

## **Public pedagogies of feminist activism: An exploration of the *Disobedient Women* exhibition** **Darlene E. Clover and Kathy Sanford**

This paper shares the findings of our study of a feminist activist research exhibition entitled *Disobedient women: Defiance, resistance, and creativity past and present* that we had curated in two public art galleries in Victoria, British Columbia. It was designed to challenge government and mainstream discourses that positioned the history of Canadian Confederation as acts of male heroism, war, and conquest as well as persistent museum narratives that tell a similar story. *Disobedient women* thus aimed to render visible women's historical and contemporary aesthetic and other forms of disruption, rebellion and agency, to resurrect the lives, experiences and imaginations cancelled out in conventional, male-orientated displays.

Our study builds on feminist explorations of popular mediums as public pedagogy that work in the interests of women and as spaces of activism (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013; Roy, 2016). It is framed through lenses of public aesthetic interventions as important, unmediated "forms of interruption" and collective meaning making (Biesta, 2012, p. 685). Our study is also grounded in feminist explorations of exhibitions as significant ways to mark subjectivity. Exhibitions are powerful 'plays of force' that do not simply disseminate knowledge, they actively construct it (Steeds, 2014). Bedford (2016) provided three lenses that we used to explore the pedagogical potential of *Disobedient Women*: narrative (stories and memory), aesthetics (connections and feeling ) and imagination (inspiration and hope).

### **Exhibition Design**

*Disobedient Women* was a multi-media exhibition that told diverse stories of activism. It was framed as a place of encounter to give attention to individual women's stories *as a collective story*, considering the other side of history. A call for objects, artworks, stories, and so forth brought forth an array of significant artifacts. We commissioned eight artists to create works focused on the theme of *Disobedient Women*, resulting in videos, disobedient hand puppets, contemporary protest buttons, installations, and paintings. We tapped into activist feminist organisations and drew from the museum and university to fill in historical gaps. We interviewed Indigenous elders and also organised talks and arts-based workshops (puppetry and photography) for students and community members around the exhibition.

### **The study**

We asked: How did the *Disobedient Women* exhibition function as a collective space of feminist public pedagogy? How did visitors experience, learn from and feel the exhibition? What new knowledge and insights were gained? Data was collected through comment cards and more detailed research forms left at each site, journal entries of our observations, conversations with visitors, and follow-up interviews with visitors. Over three hundred people took part in the study. Data was analysed for themes relating to feminist public pedagogy.

### **Findings**

Galván (2010) reminds us that what structures and shapes our worldviews as women "is intricately tied to the 'living' past" (p. 347). This was made manifest by the frequency of the term 'resonance' and its centrality to why so many visited the exhibition and lingered or returned. Data showed many of these visitors had been involved in public actions as young women or as the children of feminist mothers. Linked to the remembering was connection. One participant spoke about the exhibition as returning her to a state of being "part of a larger struggle that matters as much today as it did then." For another, it came from her feelings of

exclusion and injustice: “[I came] because I was discriminated against as a young, university student – honours chemistry and [I am] enraged at the continuing domination of powerful...men...and [I am] delighted to be with women [who are] speaking truth to power.”

Biesta (2012) believes critical interruptions through art can “prepare the terrain for political action” (p. 694). We saw this in the frequency of the term ‘inspiration’ and also, its links to the idea of hope: “I came to get inspired. It gave me hope and strength to see these bad-ass women.” The exhibition also inspired others to think about how to use their own arts practice toward social or gender justice: “Art has such political power. I had never thought about art together with politics. I can do this with my own art.” For others the exhibition gave them courage and a renewed faith in women’s power to make change.

Ellsworth (2005) reminds us that public displays such as exhibitions are important pedagogically when they draw the audience into other realities and experiences. This was exemplified in this visitor comment: “it takes you beyond the two-dimensionality of most exhibitions...it kind of came out at the viewer and brought you in.” One visitor admitted to a limited view of activism (as violent and useless) and how *Disobedient Women* had opened her eyes to the diversity of ways women act/ed in public and its power. For another participant, “this exhibition showed me how speaking out and choosing not to follow the rules can be liberating.” For other visitors it was astonishment at just how many historical injustices remained today: “I never would have believed it. I was one of the women who thought equality was pretty much fixed. Geez.” Recognising feminism’s creative and playful political inventiveness is important to challenge refrains that it is a relic of the past and “implicitly unattractive and embittered” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 157).

## Conclusion

*Disobedient women* was an important space of public pedagogy because it illuminated the power of activism, encouraged critical reflection, promoted new understandings and insights, gave voice to the silenced and put historical memory to the service of gender justice. For many visitors this exhibitions affirmed their past, the reasons why women spoke out and need to continue to do so. It was also a space where Indigenous women could connect with culture or spend time with like-minded women. *Disobedient Women* acted as a source of inspiration for new forms of ‘aesthetic activism’, allowed the entry of new subjectivities, instilled gender conscious. It also allowed for new understandings of activism and particularly, feminism’s ability for critique and defiance, humour and hope. We need sites of feminist activism that will ask the ethical questions of how to live better in an unjust and unequal world, how we create relationships with others that are more equal, how we support those who are not supported and how to keep going against narratives that seem to have become as solid as walls (Ahmed, 2017).

## Selected References

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