutions learn through aesthetic experiences with art and beauty. They also learn from interactions with other objects and sensory stimuli 'not typically considered elicitors of aesthetic experience' (Latham, 2007, p. 47). Together, these pedagogical elements are what Whitehead (2009) calls "practices of representation" - amalgamations of artworks,

images, displays, artefacts, dioramas, stage crafting (positioning) and explanatory texts specifically designed to shape knowledge and understandings of everything from innovation to history, culture to science. Hall (2013) and Cramer and Witcomb (2018) add that museum and art gallery representations also shape identity -- who we were, 'who we are and who we should be' (Hall, 2013, p. 127). While visitors can (and do) interpret different meanings from the representations they encounter, the authoritative aura of the scripto-visuals, what Steeds (2014) calls 'plays of force', both consciously and unconsciously influence what we see and therefore, assume to be "true" in terms of culture, society, ourselves, and "the other" (e.g. Bergsdóttir, 2016; Hall, 2013; Porter 1991).

The questions for us as feminist adult educators are: What "truth" are we seeing or able to see in terms of gender through aesthetic experiences in museums and art galleries? What 'is privileged within [this] regime of specularity?' (Rogoff, 2013, p. 15). Whose stories go untold and what are the implications of seeing this? Over decades, feminist studies have shown the patriarchal nature of museum and art gallery representations, a powerful "epistemology of mastery" that places men at the centre of the world's story - those who matter - and women and others at its periphery - those who do not. Not seeing oneself at all, or consistently as lesser, has an impact on both subjectivity and one's sense of agency (Bergsdóttir, 2016; Cramer & Witcomb, 2018; Code, 2003; English & Irving, 2015; Macedo, 2015; Pollock, 1988). This is what Ulrich and Raza (2015) would call an "unsatisfying condition" with profoundly negative implications. However, they also remind us that unsatisfying conditions can be catalysts for imagination and thus possibility. Any practice of power can be met with resistance if the conditions are created to do so and the unsatisfying gendered conditions of museums and art galleries presented for us an opportunity to operationalise pedagogically the analytical practices of feminist cultural scholars through a new feminist curriculum. We call this the *Feminist Museum Hack,* an aesthetic pedagogy of possibility that encourages visual literacy in the form of oppositional seeing, thinking and acting against the backdrop of patriarchal narratives that hide in plain sight in art galleries and museums.

In this article, we do two things. One is we introduce the *Feminist Museum Hack* as an embodied, analytical, pedagogical, and interventionist practice we have designed to interrogate intentionally, critically, and creatively problematic representations and to encourage direct agency and dissent. We therefore begin with a discussion of representation as aesthetic knowledge construction, meaning and identity making followed by how feminists conceptualise "possibly" in pedagogy. We then outline elements of feminist discourse analysis, visual methodologies and critical literacies and how they inform the Hack's central strategies. Our second aim in this paper is to share findings from a study of four hacks with 65 male and female adult education and teacher education[1] and 19 female community members in an ethnographic museum in Canada and a public art gallery in England. We found substantive similarities in outcomes across the two countries and the seeds of a critical feminist consciousness. We argue the significance of the *Feminist Museum Hack* as an aesthetic pedagogy of possibility to render visible that which wishes to remain hidden, to stimulate self and social critique and act as a practice of creative resistance and imagination. As a result, the Hack is our contribution as feminist adult educators to the struggle for gender justice and change and our response to calls by adult educators Borg and Mayo (2010, p. 37) to use the opportunities museums and art galleries offer 'not only for "ideology critique"… but also for struggling collectively' as educators to see the world differently in order to change it.[2]

Representation, Knowledge Construction and Identity Making

To understand why we focus on museums and art galleries as spaces for critical self, social and pedagogical exploration, it is important to conceptualise their power. The global landscape is literally peppered with thousands of these institutions and they are frequented by ever increasing numbers of adults (e.g. Hannay, 2018). The International Council of Museums reminds us that their practices of acquiring, conserving, and exhibiting is primarily 'for the purposes of education' (in Gosselin & Livingston, 2016, p. 4). This focus on education gives them authenticity and authority 'to tell stories and the unassailable cast of those stories' (Whitehead, 2009, p. 44). Studies in fact show that visitors believe museums' narratives to be inclusive, accurate, factual, and agenda-free accounts of history, creatively and innovation and this too shores up their authority and thus power to influence how we see and make sense of the world (e.g. Gordon-Walker, 2018; Gosselin et al., 2016; Janes, 2015).

