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### Museums, Feminism, and Social Impact

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the history of women within the context of the museum institution; a history that has often encouraged collaboration and empowerment of marginalized groups. It will interpret the history of women and museums and the impact on the institution by surveying existing literature on feminism and museums and the biographies of a few notable female curators. As this paper hopes to encourage global thinking, museums from outside the western sphere will be included and emphasized. Specifically, it will look at organizations in the Middle East and that exist in only a digital format. This will lead to an analysis of today's feminist principles applied specifically to the museum and its link with online platforms. Issues surrounding online platforms will be presented with given examples of museum faux-pas. It will conclude with an analysis of an exemplar feminist museum—The Girl Museum. This paper will explore the topic of women and gender rights within the museum on a global scale; however, it is important to note that other historically silenced groups can also benefit from museum empowerment.

State University of New York  
College at Buffalo  
Department of History and Social Studies Education

Museums, Feminism, and Social Impact

A Thesis in Museum Studies

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Degree of

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## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	4
Feminist Curators and Lasting Impressions .....	35
Margaret Mead .....	37
Dorothy Canning Miller .....	45
Mildred Constantine .....	53
Lowery Stokes Sims .....	60
Internationalism: Global Curators .....	66
Raneen Bukhari .....	76
Adelina von Furstenberg .....	81
Censorship, Social Movements, and the Impact on Museums .....	88
The Girl Museum .....	119
Conclusion .....	136
Bibliography .....	139
List of Illustrations .....	147

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) To explore the history of women within the context of the museum institution; a history that has often encouraged empowering a specific group of people. The group being empowered can be defined as the artists who contributed to an exhibition, the community in which the exhibition was held, or the curators who put the show together. The group who benefits from the museum changes, but the role women play in creating that dynamic remained the same. (2) To interpret how the history of women and museums have impacted the institution and what the institution can learn from these women as the institution strives to make meaningful engagement with museum staff, the artists and histories of those presented, and the greater community in which the museum exists. This will ultimately be done by looking specifically at the relationship between the museum, women, and online platforms.

In order to explore these issues a survey of existing feminist literature—specifically in regard to museums—will be presented, followed by a series of brief biographies of a few notable female curators who broke barriers in the field and their lasting impact on today’s methods of curation and social movements. As this paper hopes to encourage global thinking, museums from outside the western sphere will be included and emphasized. Specifically it will look at organizations in the Middle East and examples that exist in only a digital format.

An analysis of today’s feminist principles will be applied specifically to the museum and its link with online platforms. Issues surrounding online platforms will be presented with given examples of museum faux-pas. It should be noted that while technology has been an undeniable tool for all those that interact with it, there are still kinks to be worked out as museums learn how to respond to the ease and proliferation of criticism that the web allows for.

Following the critique of museums' interaction through online platforms, there will be a solution offered in the form of an example. The exemplar institution—The Girl Museum—is a digital museum that will be discussed in great detail. Digital institutions offer examples of how museums—both physical and digital—should handle their online presences as we continue to become a more global and interconnected community.

The literature review will provide a survey of relevant feminist material in an effort to provide insight into the topic of museums as platforms for empowerment. Empowerment for the purposes of this paper will be defined as increasing the degree of autonomy and self-determination for individuals and the communities in which they interact. Specifically, this topic will be examined through a feminist lens as it provides a point of reference for all materials and offers a plethora of examples in regard to gender rights.

Within the context of this paper, feminism will be defined using bell hooks' intersectional feminist theory; that is, feminism is as much concerned with issues of racism and classism as it is with issues of sexism. This is the definition that many recent scholars within the field have used for their own works, including Jenna C. Ashton, Ashley Remer, Elke Krasny, and Hilde Hein. This specific theory of feminism argues that all social classifications are interconnected and ignoring one in favor of the other creates oppression for all communities involved.<sup>1</sup>

These communities can be based on any number of factors including, but not limited to, gender, sexuality, race, and income. This definition was chosen for its acceptance in the field of feminist theory and its easy relatability to the museum world. While this paper will use feminism and women's rights as its platform for all arguments, it should be noted that museums as arenas

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, "A Movement to End Sexist Oppression" in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 18-33.

for empowerment are not limited to issues surrounding gender rights and feminism. Other “isms” such as racism, ageism, and classism can also be addressed in the same manner as feminism through the museum.

Ultimately the aim is to explore the relationship women have had with the museum institution and look at current trends in the museum field. These trends include things like feminist curating, digital museums, and the work of women to empower both themselves and others through the museum institution. This paper does not argue that women are the only ones capable of doing this work, but rather uses them as an example to give voice to a group that historically has been less noticed for their contributions while simultaneously working to create great feats in their fields. I assert that museums should be able to aid in this empowerment by giving more visibility to marginalized groups and offering them a stage to share their voice. As stated, this paper will explore the topic of women and gender rights within the museum on a global scale; however, it is important to note that other historically silenced groups can also benefit from museum empowerment.

## Literature Review

Museums with feminist agendas can be traced back to the 19th century, a period in which neither the museum nor feminism were widely accessible to the general public. Lori D. Ginzberg's 1985 dissertation on women and benevolent societies captures the importance of women's movements in regard to societal changes and established institutions. Ginzberg emphasizes that the early benevolent movements relied on principles that were typically viewed as "feminine" in nature. These reformers advocated a reassertion of "self-denial, humility, and benevolence."<sup>2</sup> As will be illustrated in due course, this is a theme that reoccurs in other literature, both contemporary and historic, regarding the issue.

Ginzberg states that women represented the highest form of morality and thus "womanhood" was the force that drove national transformation during the gilded age in American history.<sup>3</sup> This notion of "womanhood" would influence female rights advocates during the suffragette years and then later during the various feminist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Variety amongst the benevolent movements was vast. Some of the movements fought against liquor, lust, or slavery while others used them as a means to start charitable organizations.<sup>4</sup> Despite the assortment of interests, women were the constant between the various societies. Ginzberg concludes that even in the male-dominated benevolent societies, middle-class women were the ones who "demonstrated the power inherent in an assertion of their own supported moral virtue."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, "Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality and Politics in the Northeastern United States, 1820-1885" (PhD diss. Yale University, 1985), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 30.



It is stated that women in the benevolent societies of the 1830s-50s often removed themselves from class distinction when working towards a cause.<sup>6</sup> Class was viewed as an issue for men and family units—when a group of women were together alone, they became a classless entity. This attitude came from the fact that the majority of women during the era believed that they should all aspire to be benevolent workers, visions of morality, and embracers of femininity.<sup>7</sup> This gave women a sense of power and autonomy and led to the belief that all women were members of the same “sisterhood.” This sisterhood prompted the suffragettes to pursue economic and political rights for all women— not just women of a certain class.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, these women were working towards female empowerment and would contribute substantially to the growing movement that would sweep the country in the following decades—that movement being the suffragette crusade.

According to Ginzberg, after the Civil War men began to shove women out of the benevolent institutions they had worked so hard to create. This led to the institutions becoming more hierarchal in nature and thus forced women to seek out benevolent work in more “feminine” causes. These feminine issues were mainly concerned with cultural work. Marjorie Schwarzer, a reviewer of Ginzberg’s dissertation, wrote that the woman of this era found the developing field surrounding museums to be a perfect fit for their newly developed organizational skills and passion for public service.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Schwarzer, “Women in the Temple: Gender and Leadership in Museums” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy Levin (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 18.

This is the quote that first introduced me to Ginzberg’s work, but I have been unable to find the exact point where Ginzberg states this and have come to the conclusion that Schwarzer was interpreting the work as a whole rather than referencing one specific point.

Dianne Sachko Macleod expands upon Ginzberg's ideas and narrows it down to focus more closely on women and stewardship. Sachko Macleod's concentration is focused on the history of women's collecting habits and the influence this has had on advancing women's political and social rights. Similar to Ginzberg, she focuses on American women during the 1800s and continues her study up to the year 1940. This, Sachko Macleod argues, is about the time when multiple *elite* women began to turn their decorating hobbies into something that signified social, political, and cultural change.<sup>10</sup> Sachko Macleod is primarily concerned with wealthy women as they were the ones who had the means to purchase and donate valuable goods that were then donated to future museums. The women that Sachko Macleod was studying were no longer a part of the same "sisterhood" that early women's rights advocates were as discussed by Ginzberg. The women in Sachko Macleod's writings had already formed various prejudices based on class, race, etc.

Early women collectors were given the freedom to display their items however they wished. This was done in a carefully thought out—although rather chaotic—manner. Sachko Macleod uses Phoebe Hearst's Music Room as an example. Hearst—a famous early women's rights activist who was active from the 1880s through the 1910's—had a wild mix of tapestries, ceramics, and other decorative arts. She paired these decorative pieces with traditional paintings to create a colorful and eccentric collection for her walls (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> Hearst is one of the best early examples of women using activism and collecting habits as a platform for empowerment.

*Figure 1 Interior Hacienda del Pozo de Verona ca. 1900 Pleasanton California.*  
[http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/anthro/3founders1\\_hacienda.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/anthro/3founders1_hacienda.html)

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<sup>10</sup> Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800-1940*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



Figure 1 Interior Hacienda del Pozo de Verona ca. 1900, Pleasanton California  
[http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/anthro/3founders1\\_hacienda.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/anthro/3founders1_hacienda.html)

Hearst's methods for displaying work can provide an introduction to the practice of feminist theory within a museum institution.

As Sachko Macleod writes, "it was important to women like Hearst to weave artworks into the fabric of the home to comfort them, satisfy their fantasies, and allow them to express their self-identity."<sup>12</sup> Having the ability to display whatever they wanted gave women a sense of control. Dollhouses also became popular during this era as women yearned to have something to call their own. As they were given more freedom over the domestic sphere, the homes in which

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 10.

they lived became something of a life-sized dollhouse. Wealthy American women during the Reconstruction Era began to collect luxury items in excess as a means to form independent identities.<sup>13</sup> This continued through the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Hearst was not only concerned with her own self-determination, but also worked to support women's betterment through employment in the arts; it seems that she advocated working behind the scenes to educate children and young women with the hope that this would instill a slow but sure change in the suffrage movement and other benevolent causes.<sup>14</sup> As Ginzberg noted in her book, this was common throughout the 1800s and was why many women were hesitant to involve themselves in political movements.<sup>15</sup> This is something that will be paralleled in the present and discussed during the section of the paper dedicated to women in the Middle East.

Hearst used her collection to aid in the advancement of women's rights through her involvement with the University of California. She sponsored scholarships for women, financed archaeological digs, and contributed to various architectural projects.<sup>16</sup> Arguably the greatest program Hearst created was the Hearst Domestic Industries. This was a sort of school that helped women to learn needlework, sewing, and other vocational skills for women of working class background that wanted to help supplement their family income or gain financial independence. The skills these women learned could then be used to help finance their future schooling. It gave them a platform to interact and learn with one another, sharing ideas and gaining skills that they would use when working towards bettering themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>15</sup> Ginzberg, "Women and the Work of Benevolence," 221.

<sup>16</sup> Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives*, 116.

Despite the early influence women had on museums, the troubles facing them in the industry would continue for decades. Instances of their struggles are documented in multiple essays written by those working in the field during this time. While there have been attempts to compile essays on women and museums, these attempts have been few and far between. One of the first attempts was titled *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* edited by Jane R. Glasser and Artemis A. Zenetou. This collection of essays was in direct response to the Smithsonian Institution's 1986 conference, "The Changing Roles of Women in Museums." The editors invited the presenters of the conference to share their presentation essays while encouraging those who had simply attended the conference to write responses to the presentations they attended. The result was this 1994 publication. Despite being well over 25 years old, many of the essays in this collection still hold relevance and provide insight to the history and development of women's changing roles in museums.

*Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* gives a wonderful account of the historical development of women working in museums. It offers many firsthand accounts of women working during the 1940s-1980s. Claudia Brown's foreword of the book details her experience growing up in the 1950s and entering the museum world in the 1970s. She notes how in the early years of her career it was still common to view women and their professional roles as one that simply existed to support men and their more prestigious positions.<sup>17</sup> The women's sphere of the industry involved educating the young and tidying up the museum. The parallel between the work force and the domestic sphere were very much apparent. This led women to find work as educators, curatorial assistants, and registrars while men were the lead curators,

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<sup>17</sup> Claudine Brown, "Foreword" in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Jane R. Glasser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institute, 1994), XIV.

directors, and decision makers. This was not limited to the museum industry; women as supporting figures was a phenomenon in all fields. However, this arrangement was even more obvious when women were given positions as volunteers rather than paid employees. Brown notes how it was common for the work done by women in the museum world to be seen as a hobby rather than an occupation. She states that the change in mindset would be a slow process.

Kendal Taylor's essay "Pioneering Efforts of Early Museum Women" is the first to appear in the book *Gender Perspectives* and it continues where Sachko Macleod left off on the development of the museum world. She writes about various museums during the 1930s through the 1990s and identifies three generations of women that emerged during this time span. The first group was heavily influenced by World War II. These women fell into jobs that had been previously unavailable to them. While the men were at war, the women had to take control in order to ensure that all of the companies and institutions that our country relied on kept operating efficiently. The women who found work in the museum world were often highly specialized; they were well-educated historians, scientists, and anthropologists.<sup>18</sup> After the war, men began to reenter the work force and acquire jobs in the museum field. This cycle is similar to what happened after the Civil War when men returned from the front and began to seek out the jobs women had created in the benevolent societies. It seems to be a reoccurring phenomenon. Men seemed to have the attitude that women were simply acting as place holders for them, regardless of whether or not the women were the ones who created the jobs in the first place.

After the men returned from WWII, a second generation of women in the field emerged. These women were generalists whose flexibility in job description led them to begin organizing

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<sup>18</sup> Kendall Taylor, "Pioneering Efforts of Early Museum Women" in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Jane R. Glasser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institute, 1994), 11.

collections, developing public programming, and worked to define the museum as we understand it today.<sup>19</sup>

The final generation mentioned by Taylor spanned from the 1970s to the 1990s. It is the generation that wrote the essays for *Gender Perspectives*. These women were university trained and drawn to the museum due to its intellectual and humanitarian value.<sup>20</sup>

Taylor's essay goes on to discuss the various women involved in the early development of the museum. She cites the early 1900s as the start of their involvement. Taylor was writing before the availability of Sachko Macleod's publications, which identified important women collectors going back to the mid-1700s.

Taylor reiterates the point that women were supporters when she notes how there was a stigma surrounding women who accepted compensation for cultural work.<sup>21</sup> This appears again and again throughout the collection of essays, and perhaps it is most succinctly put in a quote from a seminar presented by Marc Pachter and quoted by Jean Weber:

“Once it became allowable for women to work in an intellectual arena, they naturally came to museums because, in American society, cultural work is traditionally women's work... in the United States, culture was often considered frivolous. And as something frivolous it was consigned largely to women.”<sup>22</sup>

Why was, and still largely is, cultural work viewed as frivolous? Weber concludes that this is not an issue regarding women in the museum world, but rather how American society views cultural institutions as a whole. She notes that there is a significant portion of the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Weber, “Changing Roles and Attitudes” in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Jane R. Glasser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institute, 1994), 33.

population that views museums as elitist and nonessential institutions. However, it should be noted this is not a phenomenon limited to the United States. A similar mindset exists globally as will be illustrated in the discussion of Middle Eastern museums later in the paper.

