

Public pedagogies of feminist activism: An exploration of the *Disobedient Women* exhibition
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Paper

Text

Our focus for this conference will be on findings from a study of an visual and narrative exhibition we curated entitled *Disobedient women: Defiance, resistance, and creativity past and present* in two art galleries. This exhibition was designed as a challenge to official narratives of Canadian history that focused on male heroism, acts of war and conquest and to museum and art gallery exhibition narratives that position men as central to Canada's history and push women to the periphery. *Disobedient women* rendered visible historical and contemporary forms of women's aesthetic activism.

Feminist adult educators have explored popular mediums as means of public pedagogy in the interests of women and as spaces of activism (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013; Roy, 2016). Mojab and Taber (2015) studied the power of 'memoir' to act as feminist public pedagogy, arguing that "community begins to be reestablished when women are able to remember together" (p. 32). In his framing of public pedagogy, Biesta (2012, p. 685) suggests public artistic interventions hold potential as unmediated "forms of interruption" for 'publicness', collective meaning making and learning. While no studies to date focus on exhibitions, Bartlett (2016) argues they are important because "they mark the significance of their subject;...being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally; being displayed publicly means being incorporated into the...memory of visitors" (p. 307). Exhibitions are in fact powerful 'plays of force' that do not simply disseminate knowledge, they actively construct it (Steeds, 2014). Bedford (2016) provides three lenses we used to explore how *Disobedient Women* transformed visitors' understandings of women's historical and contemporary activism: narrative (through stories), imagination (through connections) and aesthetics (through the visuals). Further, Bartlett (2016), Best (2016) and Fletcher (2008) outline other important elements we used to analyse the impact of feminist exhibitions: how they give women voice, encourage remembering and connecting and add new knowledge that incites women to act.

Collecting data through on-site comments cards, research forms, observations and follow-up interviews, we enquired into how *Disobedient women*, an unmediated collective public space, acted as a site of activist feminist public pedagogy. Findings show many instances of remembering and reminiscence with the past. However there were also discussions of new awareness around Indigenous women and sexism, and previously unseen connections made to the particular effects of colonialism on women. Others spoke of new understandings of 'feminism' and interruptions to beliefs that historical struggles had no contemporary times. In particular, artists were inspired to think about how they could use their own art practices as feminist activism. One visitor took offence to the word 'disobedient' -- aligning it reductively with children -- and another worried 'men might feel left out', but the majority of the 322 visitors

who took part in the study were energized by the visualisations of a radical movement that, as one visitor argued, “is not going away”.

Question: What can different lenses of gender, sexuality, culture and politics bring to our research?

Keywords: alternative narratives, feminist activism, exhibitions, public pedagogy, gender struggle

References

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