Although a number of adult education activities take place in most museums and art galleries, the central educational vehicle is their exhibitions. Steeds (2014) positions exhibitions as 'plays of force', ideal mediums designed to influence the public's knowledge of history, art, society, culture and people (p. 29). Inseparable from exhibition knowledge construction is "the practice of representation", the combinations of artworks, dioramas, images, artefacts, and explanatory texts all carefully choreographed to not only shape and produce but also mobilise our understandings of reality (Hall, 2013; Whitehead, 2009). Representations thus, are not simply 'the results of perception, learning and reasoning; they are processes of perception, learning and reasoning' (Whitehead, 2009, p. 9). Representations do not simply disseminate knowledge, they actively construct it. For Hall (2013), representation is the most powerful discursive pedagogical force we have today due to its extraordinary ability to cement and naturalise notions of common sense and "truth" as well as fix identity - our sense of not only ourselves but also, "the other" (Cramer et al., 2018; Gordon-Walker, 2018; Hall 2013).

Feminist cultural theorists Carson and Pajaczkowska (2001) argue that the power of representation lies in "the seen" because, as our most powerful sense, 'what we see is considered evidence, truth and factual' (p. 1). Sight establishes particular relations to reality that are enhanced through the context 'in which a visual is considered' (p. 1) such as the authoritative context of museums and art galleries. Although Porter (1991) argues that the adult visitor is not simply 'a passive recipient of authoritarian discourse' (p. 105), scholars such as Mirzeoff (2013), Hall (2013), Whitehead (2009) and Cramer and Witcomb (2018) have reason for concern vis-à-vis the power of their visualising to encourage adults to 'see what they are being taught to see and to remain blind to what they are being taught to ignore' (Cramer et al., 2018, p. 2). What they are being taught to ignore is what Carson and Pajaczkowska (2001) call the "unseen" and feminist adult educators such as Bierema (2003) call 'the hidden curriculum' (p. 4). For Rose (2001), this is a 'scopic regime [of] how we see, are able to see, allowed to see or made to see' (p. 6) and it has important implications for women and gender.

Feminist cultural theorists have asked critical questions about these "scopic regimes" and their relationship to gender inequality and oppression. Specifically, "whose" and "what" singular point of view is being visually constructed? (e.g. Gosselin et al, 2016; Pollock, 1988; Rose, 2001). They also challenge museums and art galleries as comprehensive, accurate, and objective because representations as never neutral. Analyses have uncovered narratives and visuals steeped in patriarchy, although these powerful "epistemology of mastery" are seldom straightforwardly visible (Bergsdóttir, 2016; Code, 2003; Haraway, 2013). In their early studies of art exhibitions Porter (1996)

and Pollock (1988) found façades of neutrality and common sense that worked to conceal the real story being told - a story of men as the masters (artists) and women the objects of their gaze. In much more recent studies these hidden naturalisations of gender remain. On the whole, in the Canadian military museums… men are represented as white masculine military heroes (the protectors) and women as white feminine civilian wives and mothers (the protected) (Clover, Taber & Sanford, 2018, p. 19). Levin's (2010) studies pick up on this in their critique of how representations in museums construct whiteness, particularly in the form of white male power and privilege. These imperial practices of visuality allow privilege to re-enforce itself as normative thus legitimising racist assumptions and practices (Mirzoeff, 2013). Normalisation also creates binaries laden with value judgements of superiority and inferiority. Porter (1988) illustrated the gendered angle of this in her study of dioramas of domestic life as the women who laboured below stairs were made peripheral to the central narrative signifying amongst other things, the 'naturalness' of the social stratification of class (Haraway, 2013).

Bates (2018) theorises practices that perpetuate sexism and inter-sectionalities of race and class as a persistent dripping that 'seeps into our collective consciousness' (p. 25) and we would argue this is what exhibitions do. Although difficult to perceive, there exist persistent visualisations of objectification, misrepresentation, and stereotyping that work to diminish people's understandings of their own subjectivity and value (Macedo, 2015; Riley, Evans & Mackiewicz, 2016). Bates challenges us to become activists in response to these types of insidious invisibilities. Haraway (2013), Riley et al (2016) and Carson et al (2001) theorise this as taking back the power of vision to unframe and reframe, to un-see and see a new that which does not wish to be unfamed nor seen. Feminist educators call this "rendering visible" and they focus on practices of power and how they control women's lives and identities (e.g. English et al., 2015; Manicom & Walters, 2012). Feminist educators such as Jarvis (1999) suggest that we use diverse experiences and curricula to generate 'knowledge and insights into the processes which might constrain women's construction of their subjectivities' (p. 112). Feminist strategies of possibility include both resisting social and cultural constraints and imagining alternatives. Manicom and Walters (2012) take this further, framing 'pedagogies of possibility' as grounded firmly in the imagination, 'that which might become thinkable and actionable when prevailing relations of power are made visible, when understandings shake loose from normative perspectives and generate new knowledge and possibilities for engagement' (p. 4). Our challenge was to conceive what this would this look like if operationalised in the aesthetic experience of the scripto-visuals of museums and art galleries? Our response is the *Feminist Museum Hack*, an aesthetic pedagogy of possibility aimed to interrogate representations and encourage a radical oppositional capacity to see, to (re)imagine and to practise active dissent.