The editors of *Gender Perspectives* make the claim in the preface that up until the 1990s the museum world ignored feminism and inequalities. The 1970s saw an increase in awareness about the issues, but it did not go as far as desired. Despite their inability to acknowledge these issues, women and minority groups have always been vital to the development and administration of museums. Museums have been largely shaped by women and thus it seems like museums are almost inherently feminist and are completely unaware of this fact. Therefore, it seems that they are the perfect platform to experiment with different means of cultural empowerment.

There is an indisputable parallel between women's rights, the various progressive movements, and the development of the museum as already stated in the analysis of Ginzberg and Sachko Macleod's writings on the subject. The following analysis of work focuses on more recent museum development in an effort to help prove that point.

In the 1970s there were many new art organizations springing up that focused on different media, artists, and audiences than traditional museums. Mary Schmidt Campbell was the first female director of the Studio Museum at Harlem and recounts the pressure she felt in the role. She gives a compelling account of her experience at the museum and notes how she and many other women working during the post-second wave feminism viewed themselves as indispensable to their work. Her essay, titled "Breaking the Cycles of Exclusion," and Jean Weber's essay, "Changing Roles and Aptitudes," both assert this notion of indispensability. Campbell describes how she felt in 1977 when she assumed the role as director of the museum:



“When I first arrived at the Studio Museum in Harlem, I saw an opportunity to realize my personal ambition to become an art historian and a curator. The Studio Museum in Harlem was a vehicle through which I could establish a professional presence. Encouraged by the fact that I had one other staff person (we were the only art historians with advanced degrees at the museum, and I was the only person who also had museum experience), I developed a sense of hubris that exaggerated my value in relation to most aspects of the museum.”<sup>23</sup>

She describes her increasing work load and stress level which led to a decline in her health. Campbell was essentially running the museum by herself. By her own evaluation, she had successfully alienated capable staff members and was single-handedly controlling all programs, exhibitions, and administrative duties. Eventually Campbell came to the realization that she needed to change her mindset. She goes on to say that when she finally hired a capable deputy director it became clear to her for the first time that while she *was* a successful director she was *not* an indispensable one. There is always someone else out there that is just as capable, if not more so, at doing the job.

Weber elaborates further on this point by noting how professional women of the 1980s were self-centered and focused primarily on personal advancement.<sup>24</sup> Today’s job market seems to have diminished this feeling amongst the millennial generation. Currently it seems that everyone understands that they are dispensable at work. While some might find this discouraging it also allows the job seeker to view their workplace as also being replaceable. Whether or not the current trend to job hop is a good one, it is important to note how this 1980s “Power Woman” was vital to our understanding of gender equality and our place in a work environment. These

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Schmidt Campbell, “Breaking the Cycles of Exclusion” in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Jane R. Glasser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institution, 1994) 4.

<sup>24</sup> Weber, “Changing Roles and Attitudes,” 33.

women were the pivotal point of female empowerment and paved the way for the ever increasing equality we have today.

Despite this, Weber notes how women of this earlier generation were susceptible to being taken advantage of. Women *and* men of this era were driven to produce “landmark exhibitions, splendid publications, and innovative programs— in short, to work miracles over and over again.”<sup>25</sup> While these women were making meaningful work, they (and to a lesser extent their male counterparts) were at the mercy of a museum board or president. They could be praised for their work one day and ousted over it the next. She notes how burnout and turnover in museums was high.

Weber, who is writing in 1994, predicted a fourth generation of women in the museum field. This generation, she theorized, would be those sick of the unrecognized achievements who would begin to negotiate higher salaries, retirement plans and other benefits, workplace safety, and realistic job descriptions. In hindsight, it seems that her prediction was accurate from the 1990s through 2007.

What does this mean for the museum world? How can a feminist perspective be adopted by the museum institution to empower women, and minorities? Both women’s studies and museum studies are inherently multidisciplinary fields and thus they offer a platform for true meaningful development in both a professional sense and a cultural sense.

Examples of professional development can be found in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*. Amy Levin, compiler and editor of the book, introduces her collection by stating that the assortment of essays featured in this book is a response to the fact that “no collection of articles

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 34.

suitable for classroom use has focused exclusively on gender and sexuality.”<sup>26</sup> When she says “classroom” she is referencing her classroom of students enrolled in her college course that teaches race, class, and gender in museums.

As of 2010, the year Levin published *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, she states that the collection by Glaser and Zenetou has become dated. She notes how the earlier assemblage focused almost exclusively on feminist issues without looking into other inequalities within the museum. While some of the essays in the Glaser and Zenetou book may be dated, they do provide an interesting set of case studies from women who lived and worked in the museum field from the early 1970s through the end of the 1980s. Levin even features one of the articles from that book, Barbara Clark Smith’s “A Woman’s Audience: A Case Study of Applied Feminist Theories,” in her own collection.

One of the main differences between the collections as a whole is that Levin has expanded her search for essays to include more than just gender inequality. She also focuses on issues relating to race and sexuality and seems to be drawing heavily on bell hooks’ feminist theory. While the scope of her study is broad, it is not unusual to link these historically marginalized groups together. Grouping these marginalized sets of people together during the early development of their historiography was a service to them in that it gave them greater visibility. If the LGBTQ communities had not banded together, it is possible it would have taken them even longer and proven even harder for them to work towards the collective voice they share today. However, society is much more familiar with feminist and LGBTQ+ groups than they were in previous generations.

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<sup>26</sup> Amy Levin, “Introduction” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy Levin (Oxon: Routledge 2010), 1.

While it is apparent that equality for all has not been achieved, it could be argued that we have reached a point where grouping histories of people together for the sake of visibility is no longer helpful and is in fact a disservice to the group. Feminism, gender rights, and the rights surrounding sexuality each deserve their own field of study as the topics are diverse. In this sense, it seems that Levin's collection could be on the verge of also becoming dated.

Regardless of whether or not Levin's collection may have fallen victim to the passage of time as Glasser and Zentou's has, it still provides an abundance of case studies that on their own are relevant to the topic at hand and are historically significant.

Hilde Hein, a professor of women's studies at Brandeis University and author of several books on museum studies, notes how the prevailing theories driving museums are "epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that have guided western secular society since the seventeenth century."<sup>27</sup> Her essay does not attempt to define feminism or argue that the traditional system needs to be completely discarded; rather, she states that feminist theory is an alternative to the prevailing theories and that the museum is an exemplary institution to "gauge its effectiveness."<sup>28</sup>

Hein outlines what a "feminist" museum or museum practice would look like. She details how feminist museums would not feel the need to sensationalize their exhibits with only the "best" objects, but they would also feature items that some might consider mundane. The presentation of these items would need special thought and care as the display is also very important. Historically, museums have carefully cataloged and presented items in a way that

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<sup>27</sup> Hilde Hein, "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective" in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy Levin (Oxon: Routledge 2010), 53.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

removes the visitor from the object and creates this sense of “other.” The museum might suggest that the artist is important simply because they are a woman, they are black, or they are any other group who has historically been excluded from the museum. Hein refutes this method for defining someone by stating that the term “woman” is only one descriptor for a person made up of countless other attributes.<sup>29</sup>

A feminist museum would display things in a way that engages the visitor and allows for them to interpret it in their own way. Hein states the following:

“Feminist theory and its cousin, queer theory, are particularly valuable to museum practitioners because they offer frameworks for critical reflection on exhibitions, and these are sufficiently flexible and capacious to be applicable to other forms of diversity. At their best, both kinds of theory acknowledge and incorporate cultural variations.”<sup>30</sup>

Hein argues that a museum wishing to adapt feminist principles could take this even further. Even when visitors are given opportunity to engage in making meaning with objects, the objects still hold a passive role. Unfortunately, Hein does not offer a means to incorporate this idea, but allows for others to think critically about it and build off it further.

The collections discussed prior to this point were all published in 2010 or earlier. *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, edited by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, was published in 2013 and offers more contemporary critique. This collection is also very focused on museums in Europe; thus expanding our global critique of the subject. Dimitrakaki is a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh; Perry is a lecturer at the University of Brighton and a curator at Tate Modern. Many of the essays come from their

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>30</sup> Amy Levin, “Theories” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy Levin (Oxon: Routledge 2010), 49.

European colleagues and thus it provides an interesting parallel to the more American focused essays in other collections.

Interestingly, many of the essays in the collection cite the year of economic downturn in 2007 as being a pivotal point for feminist curation. The editors declare this particular year as being the beginning of a bunch of high-profile museum projects “that proclaimed feminism as their subject or rationale.”<sup>31</sup>

They cite this as the point in which feminist thought in museums turned from being on the “fringe” to a factor that continues to significantly impact the institution’s curatorial practices.<sup>32</sup> The editors declare that they hope this collection of essays will invite the reader to ponder whether feminism and museums have become victim to a consumerist market and whether or not they each are simply seeking “intensity.”<sup>33</sup>

Perry has her own essay in the collection and begins it by questioning whether or not Tate Modern needs to declare its feminist practices. She notes how they have adopted similar principles that traditional feminists promote, such as the rejection of a chronological time line and instead use thematic categories. The Tate Modern’s galleries use this style of thematic grouping.

However, throughout Perry’s essay it becomes apparent that she does not view this as sufficient. While the Tate Modern does feature women artists, these numbers are still significantly smaller than their male counterparts. When Tate Modern finally created an exhibit dedicated to feminist art, they did so in a way that Perry found troubling. The exhibit, titled

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<sup>31</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki & Lara Perry ed., *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

“Double Life,” took place in 2011 and featured art from the 1970s and 1980s that focused on the feminist theme “The Personal is Political.” It was not a standalone exhibition, but rather a part of their temporary galleries that have different works from the collection circulating through. The curators are not named and it is unclear whether they were men or women. Artists featured in this exhibit were big names and included Cindy Sherman and the Guerrilla Girls.

Perry’s critique comes from the fact that the exhibit focused solely on works that were at least thirty years old and that they were displayed in a “period-appropriate” way which included the art on “domestic” televisions.<sup>34</sup>

She quotes feminist scholar and art historian Griselda Pollock to support her critique stating that this exhibition was simply “an institution nod to feminism that renders ‘invisible, through a polite and disfiguring inclusion, the radical disturbance... that the term, movement and theory of feminism mounts on a range of interlocking fronts.’”<sup>35</sup>

The critique challenges the Tate’s way of handling text panels regarding difficult subject matter. She cites a text panel they wrote for a feminist piece by artist Ana Mendieta. The photograph, “Untitled (Rape Scene)’ (1973)” was created in response to a rape and murder that had taken place on Mendieta’s college campus when she was a student. The Tate’s text panel said the following:

“Mendieta’s performances and photographs involving blood can be seen as a fusion of various influences, including the work of Frida Kahlo and the Vienna Aktionists. Her use of blood has multiple meanings, addressing both sexual violence and Afro Caribbean religious ritual.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lara Perry, “A Good time to Be A woman? Women Artists, Feminism and Tate Modern” in *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki & Lara Perry. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

Perry finds this label to be a watered down version of what the piece is really about and questions why museums are so afraid to address difficult topics. By omitting the details that it was created in direct response to a rape lessens the significance of the piece. Perry seems to believe that this is a case where the museum is doing a disservice to both those interested in learning about a piece and those who have worked hard to incorporate women's issues into contemporary social-political discussions. It seems that Perry believes museums should try to contextualize feminist pieces more fully without shying away from the gritty details that may make audiences uncomfortable. Whether this means longer text panels or ones that are just more concise, Perry does not say. The label itself does allude to the trauma that Mendieta and her classmates witnessed, but it doesn't state the circumstances. Perry clearly believes that it should reference the event in some way, but the museum isn't lying or withholding information from the visitor and therefore it seems that her reaction to this specific text panel may be unwarranted.

The Tate also does not mention that Mendieta would suffer a traumatic death herself. Twelve years after completing the piece "Untitled (Rape Scene)" (1973), Mendieta would fall from her apartment window under suspicious circumstances. To this day, it is unknown if it was a suicide or if her husband, sculptor Carl Andre, pushed her to her death. The Tate could have included this information to contextualize Mendieta's legacy and use it as an example of the doubt women are given when tragedy strikes.

Maya Gurantz, a writer for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, describes how many are quick "to believe it is more likely that Mendieta threw herself, her talent, her imagination, her burgeoning career, out of a window in a fit of pique rather than being pushed by her drunk



husband in the middle of a violent fight.”<sup>37</sup> Gurantz specifically cites criticisms she heard from attendees of a Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) show and comments on online discussion forms that claim Mendieta’s suicide—if it was a suicide—was her “final” performance act and was fitting with the discourse of her established art portfolio which focused heavily on blood and violence. The Tate does not mention any of this, despite the fact that it could have helped narrate the story of Mendieta’s work and could have been included with an add-on to the concluding sentence in their label with something as simple as “violence that would be echoed in her own death over a decade after the creation of this piece.”

Perry is not the only one to find fault in exhibit labels. Alexandra Kokoli, a senior lecturer at Middlesex University of London in the Visual Culture-Fine Arts Department, also has issues with the way works by women are described in labels.

Kokoli’s essay, “The ‘Woman Artists’ as Curatorial Effect,” initially sets out to address the somewhat fictitious figure that is known as the “Woman Artist.” It further elaborates on Hilde Hein’s assertion that noting a piece as significant simply because it was created by a woman is doing both the artist and the movement a disservice. As will be defined throughout the course of Kokoli’s essay, the “Woman Artist” is often a different entity than the actual woman who created the artwork.

Kokoli begins her explanation of this concept with an analysis of an exhibition entry panel that places the female artist, Agnes Martin, in between two male counterparts. Kokoli criticizes the fact that Martin’s work is described solely by its form (horizontal lines) and has

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<sup>37</sup> Maya Gurantz, “‘Carl Broke Something’ On Carl Andre, Ana Mendieta, and the Cult of the Male Genius” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 10, 2017, Accessed April 7, 2019. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/carl-broke-something-on-carl-andre-ana-mendieta-and-the-cult-of-the-male-genius/#!>

little else as a descriptor whereas the men described in the panel have been given thoughtful analysis.<sup>38</sup> The panel read as follows:

“[...] The paintings of Martin Barré belong to a last series of 1992, the culmination of his work on colour, which he subjected to serial procedures. For Agnes Martin, her painting – **essentially** horizontal lines painted on canvases of uniform size (6ft x 6ft, reduced to 5ft x 5ft around 1995) – **had rather to do with expression or emotion**. Robert Ryman for his part exploits the pictorial possibilities of a few basic elements: the square, the colour white, with variations of technique and support. White, omnipresent in his work without it ever being subject or essence, is employed simply as a vehicle, having no ideological or symbolic connotation.”<sup>39</sup>

The issue, Kokoli notes, with this description of Martin’s work is that it does not allude to any other interpretation or possible meaning. She states:

“Agnes Martin’s practice is first reduced to its form, which is not afforded the Modernist autonomy that it seems to have in Robert Ryman’s case, only to be then explained away through a vague reference to psychological and, by extension, biographical content supposedly conveyed through – and thus actually subjugating – her art.”<sup>40</sup>

Kokoli cites the extensive reviews of Martin’s work by feminist art historians such as Anna Chave, Rosalind Krauss, and Griselda Pollock who gave a much fuller interpretation of the piece.<sup>41</sup> Instead, Kokoli argues, this particular panel “impoverishes the range of Martin’s possible interpretations, compromising the richness of her work and Minimalist painting alike.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Alexandra M Kokoli, “The ‘Woman Artist’ as Curatorial Effect: The Case of Tracey Emin’s Scottish Retrospective,” in *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki & Lara Perry. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 187.

