

In Defiance: An exhibition as feminist adult education
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Abstract: This paper shares reflections on *In Defiance*, a feminist photography project with Indigenous women curated as a public exhibition at the Legacy Gallery, Victoria. We acknowledge the challenges and limitations of this project, whilst arguing the dialogic potential of exhibitions to act as tools of feminist adult education.

Our study is grounded in two concurrent contexts. The first is shifts in art museums away from problematic legacies of elitism and exclusion toward new exhibitions and pedagogical activities responsive to a troubled world (e.g. Clover, 2015; Janes, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Steedman, 2012). The second context is the current backlashes, stereotyping and other misrepresentations of women, Indigenous women and feminism. Bringing these together we asked ourselves how art museums, through their systems of representation (exhibitions and artworks) were acting as public pedagogical sites that contribute to gender justice and change?

In this paper, we share one response in the form of *In Defiance*, a photography project that aimed to re-represent Indigenous women through their own eyes that was publicly exhibited at the Legacy Gallery, Victoria. Darlene reflects on *In Defiance* as a feminist researcher and adult educator who included this exhibition as part of a major conference she co-organised and a graduate course. Lindsay shares reflections as the artist, and on her various educational activities around the exhibition. Tracey reflects from the position of student focussing on Indigeneity, feminism, adult education and museums. We draw attention to some of the challenges and limitations of *In Defiance*, but equally, illustrate this exhibition as an important space of feminist public pedagogy and dialogic praxis.

Representation and/as public pedagogy

Concise Oxford Dictionary definitions of the verb ‘to represent’ describe it as calling into mind by portrayal, standing for or embodying. Culture is a key space of ‘representation’, what Hall, Evans and Nixon (2013) refer to as a set of practices through which social understandings, identity, and meaning are constructed and shared. Culture is as much about feelings and emotions as it is about “concepts and ideas” (p. xix). Giroux (2004) positions culture as ‘public pedagogy’, defining it as a dynamic process where understandings of self and society and meanings are produced within a network of complex power relations and institutional practices. Culture is thus “a circuit of power, ideologies, and values” that creates and circulates representations central to narratives, discourses, metaphors, and images that exercise themselves as powerful pedagogical forces “over how people think of themselves and their relationship to society and to others” (p. 62).

Art museums are by their very essence sites of representation and cultural public pedagogy. Whether consciously or not, they play a central role in shaping our understandings of art, society and even gender (Hall et al, 2013). Feminist theorist Marshment (1993) thus reminds us art museums and their practices of representation are political issues, feminist issues. Problematically, for the most part, the representations of women as shown in art museums have been shaped through masculine lenses (e.g. Boutilier & Bruce, 2015), resulting in stereotyping, idealizing, and/or condemning women in ways that maintain patriarchal and colonial power. For example, certain types of dioramas can “mark [women’s] bodies with both sex and race”, and position them as victims and historyless (Penn & Lee, 2012). Yet Hall et al (2013) and Giroux (2004) note how culture can act as a space of

negotiation and contestation. There is evidence that art museums are becoming such spaces (e.g. Clover, 2015). However, Pollock (2003) reminds us that until cultural spaces such as art galleries are able to move beyond “the power politics of Eurocentric, phallogocentric ...universalization” (p. xxvii), they will be unable to contribute pedagogically to the type of gender justice and change we need today.

In Defiance

In Defiance by Iroquois-Mohawk artist Lindsay Delaronde is a photography project curated at the Legacy Gallery, Victoria. The installation consisted of self-portraiture through photography and created an opportunity for a group of Indigenous women to explore their identity through photography, and to provide a forum for public cultural education and learning. The photographic series consisted of 32 individual photographs of Indigenous women. Goals of the project sought to empower Indigenous women and their capability to express and reclaim their natural sovereign powers of eroticism, sensuality and vulnerability. Together, the individual photographs combine to create an empowering series that deconstructs and dismantles mainstream representations of First Nations women, challenges stereotypes through public portrayals of the women’s authentic selves as diversity, powerful and vulnerable and re-claims the word *squaw*. This feminist adult education project provided a platform for identity making, re-imagining, risk but also, a sense of trust and safety for creative self-expression and social representation.

Darlene’s findings

This process of artist and participants created an exhibit that was powerful and diverse on many levels, aesthetic, emotional, embodied, [and] spiritual. From this exhibit I learned that a mindful, engaged, and intentional process is able to flow into a product that is sincere, diverse, critical, and beautiful. (Participant)

I included *In Defiance* as part of a conference I co-organised in October 2016 entitled *Women and Leadership: Radical conversations about gender justice, art and reconciliation*. I felt it spoke to the radical intentionality of this feminist conference and provided the new understandings we require to learn to live on Indigenous land. For the same reasons, I included it a part of a graduate course entitled *Women, leadership and learning*. To gather data following the conference and the course, I carried out a study of how the exhibition had enabled new understandings about Indigenous women and the gallery space. Five students and 22 conference participants (two male) took part in email interviews.