The Feminist Museum Hack

In the Oxford Dictionary, to hack means to enter without authorisation or authority. For us, it means explicitly 'to make [our] presence felt, seen and heard' in ways not normally granted permission (Arendt, 1970, p. 29). In a *Feminist Museum Hack*, participants (students and community groups) work together in pairs or small groups, moving through the galleries using a series of questions. One form of questioning gives basic quantitative direction: Count how many artworks are by women. Count how many stories are about women.

Figure 1: Tallying Inequality

As "woman" is not a homogeneous category but laced with inter-sections such as race and class, Hack questions ask participants to focus on/count "which" women's stories are being told. Central to the Hack is also a series of qualitative questions, adapted and modified to fit varied museum genres (e.g. art, textile/fashion, industry, doll, war, ethnographic/historical). Questions are open-ended to encourage what Wilson MacKay and Monteverde (2003, p. 41) refer to as "dialogic looking", multiple ways of seeing and interpreting representations to generate active conversation (e.g. Look around the gallery. What attracts your attention and how does it do it?). However, these questions are also "intentional" because feminist adult educators remind us we must design intentional political learning agendas if we want to contribute to transformation (Clover et al., 2018; English & Irving, 2015; Manicom et al., 2012). In other words, questions "intentionally" invite participants to "see" and by doing so, aim to encourage the capacity to see/understand/think in opposition and dissent, a skill that can extend to the world beyond the institutional walls. For despite legacies of sexism, colonialism, racism and classism, a consistent finding across both countries when we invite participants to share their impressions of these institutions before we commence to Hack, is uncritical, affective reflections on artworks or memories of childhood visits. Hooper-Greenhill (1992) reminds us these institutions are seldom 'subjected to any rigorous form of critical analysis' by the general public and we ourselves when we began this work frequently (and sometimes still do) have failed to see what was right before our eyes (p. 3). The maintenance of gendered power relations is not only pervasive, it is shrewd.

To design the *Feminist Museum Hack,* we drew from discourse analysis, that is, the focus on 'groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking' (Rose, 2001 p. 136). Critical discourse analysis is concerned with reading "text" as political, as a system of meaning caught up in cultural formations linked to socially defined practices that can carry privilege, assign value, and produce subjects and thus, can never be considered neutral (Rogers, 2011). Critical discourse analysis also encourages us to pay attention to the other "language" or discourse

of the institution - its stagecrafting and engulfing for these too tell a story. Feminist critical discourse analysis sharpens this as it allows the Hack to function as 'a practice of analytical resistance concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology' (Lazar, 2010, p. 5). Explanatory texts, curatorial statements, labels, and positioning, are all "read" 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' (p. 6). We would ask, for example: How are women artists and/or their works described in the labels? This encourages reading 'not only what is being said, but what is left out; not only what is present in the text, but what is absent' (Rogers, 2011, p. 15; see also Porter, 1991).

As knowledge is also constructed visually, the *Hack* draws from critical visual discourse analysis and methodologies. Images too are imbued with 'principles of inclusion and exclusion' that must be decoded for the hierarchies and differences they naturalise (Fyfe & Law 1988, p. 1). Feminist visual analytical practices are approaches that ask us to think 'about the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and power relations; and that means thinking about the power relations that produce, are articulated through and can be challenged by, ways of seeing and imaging' (Rose, 2001, p. 3). Specifically, we queried how "authoritative visuality" works to envision masculinities and femininities as "truth"? An example *Hack* question is: How do women (and men) appear in a painting or diorama?

> Being physically in a gallery, a space that privileges some experiences over others, and critiquing this, [can be seen] as a form of dissent. It's a way of opening up the debate about whose stories deserve to be told - and whose faces seen. (Proctor, 2018, p. 1)

Direct agency and dissent are practised through the Hack using post-it notes. Guided by the open-ended questions, participants write comments or questions on brightly coloured post-it notes and place these beside an artwork, over an existing label or a display case. Almost instantly, the orderly, authoritative gallery space becomes a chaotic, visual collage of interrogation, critique, question and challenge.