<sup>39</sup> English version of information panel in Room 8: Minimal Painting, Pompidou Centre, Paris; emphasis added by Kokoli. Found in Alexandra M Kokoli “The ‘Woman Artist’ as Curatorial Effect: The Case of Tracey Emin’s Scottish Retrospective.” In *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki & Lara Perry. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 187.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

This label seems to be a better fitting example than the one discussed in Perry's essay about the Mendieta piece as the label by the Tate Modern did acknowledge Mendieta's experiences, even if it was in a generalist way. The label from the Pompidou Centre Paris does little more than describe the appearance of the piece.

From here Kokoli begins to divulge into what she calls "biographism," or the use of biographies when discussing art. She notes that a man's biography is used to hype him up as a "universal" idea and relates to the notion of "male genius" when women's biographies are used to point out their exception to the norm. A woman's biography will constantly point out the fact that she is a woman and that she accomplished some feat *despite* being a woman. Her identity is reduced to her womanhood and her art is reduced to a visual record of her "personal and psychological make up."<sup>43</sup>

This theme of women being important simply because they are female is reiterated throughout feminist literature on the subject. Why is using a woman's story through the lens of her womanhood to interpret her artwork a bad thing? Kokoli elaborates by saying that in postfeminist society, work-places often deem it necessary to put the word "woman" in front of a job description. In the museum's case it is the "woman artist." Kokoli's argument as well as other scholars is that curatorial practices often attempt to incorporate feminism, but often fall short due to a variety of outside and conflicting opinions, forces, and audiences.<sup>44</sup>

Kokoli notes that women have been the focal point of blockbuster art exhibitions; these blockbuster exhibitions seem to emphasize and commodify the fact that they are about a woman. She uses the 2005 blockbuster exhibition for Frida Kahlo created by Tate Modern curators

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 188.

Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson as an example.<sup>45</sup> Both these curators are women, but neither seem to define themselves as a feminist curator. Kokoli comments on the fact that the exhibition was hyped up by the then recently released “Frida” movie starring Salma Hayek. On top of this, the show was built up around Kahlo’s dramatic life story rather than her art. The gift shops were filled with Frida merchandise and, as Kokoli recalls, a chance to win a trip to visit “Frida’s Mexico.”<sup>46</sup> This is an issue that has continued to plague the legacies of great female artists as their contributions to the art world are neglected as patrons stare in awe at the fact that a woman was able to create something that important to art history. These women are then commoditized and turned into products such as posters, keychains, and Barbies (Fig. 2). Often these women are idealized and presented in a manner that is not entirely truthful to their actual appearance. In this case, Kahlo’s signature unruly eyebrows have been tamed and her overall appearance has been “enhanced” to fit within current beauty standards, all in an effort to make the Barbie sell better. Not only is this problematic for the young girls who buy the Barbie and think that this is a truthful image of what women should look like, it also negates Kahlo’s life story and lessens her impact.

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<sup>45</sup> Tate Modern “Frida Kahlo.” Press Release, February 23, 2005, *Tate*. Accessed May 2, 2019 <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/frida-kahlo>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Kokoli blatantly makes the point throughout her essay that “Women Artists” are currently popular and offer a way for museums to turn a quick profit. She faults the museum’s inability to include feminism in the presentation of these women’s work. This leads to the question: how can museums adapt feminist theory without falling into the pitfall that is the “Woman Artist,” “African-American Artist,” “Gay Artist,” or any other label they choose that focuses on one aspect the person rather than their work as a whole?



Figure 2 Frida Kahlo Barbie, 2018. Mattel.  
<https://barbie.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ba/inspiring-women-series/barbie-inspiring-women-series-frida-kahlo-doll-fjh65>

Nancy Proctor's essay, "Feminism, Participation and Matrixial Encounters: Towards a Radical, Sustainable Museum (Practice)," attempts to address some of the issues facing the modern museum and how to avoid being in a cycle of pursuing "endless euphoria followed by quick obsolescence."<sup>47</sup> Throughout the course of her essay she discusses both the trope that is the "Woman Artist" as well as the increasing effort to incorporate technology into museums.

She begins her essay by noting how museums are continually becoming more participatory. She credits increasing technology and integration of visitors at varying levels into the museum design process. Despite these trends, Proctor asks "whether new technologies can offer ways of figuring and negotiating encounters with the museum, its collections, and its systems and structures of power, or whether they simply enable a process whereby power-holders in the existing hegemony are swapped out for younger, more social media-savvy, museum "rock stars."<sup>48</sup>

While this seems counter to what most are saying when it comes to embracing technology, it is also well known that new technologies are constantly coming out and everyone is always searching for that "next big thing." With this mindset, is it not better to rely on the tried and true methods of the museum? Proctor argues no, but only if museums adopt a feminist perspective. She says that the participatory trend in museums is a result of feminist and other social justice movements that have "sought for generations to recover hidden and erased discourses and give voice to those who have traditionally been silenced."<sup>49</sup> Museums and feminists both face the same struggle. They both attempt to include new voices within their

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<sup>47</sup> Nancy Proctor, "Feminism, Participation and Matrixial Encounters: Towards a Radical, Sustainable Museum Practice." In *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki & Lara Perry. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 49.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

established discourses and working towards empowering communities that have previously been marginalized, while simultaneously re-engineering the very structure that marginalized those groups in the first place.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, Proctor's main concern is about making sure museums continue to adopt feminist practices even after they achieve their goal of broadening the museum's access to all. She asks us to ponder how museums can connect the audience and the collections in a new and meaningful way.<sup>51</sup>

The most current collection of essays relating to the subject at hand was published in 2017 by editor Jenna C Ashton. *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change* is a monumental two-volume assemblage of 55 essays from scholars around the world. In the foreword Maura Reilly, director of the National Academy of Design, notes how feminism and museums seem to be at odds with one another simply due to the nature of each. Museums, she notes, categorize and divide objects by age, style, and region. Feminism, *especially* the bell hooks version of feminism, seems to champion coming together to make everything more open and interconnected.

This collection challenges the notion that museums and feminism must be separate. As Ashton notes in her preface, the collection gives examples of feminist practice from museums around the world in an effort to help determine how museums should position themselves on socio-political issues. Museums cannot stay neutral. If a museum decides to ignore socio-political issues such as feminism, they are passively supporting the opposite viewpoint.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 59.

Statistics from multiple reporting agencies are peppered throughout both the foreword and preface of *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*. Reilly cites the re-opening of Tate Modern in 2016 where less than one third of the works featured in the exhibition were by women.<sup>52</sup> The Pompidou Center in Paris has less than 10% of works by women in its permanent exhibition space, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art has less than 4%. Of that 4%, 0% of the works were done by non-white women.<sup>53</sup> While these numbers may be appropriate for works dating up to or before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as fewer women were working as artists during this time, these numbers are referencing modern and contemporary art. Currently there are just as many active female artists today as there are male artists and thus these numbers should be much closer to 50/50.

Feminist curating is offered as a solution to this problem. Amelia Jones, professor and dean of Critical Studies at the University of Southern California, defines feminist curating as “the organization of exhibitions and performance or event programming that insistently seeks to expose or redress the structures of power relating to sex/gender as intersectionally held identifications.”<sup>54</sup> This is an issue that is not limited to museums in one country or another, but is a global issue and thus feminist curating can be used in one form or another worldwide.

In Astrid Schonweger’s essay “Women’s Museums: Hubs for Feminism” we are invited to critique the most common method for remedying gender discrimination within the museum—that is for the creation of museums dedicated to women. Schonweger states that museums have been in charge of determining the value of objects and if they are worthy of display; for years it

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<sup>52</sup> Maura Reilly, “Foreword” in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 17.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Amelia Jones & Jenna Ashton, “On Feminist Curating: An Interview with Amelia Jones” in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, vol. 1, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 59.



was determined that material objects created by and for women were unimportant and thus they were excluded from collections. Women's museums were mainly created during second wave feminism in an effort to remedy this situation.

Schonweger describes the variety among women's museums and offers definitions from other scholars as to what constitutes a women's museum. The most basic definition is a museum that displays objects, histories, or art that were created by women. Expanded definitions include addressing gender issues, including minorities, and the promotion of gender research.<sup>55</sup>

From here, Schonweger offers a brief summary of women's museum's mission statements from around the world. They include a museum from post-dictatorship Albania, the first women's museum to open in Africa in the country of Senegal, and many examples from Europe. Newer museums are being founded in countries that have been historically silencing women for a much longer period of time than their European counterparts. Museums that exist in the Middle East, South America, India, and others are focusing on giving voice to women and offering them a platform to explore and share their own history in an intensely personal way.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, these women are often met with resistance from their government and families.

For example, Iranian Nobel Prizewinner Shirin Ebadi and Mansoureh Shojaee have been working to create a women's museum in their home country. This museum would collect and display objects and information about Iranian women's experiences and documenting their progress.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, Iran is not at the point where they are able to accept such an idea. Both Shojaee and Ebadi live in exile while their museum remains on indefinite hold.

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<sup>55</sup> Astrid Schonweger, "Women's Museums: Hubs for Feminism" in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, vol. 1, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 161.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

The museum that Ebadi envisioned was to be an Iranian Women's Museum. She suggested the idea to Shoajee after visiting the Women's Museum Meran in Italy in 2007. The plan was to implement a physical space for the documentation and preservation of women's history in Iran.

Those involved with the creation of the museum found themselves under intense scrutiny from Iranian officials. Many of the women who were working on the museum had been imprisoned at one time or another for defying the government. In 2009, Shojaee's home was investigated by Iranian officials. The officials ended up confiscating all the resources that were to be published and presented on behalf of the museum on International Women's Day.<sup>58</sup> Shojaee, was then arrested and imprisoned at the Evin Prison.<sup>59</sup>

After being questioned by authorities, the government eventually decided to support Shojaee's venture as long as they were able to supervise and control the museum she created.<sup>60</sup> Shojaee refused to let them censor her and the museum she and Ebadi envisioned. She was imprisoned again as a result. Realizing that she could do more meaningful work for Iran outside of the country, she fled on bail and met up with her peers in Europe to discuss the future of the museum. While in Europe, Shojaee interned with the International Association of Women's Museum (IAWMM), which involved collaborating with a number of women's museums across Europe.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "About." The Museum of Iranian Women's Movement Initiative. Accessed February 22, 2019. <https://www.irwmm.org/english/about>.

<sup>59</sup> Mansoureh Shoajee, "Creating a Museum and Library for Iranian Women's Rights" in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, Vol. 2, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 448.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>61</sup> "About." The Museum of Iranian Women's Movement Initiative. Accessed February 22, 2019. <https://www.irwmm.org/english/about>.

With the necessary support, the IAWMM was founded via the internet. The website is supposed to be divided between a Permanent and Temporary exhibit space; however, it seems that they are still in the process of updating the website and it does not appear to have a permanent exhibit yet. According to their “About” page, the permanent section will be devoted to the history of the women’s movement in Iran.

The temporary exhibit section is devoted to miscellaneous activities of women. The inaugural exhibit, which was first presented in spring of 2018 at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, was a collection of crafts created while women were imprisoned for political reasons at the Evin Prison.

While the movement is still in its early stages and has many struggles ahead of it, the women involved are making efforts to reclaim their identity in a country with a government that stifles it. Through their tireless efforts, they hope to see Iran become more accepting of the basic human rights women deserve. It is a movement we can continue to observe and rally for, but ultimately change needs to occur at a grassroots level throughout the country before a real change can transpire.

Returning to Schonweger’s essay, she concludes by quoting another feminist scholar—Elke Krasny; stating that women’s museums are the perfect “hubs” for feminist activity and promoting social change. It could be argued that it does not need to be only within a women’s museum, but can expand to any sort of museum. All of the museums previously discussed prove this point. From the museums in the Middle East to different cultural museums in the United States and the feminist curatorship happening in Europe—any museum can adapt these principles and make strides toward positive societal change.

Krasny expands on feminist curating even further when she discusses in her essay the importance of global citizenship and the care museums must take when acknowledging our interconnected society. She faults the very idea of citizenship in the sexism, racism, and heterosexism that plague modern day life. Citizenship and the museum institution are both a result of the French Revolution. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, written in 1789 by the French assembly, outlines that men have the right to freedom of speech and from oppression and the pursuit of liberty, property, and security. Women are not mentioned in the declaration, nor in the United States Constitution, and were not included in the definition of citizenship.

The Louvre, founded in 1793, challenged the notion that women were not citizens. The museum was set up as a way to allow citizens to “appear” to one another in an effort to define a culture based around the notion of citizenship.<sup>62</sup> Women were invited to partake in this cultural feat by being invited to the museum and to support the new institution. The new museum promoted the idea that the art contained within it was a publicly owned entity. Women were included in this partial ownership. The museum came into existence to provide a shared cultural view for the citizen. It invited women to be a part of that experience, yet women were excluded from the definition of a citizen.

Krasny argues that global citizenship—the idea that everyone has certain rights and responsibilities that come from existing in this world that transcends political borders—and global museums need to be connected and that this is an inherently feminist act. She argues for a “denationalized” museum and one that grants “inviolable cultural rights;” that by applying a

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<sup>62</sup> Elke Krasny, “Citizenship and the Museum: On Feminist Acts” in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, Vol. 2, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 76.

global viewpoint to their practices, these institutions take on a more inclusive role that is thus feminist in nature.<sup>63</sup>

This, Krasny states, can be accomplished with the establishment of a global museum within a global city. She identifies New York, London, and Tokyo as the major “Global Cities,” but notes that others can also have this term applied to them.<sup>64</sup> A global museum is defined as “the premier cultural index of globalisation” and is different than other global entities in that others typically take place in the digital realm. A global museum would be uniquely different in that it would also provide a physical space for the display of various cultures, ideas, and histories to be presented as one complete story and thus further the idea of global citizenship.<sup>65</sup> This could be explored by adapting the large museums that already exist, such as the British Museum or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, within these global cities so that they are better serving a global audience.

Krasny’s argument will be used several more times throughout the course of this paper in order to reinforce the fact that the women working in museums, both past and present, are doing meaningful work and contributing to a meaningful global narrative.