None of the study respondents had really thought about how images and displays work to make meaning or the close links they shared between identity and knowledge. Displays are “vehicles of meaning” and representation through photographic displays, as Hall et al (2013, p. xxi) remind us, is a language, a discursive practice that communicates and renders visible, decodes and interprets. What the images communicated and interpreted were how Indigenous women saw themselves as fluid community, rather than as single entities, and they taught and decoded contemporary Indigeneity in society that many respondents admitted they knew little about. However, many other respondents argued it was not the photographs alone but the combination of these, the written stories that accompanied them, and engagement with Lindsay who spoke about the process of artistic creation that was the most powerful in terms of their own learning and ability to read the language and meaning of the works. Hall et al (2013) remind us that objects can be just objects until they are instilled with ‘meaning’ and this came from the written narratives but perhaps more so, the pedagogical process facilitated by Lindsay as she took people on the journey through the display. As one participant noted, “for me, this was indeed feminist adult education. It is

definitely an initiative to bring change and transform society the way we want.” Another argued that what she learned from the visit to the gallery is that “adult education is not complete without gender equality.”

Building on this but changing track somewhat, one male respondent noted that how he became conscious “of the way that the male gaze has shaped the way that women see their bodies”, yet he also felt that despite that, “this group of Indigenous women retained a strong sense of their own sensuality” that was different to what men may see/want or entrenched stereotypes. Yet despite the power of the self-representation process, socio-gendered conditioning did have an impact on who chose to take part in the project, and how she positioned or ‘(un)masked’ herself as Lindsay takes up below. One participant articulated it like this: “The only area that troubled me was the lack of diversity presented in the images. The artist briefly addressed this in her talk, however I felt that a broader diversity of gender presentations and bodies would have made the exhibit even more powerful.” Other respondents argued that not only was the process and the exhibition empowering for those involved, but that it was empowering to them: “The images made me realize that as women and human beings, we have a voice that we need to use to bring to the surface the problems we encounter in our societies. Others were “surprised” to find a gallery exhibiting this type of gendered, political work and as one noted, “I always think of museums as places that are you know, neutral.” Of course there is no such thing as ‘neutrality’ and art galleries are far from being neutral, but rather, deeply political projects (e.g. Mayo & Borg, In Press). But the role the art museum was playing as a ‘safe’ place to challenge sexism was noted by many as this comment captures: “The exhibition was a platform where women came together to share the struggles of their past... Space is very important for women - the art gallery was such a space that is very much needed - a place where these women felt safe, protected and comfortable to share their stories.” Yet others picked up on what participant called “The sadness in the eyes of some of the women” despite the powerful impact of the project. She argued that what she learned is that although “everyone is talking about gender equality in the 21st century, women, especially Indigenous women, are still so vulnerable and always bounded by traditional thinking and social rules.”

Lindsay’s Reflections

The sexualisation and exploitation of female representation within mainstream society has disregarded the rich cultural existence that Indigenous women have maintained through traditional knowledge, social roles and power. I feel it is time to push the continuum of those teachings forward to expose vulnerability and sensuality so that eroticism may be reclaimed through the matriarchal body.

Lindsay’s Artist Statement

In Defiance emerged three years ago from a personal reflection on healing and sexuality. I wanted to extend this opportunity for self-exploration to women in my community. Recruitment became an organic process that included women of all ages, and nations. The process was as important as the final product. Therefore, a critical step was to develop strategies that provided support to women in the project. I set up support resources as they examined their sexuality or confronted any trauma-related issues.

As an emerging professional artist this project has changed my work. When first developing *In Defiance*, I did not have a clear vision how this new process would materialize. Yet, I intuited this work as important and revolutionary in the sense that I was creating a platform for healing – safety – and to openly challenge negative stereotypes – the risk. Some of the powerful ‘pedagogical’ outcomes of *In Defiance* included forming healthy

relationships and learning how to organize strong gender-focused collaborations. One of the challenges was a woman who felt she had to hide behind masks because she wanted to be a school teacher and felt having such a sensual and provocative image of her self in public might hinder that ambition. Other women did not take part, as they were uncomfortable with their bodies in world of masculinized ideal body types. This created 'a homogeneity' of youth and body type in the series despite the diversity of self-representations, which Darlene uncovered in her study of participants.

Adult education played a central role to this project. I developed a number of creative programmes and activities around the exhibit. This work was a natural outcome of my aim to promote positive community. As I spoke about and showed the exhibition, I helped conference participants, students and other visitors to extract the bigger themes of *In Defiance* - of negative stereotypes, misrepresentation and questions about identity. Artist talks, conference panels, creative workshops that included poetry, and cornhusk doll and mask making workshops, gave people an opportunity to be creative within the context of *In Defiance*. motivated participants in their own creative processes.