Figure 2: Collage of post-it notes
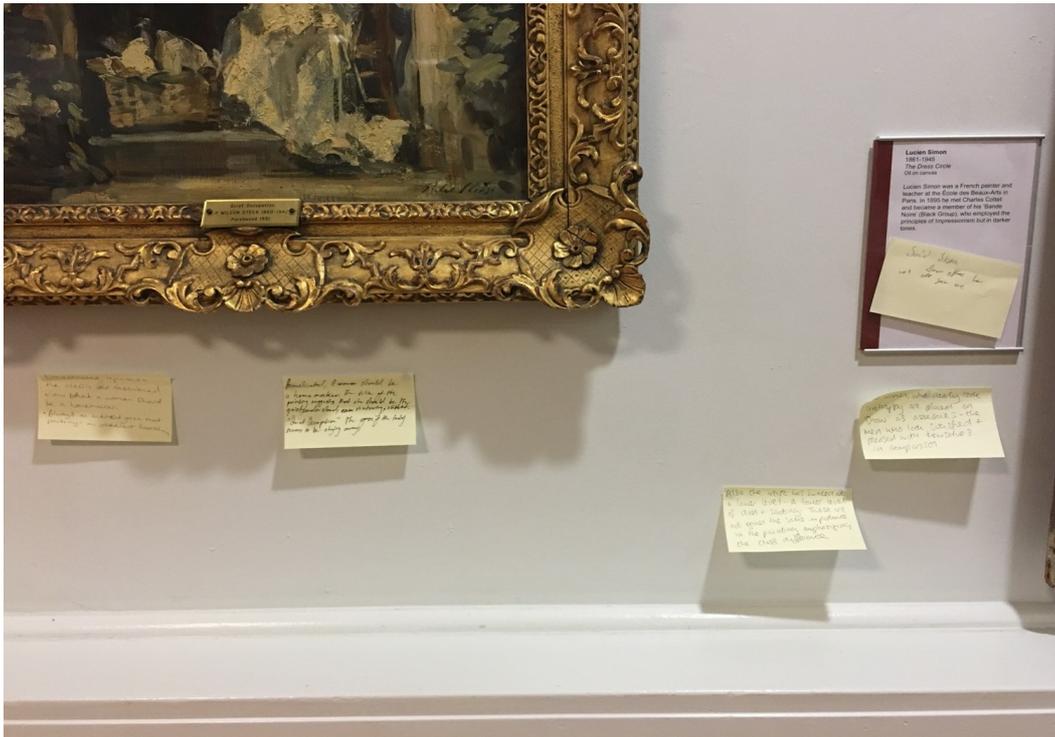
These are always noticed by visitors and we will return to this. We also incorporate other creative and arts-based practices because learning visual literacy must go beyond analytics to include actual art making and the imagination, the subversive thing Mohanty (2012) believes we can have. One art form that lends itself well to the *Hack* is poetry because its 'political task is a visionary one, the work of making way for new worlds' (Fisher, 2009, p. 984). Poems make comparatives between exhibitions, or take the form of Haiku, such as this derived from the exact title of an exhibition (in italics) (Canada):

> *Men, animals and machines*
> Yet only labouring women seen
> Write erasure; Write power

A second aesthetic practice is collage from "found" and ready-made images and texts. Collage is an inclusive form of art-making, that has a history as a practice of challenge, subversion and a strategy of criticism through a 'provocative spirit' (Frances, 2009, p. 15). It allows thinking and realisations to emerge through making, offering a visual alternative of cognitive and emotional expression. It can be a galvanising critical practice 'of jarring people into thinking and seeing' (Leavy, 2015, p. 235) and also, argues Vaughn (2005, p. 27), a 'borderlands epistemology' for feminist and postcolonial enquiry.

Research questions and study methods

In 2016 we were awarded a major research grant to create the *Feminist Museum Hack* as a pedagogic-methodology. Like other feminist and arts-based methods the *Hack* involves the systematic use of aesthetic practices to create experiences and to bring people together and to examine and understand those experiences through aesthetic practice (Knowles &

Cole, 2008). In other words, the pedagogical experience and ways of seeing are also sources of data.

Participants were sixty-five male and female adult and teacher education Master and PhD students and 19 female community members in Canada who took part in four hacks in an ethnographic museum in Canada and an art gallery in England. The study was shaped by questions that aimed to uncover the Hack's aesthetic pedagogical value:

1) What different types of textual and visual readings did the Hack allow?
2) How was the experiential nature of the Hack embodied, narrated and visualised?
3) What transformations of consciousness did it excite?
4) What were the implications for participants of this learning to see differently?
5) What elements make the Hack a pedagogy of possibility?

One source of data was post-it notes themselves as they contained a wealth of seeing, thinking, feeling. Secondly, we recorded manually aspects of the *Hack* debriefing discussions. These sessions functioned like feminist focus groups where participants shared their findings, explored commonalities and divergences, and discussed and debated the implications of their findings and the Hack experience (e.g. Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2015). We also kept notes of our observations of the participants as well as photographic records because it was clear that meaning was arising and being demonstrated from their physical engagement with objects and works in the galleries. Fourth, we analysed the visual collages and ideas in the poems to understand how participants were further visualising and narrating their experiences of the Hack as an aesthetic pedagogy of possibility. As arts-based researchers such as Knowles and Cole (2008) remind us, images and poetry convey multiple messages of complex understandings and sense-making of an experience. Finally, we undertook open-ended interviews with 20 participants which we audio recorded and transcribed. These open-ended interviews allowed yet another way for participants to reflect upon the Hack experience.

Data analysis including various stages and means. We met after the Hacks to discuss and share our own observations. We each read the transcripts and other sources of data individually to identify and label using a process of *a priori* or emergent coding. We came together face-to-face, at conferences and through email to develop clusters of themes and ideas. Our field notes were hand-written and not coded but we each referred to them regularly for reflections on for example, body language and visitor interactions.