The various theories discussed thus far provide the context for the remainder of the paper. From here, notable female curators will be discussed in relation to their involvement with museums and their contributions to the field and empowering a specific group of people. This group will change depending on the nature of the curator’s own personal interest, but they all accomplish a similar end goal. The paper will then explore problems facing the museum within

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 90.

the context of various social media movements and present examples of how these issues can be resolved. It will conclude with examples of some of the most successful museum initiatives to date that have truly accomplished the goal of empowering a group of people without creating controversy in other communities.

### **Feminist Curators and Lasting Impressions**

This section shifts focus from feminist museum literature to examples of notable women who shaped the field in its infancy and then modeled it into what it is today. While this will be done in a way that might fall victim to Kokoli's notion of "biographism" as discussed earlier, it is not the author's intention to point out these trailblazers as being notable based solely on the fact that they were women. They were selected because they made meaningful contributions that brought awareness to unknown people. Any incident of "biographism" is purely a side effect of the language available to differentiate between male and female; *not* to point out that these women accomplished what they did despite being women.

As noted in the literature review, there was a substantial group of women who began working in museums during the World War II era. These women were born during the progressive era and thus occupied a unique space in an age that underwent rapid change. During their youth, they were exposed to the widespread activism of the progressive era and saw substantial change that evolved from these ideas into social norms through the roaring twenties. These women were college students during this transition and thus were the first generation of women that were really able to challenge social norms on a widespread scale. Three women in particular will be discussed to illustrate their meaningful contributions during this era. They are Margaret Mead, Dorothy Canning Miller, and Mildred Constantine.

Each of the three women used the museum in their own unique way. Mead used it as a home base in-between bouts of anthropological field work. Miller was a passionate curator who did as she pleased and subsequently gave young and unknown artists a platform to display their work. Constantine elevated a genre of commercial art to fine art and used it to make sociopolitical statements. While their areas of interest were varied, none can be proclaimed as

the chief contributor during this era; they each laid the foundation for generations of women to build upon in the following decades.



### Margaret Mead

Margaret Mead was a world-renowned anthropologist who served as curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History from 1946-69, and has since had an exhibition installed at the museum about her work (Fig. 3). She has been a fixture in anthropology classrooms since the 1960s when she became something of a public figure. Her work, best expressed through her book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, received both public and academic acclaim. Despite her success, her work has been criticized by some in the field as being misleading and quick to jump to conclusions.



Figure 2 Margaret Mead's Cape and Thumb Stick, Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples, 3rd floor.  
<https://walkingoffthebigapple.blogspot.com/2016/03/big-things-to-see-at-american-museum-of.html>

The anthropological context is the one through which the majority of her work has been interpreted; after all, she was an anthropologist first and a curator second. Nonetheless, her work as both a feminist and a curator were both major factors in her life; while writings on these subjects are few and far between, we can glean a clearer understanding of how she presented herself in these contexts by looking at her life as a whole rather than just that of her anthropological career.

Mead's daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, wrote a biography on her mother in 1984 in which she gave the reader an opportunity to see Mead from an insider's perspective. Bateson recounts how Mead was born the eldest of five children to a Philadelphia family in 1901. Her father and mother were both social scientists; being exposed to their work at such a young age greatly influenced Mead's interest in the field of anthropology. Mead's grandmother, who was also her homeschool teacher, encouraged her to take notes on her younger siblings. This instilled a scientific mindset in the young Mead who would often document her siblings' temperaments and listed detailed comparisons of the girls.<sup>66</sup>

Her scientific parents were also in the habit of taking notes. Her parents studied their children and made documenting loved ones seem like the norm. It gave her the perspective that being observed was "an act of love."<sup>67</sup> Perhaps this can provide insight into her success working in the field. It is safe to say that Mead grew up in an environment that stimulated progressive thinking in an era when it was still unconventional for young girls to have that level of academic encouragement.

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<sup>66</sup> Shaping Forces, *Margret Mead: Human Nature and the Power of Culture*. Curated by Patricia A. Francis in the Library of Congress. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mead/mead-shaping.html>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

In her autobiography she tells the endearing story of how her father nicknamed her “punk;” when her younger brother was born he was the “boy-punk.”<sup>68</sup> Mead comments that this was “a reversal of the usual pattern, according to which the girl is only a female version of the true human being, the boy.”<sup>69</sup> She was given the freedom to acknowledge her own sense of self as being something valuable in its own right rather than being defined by male-based institutions. It could be speculated that this was a major influence on Mead’s scholarly successes and her unconventional views on social issues such as sex and marriage.

In 1920, after a brief stint at DePauw University in Indiana, Mead transferred back to the northeast and attended Barnard College. It was here that she met Franz Boas, who is widely recognized as the Father of Modern American Anthropology. As his pupil, Mead would quickly become an expert in the field.

In 1926 she was hired by the American Museum of Natural History to serve as their assistant curator of ethnology. While her work was highly respected as early as 1928, promotion to associate curator took her fourteen years, finally obtaining the position in 1942 and then an additional twenty-two years to reach the rank of curator in 1964.<sup>70</sup> This progression seems unrealistically slow given the fact that Mead was one of the most respected anthropologists of Pacific Ethnology, but is not surprising as it has been noted that women have historically found themselves confronting a glass ceiling. As already noted, women were usually only able to find work as educators, curatorial assistants, and registrars while men were the lead curators,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> David Hurst Thomas, “Margaret Mead as a Museum Anthropologist,” *American Anthropologist*, Vol 82, No. 2 (June 1980): 354, accessed February 10, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/675877>

directors, and decision makers.<sup>71</sup> In Bateson's memoir of her mother, she has this to say on the matter:

“Through the years, the museum was invaluable as her base, but her own role was ambiguous as she remained apparently indefinitely as associate curator (she was finally made a curator in 1964), like so many women in academe who were not given appropriate status. She worked around the problems, cannily expanding her work space in the tower where male curators were not interested in competing, raising her own funds, and increasing her freedom to come and go as she liked.”<sup>72</sup>

Despite her slow climb within the museum institution—an example of the glass ceiling that has restricted many female museum professionals—Mead's success in the field of anthropology aided her when she decided to begin a fundraising campaign to secure money for the less glamorous museum work that included cataloging, conserving, and storing objects.<sup>73</sup> She felt that it was much easier to secure funding for field work than it was for these mundane but necessary museum tasks. This led her to propose creating the “Margaret Mead Fund for the Advancement of Anthropology.” The plans for the fund were unveiled on her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday and her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the American Museum.

Throughout her tenure at the museum, there was talk of creating a new hall devoted to people from the South Pacific. Mead referred to it as “her hall” and imagined it as a transport to the islands.<sup>74</sup> It took years to build and finally opened in 1971—after she had already retired in 1969. The hall was short-lived and was closed down before Mead died. Whether it was lack of funds or inadequate follow-through, the exhibit was underwhelming. Bateson recalls that:

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<sup>71</sup> Brown, “Foreword” in *Gender Perspectives*, XIV.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson. *With a Daughters Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 69.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, *Margaret Mead*, 358.

<sup>74</sup> Bateson, *With A Daughter's Eye*, 69.

“The image she tried to build into her hall was that of a multiplicity of islands, each elaborating different cultural themes, divided by wide stretches of blue, the reaches of sea and air and sky, crisscrossed in perilous voyage. The displays were meant to be suspended in light in their transparent cases, while other areas suggested shadowed jungle. The rationale is elegant but the hall itself was disappointing, with sections of exotic material not quite integrated into a whole.”<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps this is because Mead did not fully appreciate the lives these people were living and still had a notion of them being “other.” While she gave the people of the South Pacific an opportunity to present themselves to the rest of the world, she created an exhibit that was still separate from the lives of the visitors who frequented the museum. There is some force that seems to separate a visitor from objects in display cases, especially if they are presented in miniature format; Mead favored this as illustrated by her construction of a diorama of the Peri Village. However, it should be noted that she did try to maintain authenticity. In 1953 she returned to the island of Manus with a diorama she had built. According to accounts, the villagers were impressed with Mead’s diorama for its attention to depict their world accurately.<sup>76</sup>

While she may not have been the perfect example of someone working to increase meaningful global awareness, she strove to do her best. Mead worked hard to raise important issues in all aspects of society. In terms of social work and museums, the first example can be found in her participation during World War II when she advocated for the use of museums to aid in raising national morale.<sup>77</sup> In an editorial she wrote in 1941, she describes how the public felt deceived by the media and those in power. She wrote that this constant bombardment of propaganda led the general population to be “suspicious of every means of communication.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas, *Margaret Mead*, 357.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas, *Margaret Mead*, 360.

<sup>78</sup> Margaret Mead, “Museums in the Emergency” (Editorial), *Natural History*. Vol. 48 (1941), 67. Accessed February 22, 2019. [https://archive.org/stream/naturalhistory48newy/naturalhistory48newy\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/naturalhistory48newy/naturalhistory48newy_djvu.txt)

The museum, Mead argued, has remained a safe place for the public as they question the authenticity of information and try to present only facts rather than make a hit exhibition based on sensationalized information.<sup>79</sup>

Her role in the war effort was not confined within the museum wall. She took an active position to assist the government in research when she accepted the position of Executive Secretary of the Committee on Food Habits at the National Research Council.<sup>80</sup> The council was founded in 1940 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in an effort to address questions regarding malnutrition. The committee's research, under Mead's direction, focused on dietary patterns within the context of conforming to society norms.<sup>81</sup>

Using her academic successes to aid and educate the public is something that Mead would continue throughout her life. For example, in the 1970s, she worked to educate the public on environmental issues, and in 1974 to confront the energy crisis.<sup>82</sup> Other issues she actively spoke out about included parenting, racism, and women's rights.

Her work in the field is cited as one of the pioneering efforts to understand the different expectations of men and women with what we now refer to as "gender roles."<sup>83</sup> Using the cultures in Samoa as her case study, Mead explored how cultures and individual personalities relate to one another; specifically looking at how people are affected by their culture when they act outside of what is considered acceptable behavior.<sup>84</sup> She wrote two separate books about her

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> National Research Council (US) Committee on Food Habits. *The Problem of Changing Food Habits: Report of the Committee on Food Habits 1941–1943*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 1943. HISTORY OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOOD HABITS. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK224356/>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> *To The Field and Back, Margret Mead: Human Nature and the Power of Culture*. Curated by Patricia A. Francis in the Library of Congress. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mead/mead-field.html>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

findings; the first, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) and the second, *Male and Female* (1949) both explored whether or not personality differences between the sexes were cultural or innate.<sup>85</sup> Her findings, while criticized by some in the field as downplaying certain evidence in favor of ones that supported her theory, ultimately led her to conclude that gender roles are a construct of society rather than a biological factor.

Her work in Samoa led her to emphasize the importance of early childhood development with positive views of “free sex.”<sup>86</sup> Her anthropological background fueled her advocacy of the feminist movement, arguing that gender roles were a conditioned behavior and not a genetic one. Her activism supported the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Mead was outspoken and used her anthropological background to apply its principles to social issues, such as world hunger, childhood education, and mental health.<sup>87</sup>

Mead practiced what she preached. She was married three times and had at least two romantic relations with women. The first was Ruth Benedict and the second was Rhoda Metraux. Benedict is described as one of the most important relationships of Mead’s life. They met when Mead was in college and together they worked closely with Franz Boas. They often reviewed each other’s work and were both members of the 1941 WWII Committee on Food Habits at the National Research Council.

In regard to her mother’s relationship with Ruth Benedict, Bateson had this to say:

“The intimacy to which Margaret and Ruth progressed after Margaret’s completion of her degree became the model for one axis of her life while the other was defined in relation to the men she loved or married. After Margaret’s death, I asked my father how he had felt about the idea of Margaret and Ruth as lovers, a relationship that had begun before

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Shaping Forces, *Margret Mead: Human Nature and the Power of Culture*. Curated by Patricia A. Francis in the Library of Congress. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mead/mead-shaping.html>

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Margaret and Gregory met... He spoke of Ruth as his senior, someone for whom he had great respect and always a sense of distance, and her remote beauty.”<sup>88</sup>

Mead lived her life the way she wanted to, without concern for what others may have thought. She inspired many to pursue careers in the sciences during an era when women were not typically pursuing that path. Her efforts contributed to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the feminist movement that paralleled it. Her methods of displaying culture were ahead of their time—albeit dated today—and provided the public with a look into the unknown. She strove to understand the cultures she worked in and think critically about what they told her about the meaning of being human. Mead used her position as a scientist and a curator to promote ideas that were controversial at the time, but ultimately beneficial to the community. She was not alone in her efforts.

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<sup>88</sup> Bateson, *With A Daughter's Eye*, 117.



### Dorothy Canning Miller

Women have been using the museum as a platform to build successful careers since the beginning of the institution's history. They allowed the museum to shape them; and in turn they shaped the institution. Dorothy Canning Miller is no exception, although she was quite exceptional. While not quite as radical as Mead, Miller's dedication led her to become a respected curator. She is most known for her work as the first curator of Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and is singlehandedly credited with promoting some of the greatest artists during the post-WWII era. Despite her success at promoting the artists—Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Clyfford Still, to name a few—she is still a relatively unknown figure. While she was an advocate for great male artists who would later achieve great success, she also made an effort to include women in her shows. Some of whom include Louise Nevelson, Helen Lundeberg, Emma Lu Davis, Loren MacIver, Irene Rice Pereira, Grace Hartigan, Chryssa, and Sally Hazelet Drummond.

The museum has unfortunately done Miller a disservice as she was their first professionally trained curator at MoMA and yet she receives no credit on the museum's page about their history nor anything more than a brief mention in their monumental book titled *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*.<sup>89</sup> In the Dorothy C. Miller papers finding aid, she is listed simply as “holder at various curatorial positions at the Museum, 1934-84.”

Like Mead, Miller was born during the height of the progressive era. Born in 1904 in Hopedale, Massachusetts she had an unusual upbringing in that her parents pushed her to

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<sup>89</sup> "The Museum of Modern Art History," MoMA. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/about/who-we-are/moma-history>.

become an artist, despite the fact that by her own admission she did not have what it took to be an artist.<sup>90</sup> Breaking from her parents' wishes she decided to pursue art in a different way and enrolled in an art history program at Smith College. In a brief auto-biographical essay she notes how "Smith's course called Modern Painting started with Rubens and ended with a few slides of Cezanne, early Picasso and Matisse, and Cubism."<sup>91</sup> While this may seem amusing to us in the present, Miller graduated from the college in 1925, decades before abstract expressionism developed. The new and avant-garde styles that would shape the art scene of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not yet developed.

In 1925 the Newark Museum began an early museum-training program, in which Miller was one of nine who enrolled. It was here that she worked under the respected librarian and museum director, John Cotton Dana. During her studies she became acquainted with museum employee Holger Cahill, whom she married in 1938. The marriage benefited Miller's career; through Cahill she became familiar with all of the current and promising American artists. After completing her studies, she continued to work at the Newark Museum for four years until she heard that a new museum, the Museum of Modern Art, would be opening in New York City. In 1929 she quit her job and set off for the unknown.