The Gallery was a deliberate educational space for the presentation of knowledge through careful curating. Some visitors were drawn to the organized nonformal educational activities but the thought and careful delivery of the exhibit also acted as an important space for informal learning. People who wanted to engage further in learning would naturally lean into the educational activities but it became clear that anybody who entered the exhibition felt the powerful intentionality of the works as pedagogical without having to attend workshops. Yet one is never better than another. Essentially, participants needed to understand who accumulated the knowledge, curated it and their sources so learners could move away from a removed anthropological or art historian analysis of the exhibit, which is what is so often 'expected' in galleries.

The Legacy honoured and engaged in respectful collaboration. The execution of the exhibit had to be done right and it was because I was given control. The work had to be represented in a good way. Visitors deserved accurate and authentic information and a creative experience of image and story. A gallery should not be a conservative space where touch and talk are prohibited. Creating artwork within the walls (e.g. corn husk dolls) breaks the sterile atmosphere of a gallery, and lays it open as an exciting space of experimentation and imagination, of disruption through new representations and narratives respective and inclusive of Indigenous women.

Tracey's Reflections

As a student researcher, I am interested in how art museums are activated to become places of critical and feminist adult learning. I was particularly keen to observe The Legacy as a space of public pedagogy on the opening evening of the *In Defiance* exhibit.

While affirming assertions that museums are by default educational spaces (e.g. Hein, 2012; Steedman, 2012), I challenge Falk's concept of free-choice learning (2006) in museums, where he argued that meaning making was solely to "support personal identity [as] the primary driving motivation behind virtually all museum visits" (p. 153). Motivated by the proposal that museums can function as pedagogical sites to collectively challenge narratives of injustice and re-educate the public through difficult dialogues, I entered the *In Defiance* opening show with curiosity.

The open Gallery doors emitted warmth and light, beckoning me in from the cool October evening. My senses were infiltrated by celebratory tones of warmth and vitality. Yet, movement by guests, tones and voices fell away as I faced the word *Squaw* in bold lettering on a Romanesque column, centrally placed in the gallery. I was reminded of the deep injustices that fuelled the exhibition and the intentionality of Lindsay's artwork to challenge

negative and all too often, life-threatening stereotypes of Indigenous women. *Squaw*, originally the title for her exhibit, asked guests to leave comfortable and known assumptions behind and enter a potential contact zone, the “physical and conceptual space in which cultures come together and grapple with meaning and authority” (Brock, 2015, p. 134). The contrast between the architecture of the Legacy gallery, originally a Bank of Toronto, and the photographs of women in vivid natural settings furthered a disorientating space.

The opening *In Defiance* was grounded in Indigenous ceremony, and invited every guest into active participation. Philips (2011) argues that when museums provide a place for communities to create relationships, they are opened up to a fluid and active re-imagining of their intentions and pedagogical value. The eloquence with which the women in the photographs spoke about their participation in the project and the vibrations of drums that paid homage to murdered and missing Indigenous women created an atmosphere of respect, vulnerability and accountability. Guests were generously invited to share their reflections and responses to the activities. The result was an Indigenous centred engagement, “a structure of support mechanisms that include[d] personal responsibility for the collective and reciprocally, the collective concern for individual existence” (Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffrey, 2004, p.5). The creation of community that evening, within the physical boundaries of the Legacy, yet equally bound by structures of women and Indigeneity, beckoned settler and Indigenous guests into a collective pedagogical space for learning to interrupt Eurocentric expectations of museums. The outcome aligned with feminist adult education as a practice of resistance and transformation with an aim to stimulate collective meaning making and knowledge co-creation, critique and debate, through a praxis of gender justice and change and in this case, Indigenous women’s justice. Their testimonies pointed to the powerful composition of the photographs and the exhibition as acts of Indigenous female resurgence that demanded viewers’ reflect upon their positionality in structures that support gender inequality. As Razak argues, “when we depend on story telling either to reach across differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between the tale and hearing it” (cited in Clover, Butterwick & Collins, 2016, p. 11).

Conclusions

Feminist interventions in arts and [culture] are not some nice, optional...add on.
Pollock, 2003, p. xxvii

Pollock (2003) reminds us “feminist interventions take part in the profound attempt to shift the very bases of our thought and knowledge systems” (p. xxvii). *In Defiance* acted as a powerful discursive feminist platform for that shift, a space of what Styles (2002) calls dialogic learning and creative thinking about Indigenous women in society today. As a form of culture and feminist public pedagogy, the exhibition and adult education activities provided visitors with challenging images and testimonies that destabilized stereotypical notions of Indigenous women. The exhibition and pedagogical activities served as dynamic forms of ‘truth telling’ (Lonetree, 2009), where the vulnerable courage and self-sensuality of the women in the photos stood in marked contrast to pervasive misrepresentations that victimize and silence, render invisible and undermine. The artists embraced their female body as a vital medium for storytelling, expressing identity and reflecting individual and collective experience. The process was empowering through the complete control of the women had over composition, and their own stories. Yet even within this powerful project, problematic social constructions of women’s bodies were played out in terms of who took part and who remained behind a mask. But overall, the play between image and text created a new type of

embodied ‘voice’ that compelled new ways of seeing and thinking, and the gallery became an experimental space for both colonial disruption and critique, as well as gender justice and change.

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