What the data shows

Objectification and Fragmentation

Objectification theory argues that being looked at, particularly the power dynamics of men looking at women - the male gaze - is a powerful mechanism by which women learn to understand themselves, and in particular, their bodies and their value (e.g. Riley et al., 2016). Significantly, women 'learn to understand their bodies as objects [they engage] in self-monitoring in anticipation of how men will judge their appearance' (p. 95). One of the first ways the Hack operates as a pedagogy of possibility is by operationalising objectification theory, that is, bringing the theory to life. In other words, as participants moved through the galleries looking at the images and texts through a feminist "oppositional gaze" they systemically unmasked a series of diverse practices of

objectification never seen before, and then discussed the implications of this with their peers.

One moment of seeing came as both a shout across the gallery floor and a query on a post-it note: 'Why are all these women in bits?' A pair had begun to notice a regularity in images in the art gallery where women were illustrated as a series of body parts although men as they noted, seemed to remain whole. The implications of this pervasive practice of objectification were captured on a post-it note by a Canadian participant: 'Woman as "object" is story-less, nameless, history-less.' In a debriefing, she talked about growing up feeling shame about her body and dousing herself in make-up. Others felt encouraged to share other stories of the negative impact idealised sexualised images had on sisters or friends. Observations and stories such as these are important in and of themselves, but what made the Hack into a stronger space of possibility was that they became entangled in a broader gendered debate taking place outside the gallery that manifested itself in the Hack.

A few days before the Hack a tabloid newspaper in England had shown a photograph of two key female political leaders - Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May - sitting together in skirts with the headline 'Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it'. One of the male participants pasted this comment beside a fragmented image of a woman's legs. When asked to read it aloud, he did so assuming the group would find it 'all just good fun.' But he underestimated how upsetting the findings were for many women participants who voiced the seriousness of sexualised objectification and challenged his notion of humour.

Building on this, history is most often recounted by the victors who present their narratives as factual and thus, true. This practice became apparent to one participant in Canada who wrote: 'I finally found a woman. A white woman in a pin-up calendar with her bottom pointed up. Great!' In the debriefing, a male participant casually suggested 'pin up calendars are just a fact of history so why should the museum apologise for having one?' This was met with a chorus of challenges from the women who challenged "fact" and the museum's sense of social responsibility as a public site of history: 'History is not neutral, so why is this museum pretending?' The challenges to both the "legsit" and "fact" comments illustrate how the Hack empowered women to speak up about something that normally, as one Canadian woman noted, she would never have done: 'I think to say something so many times but I just don't. But I was not going to let this one pass, not after what I have been seeing [in this museum].'

Relationality

Relationality is the practice of bringing diverse things together to tell a story. Ranciere (2009) cautions, however, that relationality can create problematic ways of understanding and therefore, as educators need to disrupt the correspondences. This disruptive ability came out in the Hack data in two distinct ways. Firstly, participants in both countries decoded the unequal way women artists were described in the explanatory labels as this comment from England illustrates: 'Why does the description of her painting not describe anything about her painting, but only frame the artist as someone's daughter, sister or wife? This was of course, not an isolated incident but rather, occurred repeatedly: 'Female artists, every single one of them, is introduced in context of who the men are in their life.' Conversely, descriptions of male artists "never begin with 'son of' of 'husband to'…men are great artists in their own right.' (England post-it note). If men were described relationally, as one participant noted sarcastically in the debriefing, 'it was to link them to other "great" men' (participant's emphasis). Participants also noticed how frequently

women's roles in society were restricted to what Lowenthal (1998, p. 49) called 'bearing and birthing the men.' 'Just a wife and mother?' asked an English post-it note. 'It's a good thing she gave birth to an important man or she wouldn't be this museum', an exasperated response to the only mention of a woman, after metres of nothing, in Canada.

The second can be described as "relational" thinking, that is, how we are made to make "relations" or connections where in fact, they do not exist. This is captured poignantly in a post-it note conversation between two participants in Canada:

> 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 those as a woman?

How and what we see is conditioned by what we expect to see because of normalisations making feminised objects equal seeing women even when they are not there. Equally interesting is this format of writing a dialogue on the post-it notes which was consistent in both countries. This is an example of "dialogic looking", whereby 'viewers consciously articulate questions that arise while they look' (Wilson MacKay & Monteverde, 2003, p. 42). Reading this conversation aloud to larger group as we debriefed the Hack, sparked further conversations: 'It is unbelievable to me how [things like] this have pacified me all these years. I thought I was part of history [in this museum] but in fact, I never was, none of us is [to all the women]. We are just lace and pottery.' Relationality also raised concerns about "common sense" in terms of 'what we are just to absorb as the way things were' (Canadian debriefing comment). Together we explored how 'common sense is itself ideologically and discursively constructed; the obvious and the natural are not givers of meaning' (Porter, 1991, p. 105). They are produced and re-produced and we are all to often complicit in this game.