During this time, she worked odd jobs cataloging at various museums and helping with the installation of exhibitions. She found employment at the Montclair Art Museum where she was responsible for cataloging, researching, and installing American Indian Art.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Lynn Gilbert with Gaylen Moore, *Dorothy Canning Miller* (Lynn Gilbert, 1981), accessed February 10, 2019. Location 11. Amazon PDF Reader, <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B0087Q5FGI>

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 16.

<sup>92</sup> Dorothy C. Miller Papers, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, ed. Rachel Wild, Rona Roob, and Michelle Elligott. Museum of Modern Art Archives, accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/dcmillerf>

It was not until 1932 when Alfred H. Barr, the director of MoMA, took a leave of absence and directorship fell to Holger Cahill that Miller was able to secure a temporary job at MoMA. She was employed to work on a catalog for the museum's *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862-1932* exhibition.<sup>93</sup> Two years later, in 1934, she was officially offered a staff position as the Assistant to the Director where she worked with Barr to create the *New Horizons in American Art* exhibition. Like Mead, Miller's first roles were to support the men with whom she worked.

Miller worked hard to create quality exhibitions. In her first blockbuster show, *Americans 1942*, she wrote in her catalog that the goal was to show artists who were not well known in the New York City art scene. In 1942 there were already plans to turn the *Americans* exhibitions into a series. This first exhibition featured 18 artists that came from nine different states. Many of the artists were also immigrants who came to the United States at a young age and the majority of them were a part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) art program. Cahill was the national director of the Federal Art Project, and likely helped introduce Miller to some of the artists.

Miller formatted her catalog by allowing artists to write a personal statement followed by a brief description of their past exhibitions. There appears to have been no limit to how much the artists could write, as some chose not to submit a statement at all, while others had pages dedicated to their work. Perhaps the most telling essay in regard to Miller's editing style is by Emma Lu Davis. Davis was one of two women featured in the exhibition and had the most pages dedicated to her in the catalog. The nine pages that Davis took up in the catalog shape a

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

personality in the reader's eyes of a feisty woman who defines her education as "learning to eat licorice sticks behind the third-grade geography, and use, though not understand, bad words."<sup>94</sup> This is quite a different image than the diligent hardworking woman who was personified during the same 1940s era as Rosie the Riveter.

In the catalog, Davis writes her biography in which she describes how she worked in graphic design, furniture design—where she notes that she designed a tombstone—and sculpting with wood. Like many of the other artists featured in *Americans 1942*, she worked for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP).<sup>95</sup>

Davis described how she went to Russia in 1935 and praised the soviet communist ways as it ensures an artist's economic security. Perhaps this is a misinterpretation, but it seems that Miller was not interested in censoring her artists in any way. They were allowed to discuss freely their life and work and Miller gave the platform of her exhibition and catalog to do so.

In comparison with other catalogs produced by the museum in the same year, this one was unusual in the freedom it gave its artists. *Tchelitchew: Paintings, drawings* curated by James Thrall Soby was entirely written by him without any artist statement, and *20<sup>th</sup> Century Portraits* written and curated by Monroe Wheeler, reads like a traditional art history textbook. Miller wanted the artists to speak for themselves and gave them the opportunity to do so in as open a way as she could.

In an interview she had with Lynn Gilbert for the Archives of American Art she describes how she was afraid when she asked Clyfford Still to write an entry for her catalog because he

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<sup>94</sup> Emma Lu Davis, *Americans, 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States* ed. Dorothy C. Miller (MoMA, 1942). Accessed January 15, 2019. 43. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_catalogue\\_3028\\_300061973.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_3028_300061973.pdf)

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



Figure 4 Installation shot of Francis Chapin at the exhibition "Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States." 1942, MoMA. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3028>



Figure 5 Installation Shot of Knud Merril's exhibition "Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States." 1942, MoMA. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3028>

was known for being obscene. She was pleased that the entry he wrote was tame because she didn't approve of changing an artist's statement to fit the needs of censorship laws.<sup>96</sup>

The style in which she arranged paintings is also telling. Some of the artists were hung in the traditional style where paintings are evenly spaced at eye-level (Fig. 4), while others had a more organic arrangement (Fig. 5). On her process for creating an exhibition, she wrote in her autobiography:

“I have a tremendous passion for making a good exhibition. You've got fifteen artists, who's going to be in the first gallery? The order in which you place the artists, that's so important. What you look for and what you try to achieve are climaxes—introduction, surprise, going around the corner and seeing something unexpected, perhaps several climaxes with very dramatic things, then a quiet tapering off with something to let you out alive.”<sup>97</sup>

Unlike Mead, Miller's museum career progressed in a timelier manner. Whether this is because of their priorities or the difference between an art museum and a natural history museum is unknown. It is clear that Miller viewed herself as a curator first and an art historian second; while Mead was much more concerned with her academic research in anthropology than she was with being a curator. It also is possible that MoMA, being a new institution, was more liberal in allowing women to rise through the ranks. The museum itself was founded by a group of women in 1929; they were Miss Lillie P. Bliss, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller—all of whom were avid art collectors of the avant-garde. As a new organization, the museum was reliant on all of their staff as they were still an institution that needed to prove

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<sup>96</sup> Oral history interview with Dorothy C. Miller, 1981 May 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-dorothy-c-miller-12250#transcript>

<sup>97</sup> Gilbert, *Dorothy Canning Miller*, location 130.

themselves. The American Museum of Natural History had been around much longer as it was founded in 1869.

Regardless, Miller was able to progress from Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture to Associate Curator and then finally Curator of the same department within a span of eight years. She assumed the role as Curator of Museum Collections in 1947, which she served for twenty years, before assuming her final title as Senior Curator in 1968 where she remained until her retirement in 1969.

During the span of her career, there were five *American* exhibitions in total, the last being the most famous from 1959 titled *16 Americans*. This show featured the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and Louise Nevelson.

Miller sought to promote the unknown, which is evident in the ages and experience levels of the artists. Three of the artists were in their twenties, nine were in their thirties, and only three others were older.<sup>98</sup> Miller was unique in that she chose work based on her own tastes, not what the demands of the art world declared as valuable. The best description of her work is stated in her own words:

“Once in a while someone has called me on the telephone to say, ‘I’d like to buy something that’s going to be eight times as valuable.’ I say, ‘Well, I’m not interested. I only buy things myself because I’m crazy about them and I advise other people to do the same. If it becomes more valuable, that’s just good luck.’ I don’t help anybody who says he wants to buy for investment purposes, I don’t like that as a reason for buying.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, "No. 110." News release, December 15, 1959. MoMA. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_326175.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326175.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> Gilbert, *Dorothy Canning Miller*, location 194.

Her tastes allowed for a young, talented, and vibrant group of artists to receive recognition that they may not have had the luck of receiving had Miller not given them a space to present their work.

In the Gilbert interview, Miller describes what drew her to Mark Rothko.

“Well, in those shows there was an awful lot of straight realist work. It was the hangover of the very big realist period with American art in the '30s and early '40s. And we were all sort of bored with it. And these stood out. Although they had a subject matter, it was treated in a rather abstract way and the color interested us. I think that would be it.”<sup>100</sup>

The museum gave her the opportunity to have complete control over her exhibitions. She recounted how Alfred Barr, a graduate of Harvard’s Museum Studies program, was subjected to a committee the first few years he was a director as the trustees felt it was unwise to have a 26-year-old man in complete charge of a show. After the first few committee shows at MoMA, Barr was given full reign and made it a part of his leadership plan to always have one person in complete control of an exhibition. Miller was thus able to have complete autonomy when she was curating an exhibition and was at the mercy of no one but her own whims. The early years at MoMA must have been exciting, as Miller stated that “...I never had any interference with those American shows. I just put whoever I wanted in it. I could ask as much advice as I wanted, but I wasn't troubled with "no, you can't put that person in," or, "put this one in.”<sup>101</sup>

It was due to this freedom that Miller was able to promote others like her—those who may not have had the chance if there wasn’t someone advocating for them—to have a platform to display their work and opportunity to become successful.

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<sup>100</sup> Oral history interview with Dorothy C. Miller, 1981 May 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-dorothy-c-miller-12250#transcript>

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



### Mildred Constantine

Mildred Constantine, known by most colleagues as “Connie,” was another female curator who worked at MoMA. She had her start some years later than Miller, joining the museum in 1943. She found her home in the museum’s architecture and design department, and according to multiple sources was responsible for popularizing collections that were difficult to categorize. She referred to these works as “fugitive materials.”<sup>102</sup>

Constantine was slightly younger than the other two women. She was born in 1913 in Brooklyn, NY. She attended New York University where she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. After completing her schooling in the United States, she traveled to Mexico and studied at the graduate school of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Constantine travelled extensively in the country during 1936 on behalf of the organization Committee Against War and Fascism, of which she was a member.<sup>103</sup> The organization was heavily focused on the promotion of pacifism and had a large number of feminists involved in the cause. It was during her time in Mexico that she became interested in political posters and organized a collection which is now part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Constantine used her passion for posters and the space offered by the museum to make statements regarding various social issues. Perhaps the most civic-focused exhibition she produced was the 1949 *Polio Posters* exhibition. The program, as stated in a press release, “arose from discussion with the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis regarding its educational

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<sup>102</sup> Steven Heller, "Mildred Constantine, MoMA Curator, Graphics Expert and Poster Preservationist, Dies at 95." *The New York Times*. December 13, 2008. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/arts/design/14constantine.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

program and the need to familiarize the public with its many functions.”<sup>104</sup> The press release discusses how the artists were not experts on the foundation, but rather had an ability to interpret the issues and “present these functions to the public from a layman’s point of view.”<sup>105</sup>

The goal of the exhibition was to promote the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis’s cause, but the artists were given very few restrictions in how they were able to interpret that. The only guidelines they received were the poster size and the need to include the name, address and symbol of the foundation somewhere on the poster.<sup>106</sup>

In 1956 Constantine curated *Posters for the Family Service Association* which was an exhibition of nine posters commissioned by the museum for the foundation. According to a press release dated March 23, 1956, the exhibition’s purpose was to “create posters that will stimulate further use and support of community agencies throughout the country that provide professional services to families in trouble.”<sup>107</sup> Constantine stressed her belief that through posters “the artist can play a more direct role in the social scene.”

Posters had been used in the past to address physical health problems, but this was the first occurrence of their being used to address mental and emotional needs. Clark W. Blackburn, the director of the Family Service Association of America, had this to say about the exhibition: “With the aid of the artists in the Museum of Modern Art project, we hope that the value of, and need for, family counseling services will be vividly registered in the public mind.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, "Original Posters on Infantile Paralysis by 23 Artists to be Shown at Museum." News release, 1949. MoMA. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_325697.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325697.pdf)

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup>The Museum of Modern Art, "No. 28." News release, March 23, 1956. MoMA. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_326036.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326036.pdf)

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

Like Mead, Constantine believed that the museum should use its position as a neutral platform to educate the public on contemporary issues in a non-threatening or propagandistic way. Similar to Miller, Constantine also believed that unknown or “lesser” artists should be given a chance to make it in the art world. On the subject of both social issues and advocating for unknown artists, she wrote in one of the press releases that:

“The museum believes that the creative artist functions as part of the living world, whether he paints easel pictures or designs posters. Posters play an important role in the social scene, by direct communication or by evoking ideas or emotions to which the observer subconsciously reacts. Through the medium of the poster, the creative artist can translate a multitude of social, scientific and educational ideas into a visual language understood throughout the world.”<sup>109</sup>

Promoting a variety of arts media is something she would do throughout her career. The 1968 exhibition and catalog, *Word and Images*, were both curated and produced by Constantine. The exhibition was the first of its kind in that it offered a “comprehensive historical survey selected from the museum’s collection of over 2,000 posters” that dated from the 1880s to the current posters of that era.<sup>110</sup>

In a statement about the seminal exhibition, Constantine reflected that the poster collection, due to the nature of the medium, “reflects the social, political and environmental events of the day, in addition to paralleling developments in the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century visual arts.”<sup>111</sup> Constantine was one of the first to view a “lesser medium” as being valuable in both a historical and art historical sense. The posters in the exhibit merged the fine arts with the graphic arts. Visitors of the exhibit could be treated to works by known artists such as Marc Chagall, Vasily

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<sup>109</sup> The Museum of Modern Art. "Original Posters on Infantile Paralysis by 23 Artists to be Shown at Museum." News release, 1949. MoMA. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_325697.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325697.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

Kandinsky, and Pablo Picasso, to everyday posters that advertised U.S.A. Voting Rights, the band Sopwith Camel, and the London Underground (Fig. 6).

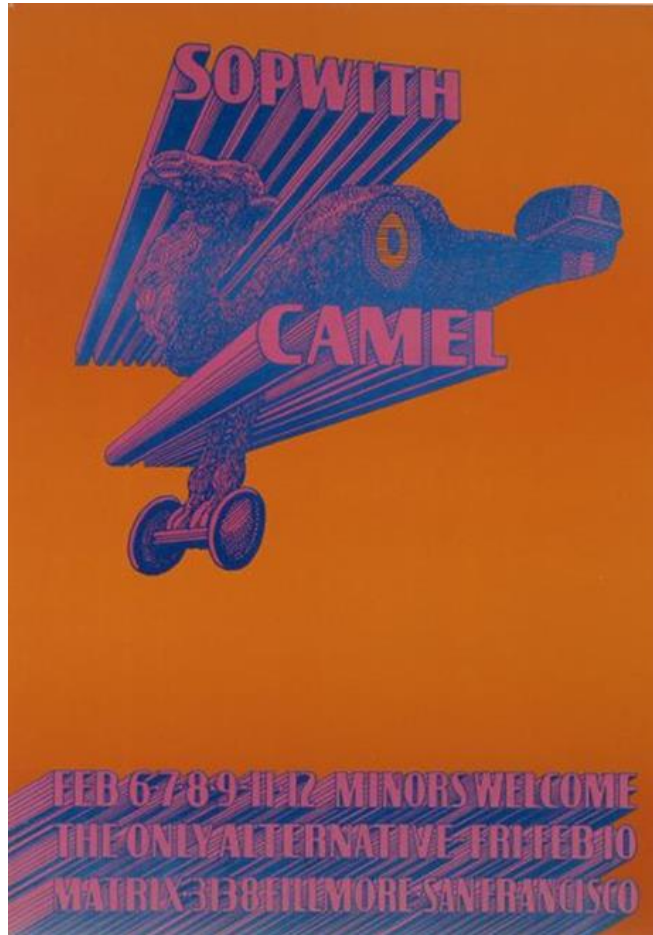


Figure 6 Victor Moscoso, *Sopwith Camel*, 1967, Offset Lithograph. New York, MoMA. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/5424>

The diversity in the exhibition exemplifies Constantine’s view of art: anything can be art. She was a feminist curator before it was clearly defined by Hilde Hein decades later—meaning that she did not feel the need to sensationalize her exhibitions with only the “best” objects but featured items, like posters, that some might consider mundane. This allowed the visitor to engage with the objects and interpret them in their own way.

Even when visitors are given opportunity to engage in meaning-making with objects, the objects still hold a passive role. Objects in Constantine's displays were posters, advertisements, and utility ephemera that had no innate sensationalism. Constantine made many of the graphic designers, whose names may have been lost to time without her, a platform to display their work. This led to a generation of artists being inspired by the work of graphic designers and a blurring of lines between the fine art world and the working artists world.