Seeing invisibility and feeling absence

Aesthetic experiences teach us to see and not to see and to feel and to not feel often in equal measure. Moreover, if we give meaning to something by representing it, as Hall (2013, p. 13) argues, 'then what does it mean, or rather what does it teach us, when something is either faint or not represented at all? If culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions then how does one "feel" when they are invisible or absent?' While invisibility and absence are similar, *Hack* participants unearthed how they were not always the same. Invisibility can be something there, but faint or indistinct. This was highlighted in three ways. Firstly, in this English post-it-note conversation:

> E: Oooh! It is Mary Martin
> O: Who?
> E: Exactly

Even when a woman artist's work is shown in the gallery, she is still like to be "faint" in the minds of the audience. Moreover, as noted above, there will be little written about her work on the labels that render her less faint. Pollock (1988) reminded us we have been taught well by these institutions that 'creativity is an exclusive masculine prerogative and that as a consequence, the term artist automatically refers to man' (p. 29). A second instance of invisibility comes in the form of stage crafting in Canada:

> The diorama of the woman's 'boudoir' was poorly lighted, dusky and maybe a bit suggestive. You had to look down and it was hard to see it. Next door the display of the man's red military uniform was elevated and very brightly lighted. I asked myself is this intentional? Maybe or maybe not but it screamed double standard. It sent a signal to my brain that said "this is important and this is not." (Debriefing session comment) (Pollock, 1988, p. 29)

Absence is total erasure but as Sartre (1963) reminded us, absence reveals reality, the reality of what is not present - the "unseen". The Hack provided tangible evidence of the absent, and this absence was experienced. In England, with deep sadness, a participant said 'There are no black women or Asian women to be seen. As a young non-white woman, where's my positioning in the gallery?'. Although they were far fewer as the gender bias was so palpable, this comment highlights an intersectionality of gender and race and how it is deeply felt. Later this participant used visualising through collage as a means explain 'that anger more than I can.'

Performing masculinity and femininity

When Berger (1972, p. 47) wrote, 'men act and women appear' (p. 47) he was drawing attention to the power of male performativity and agency. Just how deeply and frequently masculinities and femininities were being performed in the institutions astonished the Hack participants. In particular, what was being picked up was captured with precision in this Canadian post-it note comment: 'It is fascinating just how often men are made out to be the heroes in their own stories in this place! Who writes this stuff!?' (post-it note).

Indeed, heroism was, inevitably enough, noted again and again by participants. Stories and images were noted as 'vigorously masculine', as they unearthed repetitive tales of the 'genius innovator who makes world.' These stood in marked contrast to how women were displayed: 'Domesticated. A woman should be a homemaker. The title of the painting suggests that she should be quiet, understanding, nurturing, obedient: "Quiet Occupation"' (Post-it note comment, England). Others noted how often the gaze of women in portraits was 'diminutive', 'shy', or 'submissive.' There is "always an indirect gaze that portrays an obedient subordinance", stated a participant in England. A collage powerfully portrayed this through the cutting out and removal of women's eyes, thus removing their ability and any 'right to "see"'.

Figure 3: 'No right to see' (collage title, Huddersfield)
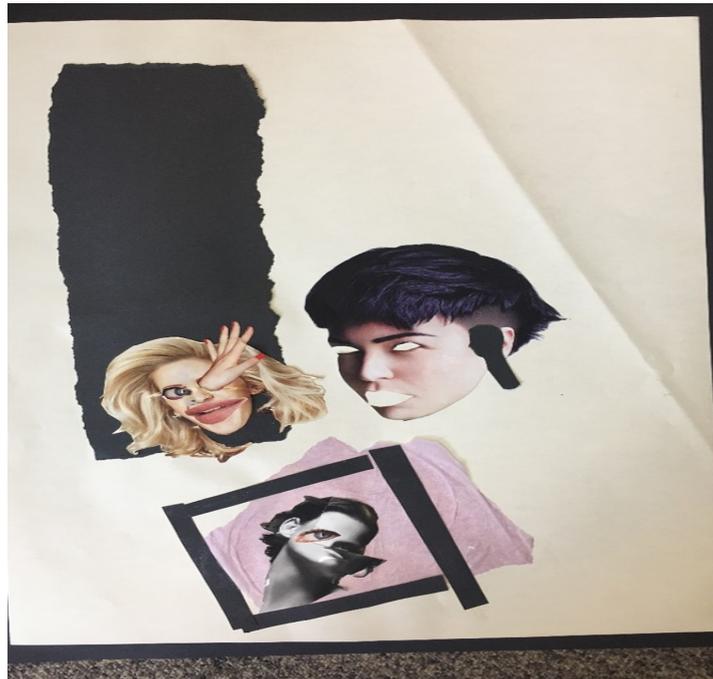
In discussions participants drew from their post-it notes to explain how the masculine and feminine representations were teaching them to believe 'women were weak, bidding creatures' (England) and to see men as 'muscularity [with the] right to dominate and control the world, including women' (Canada). The intersectionality of gender and class was also illuminated in observations, much like Porter (1991), of domestic women staff missing from the domestic portrayals, albeit the middle and upper class women featured were primarily engaged in "feminine" occupations of embroidery or genteel rituals of toilette. On this latter, a number of participants queried: 'What else did women do besides sit around in pretty clothes?' (England); 'Did women in the past do anything besides dress pretty?' (Canada). Debriefings focussed on how "disempowering" it was to see women either dismissed 'if they are in my class', one woman noted, or simply confined to doing "nothing". This raised the topic of the women's movement (including suffrage) and this was significant as many participants had not aligned themselves with the women's movement, nor feminism which one participant had queried before the *Hack* as 'really outdated and not really very necessary, right?'.