As a pioneer in the field of poster curation, she was able to develop and implement her own collection and storage method; suggesting rolling posters in tubes was inferior to hanging them in storage. Through her time at MoMA, she built an extensive Ephemera Collection which featured materials like business cards.<sup>112</sup>

Her focus on non-traditional art forms helped many launch their careers. She helped to bring fame to designers like Alvin Lustig, Bruno Munari, Tadanori Yokoo and Massimo Vignelli, among others.<sup>113</sup> Her exhibition *Two Graphic Designers: Alvin Lustig and Bruno Munari* that took place in 1955 aimed to "illustrate two highly individual approaches to graphic design" to elevate the graphics of posters and merchandise packaging to a level of high art. When describing Lustig's work, Constantine used language that gave the work a sense of importance rather than the typical disregard that it was just fancy lettering for a commercial item. Writing in regard to an album cover designed by him that "here the nervous angularity of the design suggests the composer's baroque orchestration, the shapes of the letters and their placement carrying a meaning as much as do the actual words."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Steven Heller "Mildred Constantine..."

<sup>113</sup> The Museum of Modern Art. "Two Graphic Designers: Alvin Lustig and Bruno Munari." News release, October 14, 1955. MoMA. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_326004.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326004.pdf)

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

Items that were displayed in this exhibition included a selection of book jackets, binding designs, and model towers from Alvin Lustig; with Bruno Munari contributing a model fountain, Christmas cards, and business cards.<sup>115</sup> The models were paired next to photos of the actual structures which gave viewers a scale person with which to compare the size of the artist's actual creation.

Constantine left the museum in 1971 to begin a new chapter of her career that included freelance curating and the production of many highly praised books on the decorative arts. Her interests later in life focused on fiber-based arts. Her work, which focused on the sculptural aesthetic of fiber, can be linked to the understanding that fiber works are traditionally made by women for practical purposes. Weaving ropes, knitting, sewing, and the like were all practical skills women needed to run a successful household as already indicated in Diane Sachko Macleod's assessment of domestic crafts. While Phoebe Apperson Hearst focused on training women in these crafts through Hearst Domestic Industries, seventy years later Constantine was focusing on elevating this craft to fine art.

The link between fiber, craft arts, and feminism has been made countless times during the last several decades. The most noted authorities on the matter would be Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock when they noted the importance of an artist's gender and how this effects the frame of reference when discussing an artwork.<sup>116</sup> Some historians have written that while the effort to challenge the gendered association with crafts was well-intended, it actually had the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Elissa Auther, "Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960-80." *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Vol. 1, 2008. Accessed February 14, 2019. 17. <https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/doi/abs/10.2752/174967708783389896#aHR0cHM6Ly93d3ctdGFuZGZvbmxpbmUtY29tLnByb3h5LmJlZmZhbG9zdGF0ZS5lZHUvZG9pL3BkZi8xMC4yNzUyLzE3NDk2NzcwODc4MzZM4OTg5Nj9uZWVkQWNjZXNzPXRydWVAQEAw>

reverse effect. By challenging the stereotype, they were reinforcing the association many had with femininity and these “low crafts.”<sup>117</sup>

The link between crafts and women’s art has been repeatedly studied by those like Dianne Sachko Macleod and those with an interest in Middle Eastern Art. The phenomenon is a global occurrence with women’s creations in cloth and other non-traditional mediums being defined as either essential for running a household or a hobby. These diminish the importance of both the works created and the lives of the women creating them. Constantine was the first to notice that these works had a value that was beyond utility and a means to pass boredom. She saw that the works had an impact on the artists creating them that was valuable in and of itself. These are trends that would continue in the United States as women became increasingly concerned with reclaiming their space and defining their work as important. These ideas would eventually spread worldwide

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 17.

### Lowry Stokes Sims

Lowry Stokes Sims bridges the gap between the formidable women who shaped the early museum institution and the modern curators of today, and like the previous curators discussed she had parents that supported her artistic curiosity. Born in 1949, Sims grew up in Queens. As a child, her parents often took her and her siblings to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>118</sup> The difference between Sims and her predecessors is that she is African American and they are not. While her parents encouraged her appreciation of the history and the arts, they were not sure if she would be able to make a career out of it as she recalls while describing her early Met experiences:

“My favorite galleries were the Egyptian ones, and I early aspired to be an archaeologist. However, my mother suggested that my race and lack of requisite financial inheritance would be an obstacle to that goal, and so I found the extremely lucrative career of art history instead.”<sup>119</sup>

Describing her career as lucrative is an understatement. Sims is holder of various degrees. She earned her B.A. in Art History from Queens College of the City University of New York; her M.A. in Art History from The Johns Hopkins University; and both a Master of Philosophy and a Ph.D. in Art History from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

In 1972, at the age of 23, Sims obtained her first position as an assistant to the education department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During her tenure at the museum, she advanced until she was the first African American woman to work at the Met as a curator. Her work at The

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<sup>118</sup> Lowry Stokes Sims, ‘I was Really A Nerd’ : Lowry Stokes Sims on Her Life in Art at ArtTable’s 2017 Benefit” *ArtNews*, April 27, 2017. Accessed May 2, 2019. <http://www.artnews.com/2017/04/27/i-was-really-a-nerd-lowry-stokes-sims-at-arttables-2017-benefit/>

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.



Met focused on adding African American artists to the collection; some of which include Robert Colescott, Faith Ringgold, Adrian Piper, Betye Saar, and Lorna Simpson.<sup>120</sup>

In 1999, Sims left her position at The Met to serve as Executive Director and curator for The Studio Museum of Harlem, and then a few years later the Charles Bronfman Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design.

While choosing any one exhibition of hers to discuss over another proves difficult, one of her most well-known projects took place at the Maryland Museum of Arts and Design. *The Global Africa Project's* opening reception took place in late 2010 with the exhibition ending mid-2011. It featured the work of more than 100 artists from Africa, Europe, Asia, the United States, and the Caribbean and was a timely exhibit as 2011 was recognized by the United Nations as “The Year of the Peoples of African Descent.”<sup>121</sup> The exhibition was an excellent example of Elke Krasny’s notion of global citizenship, as is evident with dozens of nationalities represented in the show.

In vein with Alexandra Kokoli’s argument against “biographism’s,” Sims hoped her exhibition would challenge the notion of a “singular African aesthetic and identity, and reflect the integration of African art and design without making the usual distinctions between ‘professional’ and ‘artisan.’”<sup>122</sup> To be an African Artist does not mean one thing, nor should it be the only reason for noted success. This is something she discussed in regards to the artist

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<sup>120</sup> Thomas Gale, "Sims, Lowery Stokes 1949–." From *Contemporary Black Biography*, accessed on Encyclopedia.com. 2005. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/sims-lowery-stokes-1949>

<sup>121</sup> “Artistic Voices of the Diaspora” *MAD Events*. April 2, 2011. Accessed May 2, 2019 <https://madmuseum.org/events/artistic-voices-diaspora>

<sup>122</sup>Museum of Arts and Design, “The Global Africa Project Explores the Impact of African Visual Culture on Contemporary Art, Craft, and Design around the World.” Press Release, September 16, 2010. MAD. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://madmuseum.org/press/releases/global-africa-project-explores-impact-african-visual-culture-contemporary-art-craft>

Howardena Pindell. Pindell, a friend of Sims, used to tell stories of how in the 1970's she would send slides of her work to various galleries. The galleries would be intrigued by her work and invite her in to discuss various possibilities, but after meeting with those at the gallery she was often told that they didn't show "Black art." This made Sims wonder what it was that defined Pindell's work as black (Fig. 7).<sup>123</sup> The galleries clearly felt it was because of the race of the artist who created it.

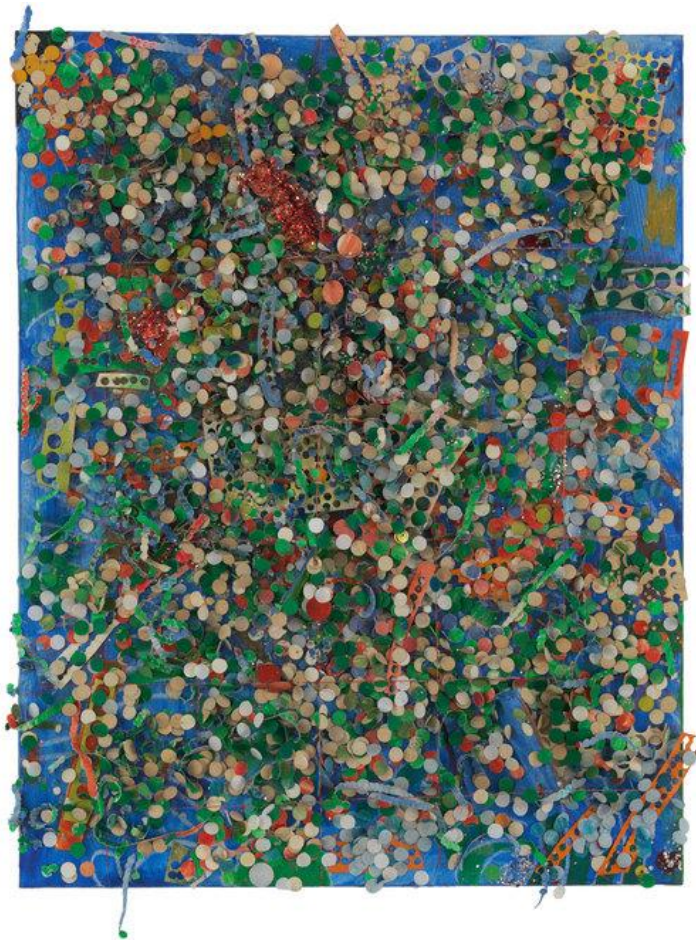


Figure 7 Howardena Pindell, "Untitled #101, 1979" Mixed Media on Board <https://www.howardenapindell.org/selected-paintings>

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<sup>123</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims, "I was Really a Nerd..."

These are the sort of thoughts that would lead to the creation of the exhibition *The Global Africa Project*. The exhibition featured everyday items such as contemporary fashion by designers Black Coffee, Sakina M'sa, and Victor Glemaud. Each designer came from a different part of the world and had a different aesthetic as a result. M'sa, who is from the Comoro Islands, had a feminine flair while simultaneously experimenting with deconstruction techniques; while the Haitian-American designer, Glemaud, used menswear as inspiration. None of the aesthetics were the same and thus helped narrate the story that everyone who is of African descent has their own personality and tastes that defy the stereotype of one shared African identity.

Found objects were often incorporated into the installation pieces featured in the show. Esther Mahlangu's BMW Art Car from 1991 was featured (Fig.8). The piece takes a modern American vehicle and covers it with the traditional designs of a South African Ndebele house. This collaboration was notable for several reasons. First, it was the first time a woman had been given the opportunity to work with the BMW art car project. Second, Esther Mahlangu was the



Figure 8 Esther Mahlangu, BMW Art Car 1991, Paint on Car,  
<https://www.bmwartcarcollection.com/2011/05/12-esther-mahlangu-bmw-art-car/>

first person from Africa to be given the opportunity. The bold colors and shapes quickly create an eye-catching pieces that mixes the contemporary with the traditional.

In addition to the diverse forms of art on display, the exhibition also had a series of special programs. These included lecture series and panel discussions, a pop-up art market, and a series of art classes taught by the artists. The classes were in subjects such as haberdasher, crocheting, and sweetgrass weaving.

The exhibition had an online form, titled *Conversations* that allowed for open discussion. It should be noted that this took place in 2010 when social media was firmly in the grips of the public but institutions were continuing to learn how to utilize these digital tools. Sims made the first contribution to the form, creating an environment of discussion and feedback with her statement:

“The point of this exhibition has been as much to encourage museumgoers to consider the mutable experience of “the African,” as it's been to provide a survey of contemporary art, craft and design made by Africans and members of the African diaspora. The question is did we succeed? Is this an idea that can catch on in the larger discourse? Or are we falling into an essentialist trap?”<sup>124</sup>

Other people are able to comment on her statement and contribute to the larger discussion. One of the early posts from an anonymous commenter discussed how when comparing two pieces of cloth, they saw an “African” aesthetic, but the rest of the exhibit challenged this as it paired things like Ikea furniture and crocheted hats in similar exhibits. The commenter ends the post by stating “That was what the show did for me: it tested my tendencies

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<sup>124</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims “On the Title ‘The Global Africa Project.’” Comment on *Africa Talks* for the MAD, February 28, 2011. Accessed on May 2, 2019 <http://gap.madmuseum.org/content/title-global-africa-project>

to essentialize and stereotype, but it quickly raptured that notion by forcing me to relate so many objects in a concentrated space.”<sup>125</sup>

The visitor was able to think critically about the exhibit, ponder the items on display in a worldly—or global—context and then write about their experience on an online platform that could help other visitors interpret the exhibition for themselves. Sims responded to most commenters with thoughtful posts in which she expands upon the ideas they reference or provides an inside look at the curator’s thought process. This is something that has been a constant throughout much of Sim’s curatorial work, making her an excellent example of a feminist curator.

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<sup>125</sup> Anonymous “On the Title ‘The Global Africa Project.’” Comment on *Africa Talks* for the MAD, March 2, 2011. Accessed on May 2, 2019 <http://gap.madmuseum.org/content/title-global-africa-project>

### Internationalism: Global Curators

The Iranian Women's Museum Movement, mentioned earlier, is in its early infancy and is still struggling to make a place for itself within the country of Iran. Thus, in an effort to increase Elke Krasny's notion of "global citizenship," the focus will shift from Eurocentric examples to movements in the Middle East and organizations associated with the United Nations working in countries throughout the world that provide excellent examples of organizations serving as platforms for women's arts empowerment. While this section focuses mainly on the Middle East it should be noted that the same occurrences have been found in South America and Asia, which will be discussed in the concluding section dedicated to Adelina von Furstenberg.

"Attitudes toward Gender Equity" by Esin Atil is an excellent source to introduce the idea of museums outside of the western sphere of influence acting as platforms of empowerment. Atil expands beyond the American museum experience and briefs on how Islamic countries have handled their museums. The essay itself is very short, but it makes multiple points that are relevant to the discussion of empowerment. When Atil wrote the essay in 1994, there were more women working as the directors or department heads in Islamic museums than there were in American and European institutions.<sup>126</sup> She notes how Najah al-Attar was the minister of culture in Syria for over ten years. Al-Attar continued to serve as minister of culture until the year 2000 and has since become the Vice President of Syria.

"Museum, Women, and Empowerment in the MENA Counties," by Carol Malt, expands on Atil's work by inviting the reader to imagine the issues from a non-western standpoint. Malt is a Fulbright Senior Scholar who specializes in women and Middle Eastern Museums. These

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<sup>126</sup> Esin Atil, "Attitudes Towards Gender Equity" in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, ed. Jane R. Glasser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institute, 1994), 63.

museums, Malt notes, were all established in a similar fashion. They were started by foreigners and heavily influenced by ideas of colonialism.<sup>127</sup> They developed as a result of tourism in the area and were built to serve the Europeans who came to visit these “exotic” places. As a result, they were structured after the museums founded in Europe. This is a system that has continued to remain in these institutions even after the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries won their independence from the Europeans.

These museums, now often run by the various Ministries of Culture, were developed as agents of social control for governing bodies.<sup>128</sup> Museums were used as a way to present a certain kind of history; frequently it was one that favored the men in power. The elite men often had elite wives who involved themselves with museums. They attempted to present a history that favored the upper classes who were in power.

At first these women were limited to “womanly” fields such as jewelry, costume, or the decorative arts. It was inappropriate for her to busy herself with the collections of men, such as objects connected to war.<sup>129</sup> This is something that Dianne Sachko Macleod noted about early American women working in the museum field. Like their American predecessors, the MENA country women would slowly expand past this gendered role and pursue the increasing number of opportunities in the field.

In 2005 when Malt was conducting interviews in the MENA countries, she identified twenty-four women who were either curators or directors of the museums in Jordan. Twenty-four women within an entire country may not seem like a high number, but during the time of her

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<sup>127</sup> Carol Malt, “Museums, women, and empowerment in the MENA countries” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy Levin (Oxon: Routledge 2010), 43.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

study there were only thirty-six museums in the entire county; thus, two-thirds of museums had women in higher ranking positions than just a secretary.<sup>130</sup> Regardless of this fact, there still exists a very prominent glass ceiling for women in the region.

Unfortunately, Malt states this is due to the fact that the woman of these countries do not view mainstream history as something relevant to them, nor do they view their personal history as a means of empowerment.<sup>131</sup> Without finding meaning in history, women are limited in their abilities.

Malt's research suggests that museums are the perfect platform to change this dynamic. Museums in the MENA countries have been increasingly viewed as a safe space for people to learn and explore new ideas without having a sense of shame or ownership over the negative aspects of the exhibit. Exhibits can discuss the region's history with war, colonization, and other less than ideal moments from their past. For the first time in many decades Jordan was able to investigate its own history. The Jordanian government encourages bringing school-age children to museums in order to educate them about their country's history. Thus, museums can become platforms for women to challenge the traditional male interpretations of culture.<sup>132</sup> Malt continues to say that museums can provide methods of empowerment through employment, reinterpretation of objects, and scholarship.<sup>133</sup> Similar to the museum program set up by Phoebe Hearst at the Hearst Domestic Industries, these women are able to better themselves and their community through their active membership in the museum community.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 45.



As women in these countries continue to seek out work in museums, Malt began to wonder what drew them to the field. Through her interviews she found that they were interested in preserving and sharing cultures. There was also a focus to educate on “the other,” exemplified by her interview with Zhor Rehilil. At the time, Rehilil was a Muslim conservator working at the Museum of Moroccan Judaism in Casablanca. She has since been appointed director of the museum after a long-term tenure from former director Simon Levy. In her interview with Malt, Rehilil stated that:

“I am a pioneer! The first Muslim to work in Jewish Museums. The first student to work on Jews and Jewish culture. Why? Because I studied anthropology, therefore one should be interested in ‘The Other.’”<sup>134</sup>

Rehilil’s success in this scenario is not defined by her gender, but rather by her religion. In a region that has tumultuous relations with people of other religions, women are working together to challenge these societal norms. Thus, women are breaking down barriers in the MENA countries and focusing on both female empowerment and inclusivity while simultaneously promoting peace and prosperity in the region.

The existence of the Casablanca Museum of Moroccan Judaism is an empowering platform simply because of the content it displays. The museum was founded in 1997 with the support of the Moroccan government and Ministry of Culture.<sup>135</sup> The museum has gained even more freedom in what they are able to display since the adaptation of a new constitution by the Moroccan government in 2011. Rehilil stresses the importance of this new governmental focus

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>135</sup> Saad Guerraoui, “Jewish Heritage Preserved in Casablanca Museum.” *The Arab Weekly*. April 9, 2015. Accessed February 22, 2019 <https://theArabweekly.com/jewish-heritage-preserved-casablanca-museum>

to emphasize “both ethnic and religious pluralism” in the country by positioning a large copy of the constitution in the entrance way to the museum.<sup>136</sup>

The collection features items from Jewish heritage that include jewelry, wedding dresses, and photographs from Jewish history and culture. The effort to present Jewish culture comes from the long history of Jews living in the country. They have been calling Morocco home for centuries, with their numbers growing substantially in the country after the widespread persecution of Jews in Europe during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, after the creation of Israel in 1948, the country saw a drastic drop in population from over 250,000 to just a few thousand. This has led to a silencing of this group’s presence within the country that the museum is now trying to remedy.<sup>137</sup>

The museum’s efforts seem to be working. Rehihil notes how the majority of visitors to the museum are Muslim tourists visiting from neighboring Arab nations. She says that the majority of the tourists come to Morocco to see the Hassan II mosque and then discover that the only museum dedicated to Jewish heritage in the Arab world is located nearby. As illustrated by one student who visited the museum, many of the visitors don’t realize that a Jewish community even exists in Morocco.<sup>138</sup>

Simon Levy, who was still director at that time, stated in a 2011 interview that they want to use the museum as a platform to educate the citizens of Morocco “That the Jews of Morocco did not disappear without a trace... a Jew is [often misrepresented as] simply somebody who kills someone in Palestine, even if Jews have contributed enormously to this country”<sup>139</sup> While it

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> AFP, “Only Jewish Museum in Arab World.” *YNet News*. May 11, 2011. Accessed February 22, 2019 <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4027095,00.html>

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

seems that there is a growing tolerance for Jewish culture in the country of Morocco—and that the museum is contributing to that consciousness—there is still a risk involved when displaying the items. In an effort to promote visitor safety, a police officer is often stationed outside the museum doors.<sup>140</sup> Nonetheless, with continued promotion of cultural awareness, it is possible to make change in an area that historically has been riddled with cultural tension.

Malt comments that one of the reasons curators like Rehihil are drawn to the field of museum studies and able to succeed not because it “represented a secular or internationally connected profession,” but because they were interested in “history and traditions of their own culture.”<sup>141</sup> They were not seeking to “influence society or communicate their ideas about women’s issues,” but they also did not rule it out as being possible.<sup>142</sup> The employment they found at these institutions was the empowerment accessible at the moment. They are making meaningful change without necessarily shaking the foundation of these countries’ principles.

Malt’s larger work *Women’s Voices in Middle East Museums* provides more context for women working in the MENA countries with an in-depth analysis of women working in the country of Jordan. While Malt does not explicitly state why she chose Jordan for her case studies, it might be that Jordan has historically been the most peaceful country in the Middle East and has been known for its cultural tourism.

She begins her book by stating that Middle Eastern countries have different understandings of what a museum is. Malt notes how western museum practices are inappropriate in a Middle Eastern museum; specifically, she cites a conversation she had with

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Malt, “Women, Museums...” 46.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 46.

Suha Shoman, founder of the Darat al Funun—an art center that supports local artists—in which Shoman said that western museum policies are unnecessarily rigid and inappropriate for Middle Eastern museums.<sup>143</sup>

Darat al Funun is another Middle Eastern art center that has been making waves in the art world. It was founded in Jordan in 1988 by Shuha Shoman. The organization is dedicated to supporting arts and artists in Jordan. Five out of seven employees are women. As an art center, rather than a museum, they strive to merge the visual arts with other artistic endeavors which include everything from performance art to film, concerts, and other cultural events.<sup>144</sup>

The center has worked hard to build up its reputation. In 1993 they were able to secure their main building which is used to display exhibits, house an art library, and provide space for various workshops and performances. All of this takes place within an archaeological site. The site, which is the remains of a Byzantine church built over a Roman temple, was excavated in 1993 and currently serves as the Darat al Funun garden. This space allows for performing arts, outdoor film screenings, and open exhibition space.

While the traditional museum may be a new phenomenon to the Middle East, the act of collecting is not. Malt states that collections in the area have existed in the form of libraries for millennia. She references the library of Alexandria during the Hellenistic period and the churches and monasteries of the medieval era.<sup>145</sup> These collections were mainly concerned with obtaining scrolls and then illuminated manuscripts. These illuminated pieces of ephemeral material were viewed as more valuable than physical objects or large-scale artworks. Museums that featured

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<sup>143</sup> Carol Malt, *Women's Voices in Middle East Museums: Case Studies in Jordan* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), VII.

<sup>144</sup> "Our Story." Darat Al Funun. Accessed February 10, 2019. [http://daratalfunun.org/?page\\_id=85](http://daratalfunun.org/?page_id=85).

<sup>145</sup> Malt, Carol, *Women's Voices*, XIV.

art, sculpture, and artifacts began to appear in the west during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and would not appear in the Middle East until the colonization frenzy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

These museums, as already stated, were largely founded and run by foreigners. For a long time, there was a lack of interest from Jordanians in their monuments and historical objects. Malt does not discuss iconoclasm in relation to Islamic countries, but there seems to be a real connection. The worship of idols is forbidden in Islam and putting items on literal pedestals within a museum might be off-putting for someone who has grown up with this belief instilled in them. This could prove to be an interesting case for further study. Questions could include asking visitors of Middle Eastern museums about their thoughts on whether or not museums are “worshipping” objects and visitors’ general feedback. Perhaps this is why, as Malt notes, museums in the Middle East were largely treated as warehouses for objects that had been obtained through plunder, colonial history, and purchase.<sup>146</sup>

While the Middle East has historically been restrictive to women, interviews with women working in Jordan revealed that the discrimination decreases with age. Women of childbearing age, who typically would be at home raising a family, are often not taken as seriously. Malt notes that the women who are most respected in their careers are almost always college educated, unmarried, post-menopausal, and middle class.<sup>147</sup> These are the woman who have the greatest chance of obtaining a higher position within an organization. Regardless of this possibility, many women interviewed by Malt expressed that it was unlikely they would ever be considered for promotion due to the fact that they are female.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., XVII.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 15.

Despite this, many of the women that Malt interviewed had positive things to say about the museums where they worked. The museums funded by the Jordanian government paid men and women of the same position equally. This is something that was reiterated throughout Malt's book— women are receiving the *same* pay as their male counterparts. Another benefit that many working mothers spoke of favorably was the flexibility they had when it came to raising their children. Maternity leave was anywhere from 40 to 60 days in length and women are allowed to leave work up to two hours early to go and take care of their children.<sup>149</sup>

When asked about women's rights and feminism there was no real consensus. Some felt that feminism was a western phenomenon and not needed in the Middle East because they have Islam to guide them; others quietly supported women's rights, but were uncertain of the term "feminism." Their understanding of the word came from the radical feminism of the 1970s that was often misrepresented through images of bra burning and loud protests.<sup>150</sup> Troublingly, the women's rights organizations that exist in Jordan were all almost exclusively founded by men. The organizations are all governmental agencies and therefore frown upon women coming together collectively in a formal group.<sup>151</sup>

Despite their disapproval of women organizing for themselves, the government seems to support women organizing for the country as a whole. Museums in Jordan are allowing Jordanians to reclaim their cultural identity; this is something that the government supports. Jordan has had a tumultuous history when it comes to who was their governing force. They were ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries and then given to the British shortly after WWI. The country of Jordan was not a fully independent state until 1948. Jordan also has a high percentage

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 19.

of refugees, many of which are Palestinian. Some argue that the museum is the perfect institution for Jordan to promote a cultural identity while others feel that this is too political a museum goal for their involvement.<sup>152</sup>

Since Malt published her book in 2005, there have been some drastic changes to the region. While Jordan has remained relatively unscathed from the violence that started with the Arab Spring and has continued in one form or another to the present, it seems reasonable to assume it still has a psychological impact on the people living and working in the area. To gain a better understanding, we can look at other nearby countries and the art organizations for answers.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 35.

Raneen Bukhari

Saudi Arabia has a political stigma surrounding it as a country of repression, greed, and terrorism. The issues surrounding women's rights in a country that just recently gave them the right to drive has been talked about by outside nations and human rights' activists for years. This is why it may be surprising that women have been leading the country's small, but blossoming, cultural scene for decades.<sup>153</sup> Their efforts have finally made an impact on a national scale with the government announcing \$64 billion commitment to the entertainment and cultural sector in an effort to diversify the Kingdom's economy.<sup>154</sup>

While this is a recent development on a national scale, the arts have existed underground in the area for decades. Largely, women have been the driving force behind it. Historically, the role of the artists has been designated to women in Saudi Arabia as noted by art historian Eiman Elgibreen from the Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University.<sup>155</sup> Elgibreen says that women were known as the textile weavers and caretakers of the home—thus painting murals on their family's walls was well within their domestic sphere of influence. The domestic sphere in the Middle East is similar to that of the domestic sphere that existed in the United States during the 1800s. Women in both scenarios were given freedom of expression within the home, but not outside of it. This leads to an increase in domestic arts as a form of expression and empowerment for the woman.

While these instances have existed for decades, there is a new generation of women making waves in the region. Raneen Bukhari is an excellent example of a contemporary woman

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<sup>153</sup> Wided Rihana Khadraoui, "Don't Forget the Women Who Forged Saudi Arabia's Art Scene." *Artsy*, July 13, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-forget-women-forged-saudi-arabias-art-scene>.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*



who is making an impact in the art world in Saudi Arabia. Bukhari made the BBC's "100 Women" list in 2018; the 31-year-old placed 16 on the list and was summarized in two short sentences in the article: "**Curator and social media manager**, Saudi Arabia. Bukhari is a curator and art consultant, who also works for her family's design business."<sup>156</sup> This short statement does not do Bukhari's work justice. She is more than just a shop girl who works in her parent's business—Desert Designs Art Gallery—she is a curator, public speaker, and activist.

In 2012, Bukhari founded LOUD Art, which was an organization that produced an exhibition in an effort to inspire new forms of art. Bukhari told her interviewer from the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW) that in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia the art scene was limited to abstract expressionism with very little experimentation.<sup>157</sup> Bukhari wanted



Figure 9 LOUD Art at Desert Designs Gallery, 2016. Courtesy of LOUD Art.  
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-forget-women-forged-saudi-arabias-art-scene>

<sup>156</sup> "BBC 100 Women 2018: Who Is on the List?" *BBC News*. November 19, 2018. Accessed February 11, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-46225037>.

<sup>157</sup> Samyah Alfoory, "Transforming Art in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province: LOUD Art and Huna Art." *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*. August 30, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://agsiw.org/transforming-art-in-saudi-arabias-eastern-province/>.

to encourage new forms of art, so she contacted artists asking for installations, sculptures, performances, digital, video, etc. The result was a lot of locals asking how these mediums were “art” and allowed Bukhari to start a dialogue around the subject. After the inaugural year, LOUD art became synonymous with public art. Khobar, the city in which LOUD art takes place, is a new city and fairly industrial in its appearances. In order to beautify the streets, they worked on concepts of murals and other public art ideas (Fig. 9).