Just Ire

> What did I get from the *Hack*? White, able-bodied, heterosexual men "made" Canada. Indigenous people were just "here" so they don't count. No one was gay and by the way, women don't count either unless half-naked in a calendar for the purpose of titillating. That about sums it up. Shame on this museum. (Canadian debriefing comment)

One of the findings of this study was that the Hack has the ability to induce "anger" and while this can be a problem it is also a possibility. In Canada, for example, two visitors reading the post-it notes became extremely agitated and accused the students of 'defacing and disrespecting' the museum. They questioned upon what authority they were pasting their own thoughts and messages. In England, the gallery attendant queried why the

comments were 'not about art' but rather 'just political statements'. Students have also been subject to racist diatribes by visitors who laude colonial histories of male discovery and conquest: 'Those "Indians" have done nothing but benefit from "us"; "Women never took the risks like men to discover Canada and that is why they aren't in the museum.'

Problematically, these encounters are deeply unsettling for those who are subject to their hostility (and ignorance). However, they provide two concrete examples of somewhat abstract realities. The first is an insight in the "disciplinary power" of these institutions and their ability to instil in the public a great faith that does not enjoy being tested. The second is the types of racial and gendered assumptions these adult educators will face working in institutions and communities. Hack debriefings in Canada provided a space to discuss not only what happened, but also, pedagogical strategies that could respond. A pedagogy of possibility must give people the tools to deal with anger, sexism and racism (Manicom et al., 2012).

We were also often uplifted by other visitors who do appreciate our interventions. For example, a woman in England said, as she watched us removing the post it notes following a Hack: 'Oh, you are not taking those down? They have added so much to my visit.'

An even more positive sense of possibility was the high degree of what Freire (2004, p. 14) called 'just ire' or 'legitimate rage' we witnessed as the new realisations began to dawn, as the multiple misrepresentations, objectifications and absences began to emerge in institutions participants had trusted to be truthful and inclusive. Every Hack, we watch participants begin tentatively and then start literally to stomp from one display or diorama to next, gesticulate vigorously to companions, race up to us with comments, and scribble furiously onto the post-it notes. In England, numerous participants in the interviews spoke of being 'really infuriated' by 'the gender injustice' they had never seen before. In Canada, anger was manifest all over the post-it notes. For example, 'Damn you this is just male-centred colonialism. The land <u>was</u> 'settled'; it was carefully developed long before White, male Europeans arrived. Put <u>that</u> in your curatorial statement!' In an era of reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples in Canada, anger at stories that continue to suggest colonisers were 'a civilising presence' and continue to 'whitewash (literally) historical injustices' bodes well for their future as adult educators. As Freire (2004) argued, anger itself may not produce change but it is where hope lies.

Building on this amidst the anger and critique were wonderful moments of humour and laughter, as sarcasm and irony reigned and we poked fun at the clear ideological biases being unmasked. This too was deeply empowering, for as Hannah Arendt (1970) reminded us, 'the greatest enemy of authority… is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter' (p. 40).

Figure 4: Participant post-it note comment (England)
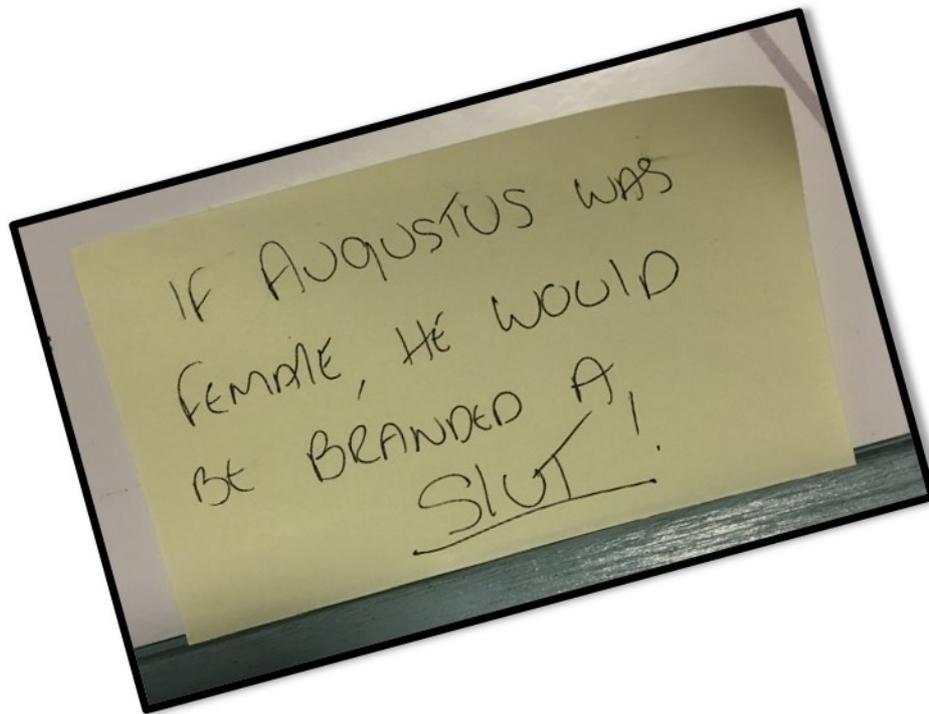
Transformation and the radical imagination

Cultivating an aesthetic imagination requires paying attention to what is right in front of us, and developing an understanding of what it is that we see. Cultivating a radical aesthetic imagination, to borrow from Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), is the ability to see through the present order, and we make common cause with others through encounters with the unexpected. We can argue that all of the findings by the participants of the Hack in terms of what they encountered were truly "unexpected". As one Canadian participant noted, 'it just went on and on and I never would have believed it before the Hack. We never expected to see this. We never expected to feel so angry but now I do, I am going to have do something about it.' As this comment suggests, for all the participants the Hack was a truly eye-opening experience and they could not believe they had never seen before what had become so clear. Further, in the interviews, participants used words such as 'powerful', 'thought-provoking', 'gripping' and particularly 'empowering' to describe the aesthetic experiences of the Hack. For some, new ways of seeing focussed on the institution: 'This is just patriarchy. Now you see it, now you don't and no museum will ever fool me again' (Canadian post-it note). For others, it was themselves and best articulated in the reflections of a male participant:

> Then: When I walked into the gallery I was a male, white, straight artist [who] hadn't recognised my privilege as much as I should.

> Now: I will start to look at art now on other levels. The social contexts of class, race, gender, sexuality are a very important aspect of art and art education (English comment).

Rose (2001) reminds us that the power of interpreting images is not that there will be a single truth, but that we become accountable to what we have learnt. As a pedagogy of possibility, the Hack gives participants new lenses of accountability as they call both the institution and themselves to account. Ranciere (2009) called this a form of emancipation

and he argued that it begins when we come to understand that "viewing" can not only transform how we see structures of domination and subjugation but instil in us a sense of power to act. But new revelations about ones' own privilege do not come without a certain amount of discomfort, and this we witnessed in some of the male participants. Disruptions to their power, whether they realised they had it or not meant they struggled, sometimes by saying the women 'were too combative' or 'well, that is just the way it is'. Possibility, however, is having to engage with our habitual ways of seeing, thinking, knowing and being in the world and to listen to those who question these seemed certainties.

Engaging possibility

The intelligence of adults to discern ideologies should never be underestimated, and it is most certainly not in the *Feminist Museum Hack*. But what we and other feminist cultural theorists and adult educators know is that patriarchal assumptions are embedded deeply in the fabric of our language, our histories, our visual representations. Museums provide perfect places to explore this, as they visualise and narrate epistemologies of mastery. Hiding these in plain sight influences how we see and know the world, and our sense of agency as women and 'the other'.

What we see from the findings is how the Hack ignites new ways of seeing and thinking. As participants engage more actively with their visual and discourse powers of analysis, they 'create, read, and respond to visual images' and this "visual" literacy givens them critical insights into the practices of meaning making in these major institutions (and how it goes beyond them) (Holloway, 2012, p. 150). As a pedagogy of possibility, the *Hack* disrupts the masculine gaze and unsettles its pretentions to common sense about whose artworks, stories, and experiences matter. As a pedagogy of possibility, the Hack enables the revelation of relations of power and calls into the question the storied and visualised assumptions that lurk in their shadows. Indeed, when 'feminism and museums collide' (Ashton, 2017, p. 43) we have the possibility to hone an oppositional gaze and radical imagination and to awaken just ire and relational thinking. We see and feel fragmentation, we name and re-name subjectivity. The Hack is also about the possibility of new transformational arenas, turning passive spaces of ideological absorption into active sites of embodied enquiry and resistance. It is a practice of hope, an aesthetic way to recognise possibility and, returning to Sartre (1963, p. 94), to imagine 'the presence of the future as that which is lacking.' Finally, findings show how the *Feminist Museum Hack* stimulates the imagination, and the imagination acts as a form of thinking the possible. This a significant for teachers and adult educators who will enter the political pedagogical struggle for gender justice and change.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] In Canada adult education is the term used. In England they use 'teacher education'.
[2] A version of this paper was published in Andragoška spoznanja in 2018. This paper is extended and altered to share empirical data from a study of Hacks with students and community groups in Huddersfield and Victoria.

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