The second project involving Bukhari involved a partnership with her co-creator Najla Abdulla. The project is called Huna. Unlike LOUD which focused on inspiring art in Khobar, Huna is more focused on creating a dialogue about art inside Khobar. Huna means “art is here.”<sup>158</sup> It was inspired by a similar art group based in the city of Jeddah where artist’s talks take place regularly and help to stimulate the creative community within the city. The group is comprised of ten volunteers that work together to create bi-weekly events featuring various speakers from the artist community.

Bukhari continues to say, “We have these mixed-gender gatherings, which is crazy for Saudi Arabia, and we talk about creative things and how we can work together to increase our productivity to shine and be more global.”<sup>159</sup> Not only is this socially taboo for the country, but it poses the possibility of serious risks.

The group uses social media to increase their accessibility to the public. Snapchat, Bukhari tells, is especially useful as they allow various artists to take over the account and give tours of their art shows to Huna’s followers. As of 2016 they had over 10,000 followers on the account.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

The main goal of these groups, Bukhari says, is to create an art culture in a country that doesn't have one. Saudi Arabia does not have art institutions like museums and galleries, and this is what Bukhari faults for the lack of a thriving and established art scene. "The fact that the oldest art gallery in Saudi [Arabia] is only eight years old can tell you a lot about the history of art here."<sup>160</sup> They are building a community of likeminded people from nothing. Bukhari wants to try to include as many people as possible. She says:

"LOUD is pushing the younger generation of artists to do more work; it adds to the culture by making it for the people. Art galleries often become very elite and only people of a certain class attend, but we have artwork that starts at \$20 or \$30 – prices unheard of in most galleries in Saudi. I want to have a market where anybody can attend, anybody should attend, and everybody can buy. If you like it, buy it, because it's affordable. That's the culture I'm trying to promote and create."<sup>161</sup>

While their website appears to have stopped being updated in 2016, their Instagram @desertdesignssa is still active. Recent posts show that they offer watercolor workshops, frequent gallery exhibition openings, and promote local craftsmen. The majority of the items they sell appear to be handcrafted and they always give ample credit to the artists that they work with.

Bukhari and her organizations are all focused on promoting local artists as a way of continuing dialogue regarding their country, heritage, and lifestyles. She is trying to encourage artists to push the boundaries of their craft and make statements that mean something to them. By creating these platforms (LOUD, Desert Design, Huna) she is allowing artists to feel comfortable in their craft and create a real dialogue surrounding it.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

Her latest endeavor is the one that placed her on the BBC's list of 100 Women. Bukhari was involved in Contemporary Collective in 2017. The exhibition, "We Are Not Alone," featured work from the British Council's art collection in an effort to explore "how our common feelings, anxieties and human behavior can be expressed through the familiar, the peculiar, the uncanny and the transcendental. The exhibited artworks have been selected to encourage dialogue and curiosity."

These are feats that she appears to be accomplishing. All of the current work that she promotes on her Instagram page, which is her platform of choice, seems to be working towards encouraging new ideas and innovative art for the country. She is striving towards Elke Krasny's goal of an interconnected world by opening up the Saudi Arabian art scene to the rest of the world. With this increased awareness, there is more opportunity for collaboration with our artists, galleries, and countries.

### Adelina von Furstenberg

Another woman who has been involved in meaningful curatorship is Adelina von Furstenberg. von Fürstenberg is perhaps the best example of what Elke Krasny wrote about in her essay titled “Citizenship and the Museum: On Feminist Acts.” Krasny advocating for connecting global citizenship to the museum as a “necessary feminist act,” because both the institutions of citizenship and museums are deeply gendered, and this results in an “institutional inequality and sexualised epistemology” is easily reflected in von Furstenberg’s work.<sup>162</sup>

Von Furstenberg is an international Swiss curator of Armenian origin. She is known as one of the first curators to show interest in non-European artists with her efforts as the founder of the Centre d’Art Contemporain in Geneva.<sup>163</sup> Her work has a continual interest in worldwide social issues. In 1995 she founded ART for the World, which is a non-government organization (NGO) associated with the United Nations department of public information. von Fürstenberg was invited to curate the fiftieth anniversary exhibition for the United Nations titled *Dialogues of Peace*. The exhibition was such a success that it continued to operate as an NGO. Since the inaugural exhibition, ART for the World has continued to create films and exhibitions on issues relating to the declaration of human rights. The organization is an example of a “museum without walls,” or groups of people that run exhibits or digital exhibitions without having one specific building to call their home base, and that aims to bring information and public awareness to the global community. In her own words, von Furstenberg describes the organization as follows:

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<sup>162</sup> Krasny, “Citizenship and the Museum...” 75.

<sup>163</sup> "Adelina Von Furstenberg," *Armeniapedia*, Accessed February 10, 2019. [http://www.armeniapedia.org/wiki/Adelina\\_von\\_Furstenberg](http://www.armeniapedia.org/wiki/Adelina_von_Furstenberg).

“How are the intentions of ART for The World reflected in the way the organisation operates? We are a museum without walls made up of a limited permanent staff and a global ensemble of people who do their own work outside of what we do. Most of our exhibitions are global productions, which relates not only to how the organisation works, but also to various experiences.”<sup>164</sup>

The projects have highlighted everything from the depiction of transgendered and feminist rights to issues of racism. They are not afraid to address difficult subject matter; one project was a series of short films compiled together to create “Stories on Human Rights.” One of the many stories featured throughout the short films focused on the romantic relationship between a woman of color and a neo-Nazi.<sup>165</sup>

G. Roger Denson, a colleague of von Furstenberg, recounts how the two of them were both present in New York City on September 11, 2001. von Furstenberg had been visiting the city to launch *Playground and Toys* (Fig. 10), an exhibit that would have focused on improving the well-being of children living in poverty around the world. Unfortunately, the chaos that unfolded that week led them to cancel the opening and instead hold a private unveiling of plans for future exhibits.<sup>166</sup> Exhibitions were held in Athens, Milan, New Delhi, London, Hobart, Yerevan, and various refugee camps in Africa during the following years.

With each exhibition came the actual completion of a playground that children were able to use. von Furstenberg used the weeks after the 9/11 tragedy to focus her attention on brightening the lives of children. By searching for existing playgrounds or a plot to build them on, von Fürstenberg interacts with the locals and invites artists who approach her to contribute to

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<sup>164</sup> Stephanie Bailey, "Adelina Von Fürstenberg in Conversation." *Ocula*. May 26, 2016. Accessed February 11, 2019. <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/adelina-von-furstenberg/>.

<sup>165</sup> G. Roger, Denson. "Adelina Von Fürstenberg and ART for the World Remember Stolen Lives and Legacies," *The Huffington Post*. December 07, 2017. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/adelina-von-furstenberg-a\\_b\\_12374744.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/adelina-von-furstenberg-a_b_12374744.html).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*.

the project. “Going to Nigeria to find a Nigerian artist is not always interesting, let alone productive.” Instead, von Furstenberg says she, “prefers to go Nigeria to build playgrounds and art for children and meet the artists in that way.”<sup>167</sup>



Figure 10 Fabrice Gygi, *Playground, Deepalaya School, New Delhi, 2002*. Courtesy of ART for the World “Playgrounds & Toys” <https://www.artfortheworld.net/playgrounds-toys>

Using this method, ART for the World has been able to create playgrounds worldwide, at least ten of them being in India.<sup>168</sup> ART for the World aims to give back to the community and to create a meaningful connection between art and life.

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<sup>167</sup> "Adelina Von Furstenberg." *Armeniapedia*.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

The themes of the exhibits vary from socio-political, environmental, ethnic, and gender-specific. Furstenberg does not think that the work she does can negotiate a difference on the political world stage, but she hopes that it can suggest change and help direct the impacted communities in a positive direction.

ART for the World has a special focus on non-western art. According to von Fürstenberg, this is because artists working in Africa, South America, and Asia have less of an aesthetic drive and more of a drive for change. This is something that von Fürstenberg argues western artists have lost. She says:

“When I started working in contemporary art, there was really a very strong energy among artists... They believed that art could change the world. Then gradually all of this transformed to a more aesthetic approach. However, artists from India or South America, for example, still believe that, because they are artists, they can change the world. They are fighting for their art... This is what I love so much. When an artist in India works on women’s issues, it is not because of aesthetic reasons but because there is a problem. Of course the result is art, it is not revolution. It is a work of art because she is an artist, and she can only do art. She is not a philosopher, activist, etc, but an artist who, in a certain, non-aggressive world, works towards change.”<sup>169</sup>

Despite this, von Fürstenberg states that artists and curators do not have the power to negotiate in any real political setting. The most a cultural worker can do is make suggestions to society and wait for their ideas to catch on.<sup>170</sup> While this may be an over-simplification of the lack of power artists have on society, it is apparent that in terms of political power artists and curators rank lower than high level government officials. Regardless, the impact artists have on a community can shape the decisions made. This is why art is so important for social change.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Denson Roger, "Adelina Von Fürstenberg."



ART for the World does not strive to destroy history in order to create new beautiful things, but rather incorporate contemporary art within the context of history. An excellent example of this can be found in ART for the World's first installation show. Presented in 1996, *Bajo el Volcan (Under the Volcano)*, focused on the economic disparity amongst native peoples of the Americas and the European descendants who also referred to the land as home. This exhibition focused on the needs of villagers living around the Mexican city of Tepotzlan. The villagers were upset because an outside corporate entity had plans to build a large golf course that was expected to use more than half a million gallons of water per day—a troubling statistic because the villagers were unable to sustain themselves on the little water that was already available to them. In addition to the humanitarian need for an adequate water supply, the construction of the golf course would also have led to the destruction of some important architectural pieces.<sup>171</sup> With the exhibit's efforts to raise awareness regarding these two issues, von Furstenberg and ART for the World were successful in delaying the golf course and providing the villagers with a running water supply adequate for their needs.

Water is a repeated topic within the ART for the World organization. Most recently, the 2018 exhibition titled *Agua (Water)*, aimed to address concerns regarding the contamination of the global water supply in exchange for the commercial production of merchandise and the diminishing rainfall as a result of climate change.<sup>172</sup>

The exhibit catalog opens with an introduction in which von Furstenberg questions the sudden change regarding water. She writes that since the beginning of civilization, water has been recognized as a public resource available to all men, women, and children. She notes how

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> *Distinguishing Between an Environment and a Reservoir*. (Art for the World Exhibit Catalogue: 2018). Accessed February 1, 2019. [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5ad8ca\\_47b8cdf4558c4ef58381f0906d1035f1.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5ad8ca_47b8cdf4558c4ef58381f0906d1035f1.pdf)

the Byzantium Emperor Justinian I announced that all the natural elements are free for all mankind.<sup>173,174</sup> For centuries this was understood; any shortage of water was due purely to environmental reasons and not done by the hands of men. In recent decades there has been a shift in understanding as water has increasingly been viewed as a commodity that can be bottled and sold.

Unfortunately, as the supply of usable water continues to diminish due to pollution, consumption, and commercialization of our planet's resources, the value in water will continue to rise and the accessibility of it to impoverished areas will decline. ART for the World hopes to address these concerns and make meaningful change through the *Aqua (Water)* exhibition.



Figure 11 Eduardo Srur, *Hora da Onca Beber Agua*, 2014/2017, Inflatable and Paint.  
<https://www.aqua-artfortheworld.net/installation-photos>

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> “Aqua: Contemporary Artists on Water Issues,” *ART for the World*. Accessed February 24, 2019.  
<https://www.aqua-artfortheworld.net/home>

Artists involved in the exhibition submitted pieces that addressed the problems already stated, as well as other impacts causing the decline in water's accessibility. Eduardo Srur's piece, *Hora da Onca Beber Agua (It is time for Jaguar to drink water)* addresses the impact water scarcity has on endangered animals (Fig. 11).

The goal of the exhibit is well within its means. ART for the World strives to make slow change by raising awareness about contemporary issues in the hope of inspiring others to make conscious efforts to remedy the problems. ART for the World brings voice to the world's most current issues in a way that strives to bring meaningful change and global awareness. With von Furstenberg as their leader, the group of artists and curators working to realize this cause are making global impacts in countries that may not have the same opportunities as those in the United States and Western Europe. The ability to become increasingly interconnected is expanding as digital platforms are bringing artists from these non-western countries to some of the biggest contemporary art centers in Europe and the United States. By bringing different viewpoints and histories to the forefront, organizations can work together on a global scale to make a difference.

### **Censorship, Social Movements, and the Impact on Museums**

Issues of censorship are nothing new in the art world. Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* had clothing painted over it after the artist's death; degenerate art was banned in Hitler's Germany; and in 1999 New York Governor Rudy Giuliani threatened to defund the Brooklyn Museum for a controversial exhibition. Despite the constant threat of authorities banning an artist's work, there is a new threat in the cultural sector. Social media has led to an increase in mob mentality judgment that has forced museums to question where the line is drawn between censorship and mindful stewardship. This is especially apparent when looking at cases regarding gender issues.

Until now, this paper has addressed the role women have held as employees in museums. These women were either "proto-feminists" or self-declared feminists. Therefore, a shift in discussion about the role that feminism has had on the museum is relevant, as the relationship between the two is symbiotic; thus one cannot be discussed without acknowledging the other. The majority of issues that have developed in recent years have been influenced by the rise in social media, web presence, and general world interconnectivity.

Unsurprisingly, artists have had a large role in this relationship. During the 1980s the art world was forced to confront inequality when the Guerrilla Girls broke into the scene and began to plaster startling statistics about the art world across New York City. Their activism was a result of the 1970s feminist texts, such as Linda Nochlin's ground-breaking essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and continued to prompt conversation about gender rights.

One of the Guerrilla Girl's most famed pieces stated that 85% of the nudes in the modern art section of the Metropolitan are female, while only 5% of the artists are.<sup>175</sup> The Guerrilla Girls hoped to make a real change by spreading the message of inequality in the art world through humor.<sup>176</sup> While this message was first plastered across the art world during the mid-to-late 1980s, it seems little has actually been done in response to their message.

While the issues remain the same, the tactics to help inspire change have drastically changed. Kaywin Feldman, director of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, notes in her essay "Guerillas in Our Midst," that the time for Guerilla Girl-esque tactics has passed. What was once seen as the revolutionary spirit to eradicate sexism in the art world now feels dated and at times prejudiced against some of the gender issues in today's current socio-cultural climate.<sup>177</sup>

Feldman believes the Guerilla Girls had a time and a place in the art movement; but as they rely on the same 1980s videos and techniques that made them popular, they continue to embarrass themselves and do little to help the issues in the art world today. Specifically, Feldman states that the masks the women hide behind do more to hurt them and their mission than help them. The original intent of the masks was to provide protection to the protesters via anonymity while promoting women artists from art history. Feldman states that the current generation relies on public figures having a sense of transparency and being able to find organization leaders easily online.<sup>178</sup> In the age of social media, people have become accustomed

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<sup>175</sup> Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, Color offset on illustration board, National Gallery of Art, Object Art Page Accessed April 08, 2018. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.139856.html>.

<sup>176</sup> Kaywin Feldman, "Guerrillas in Our Midst: A Museum Director's Appeal for a New Feminist Agenda," in *Feminism and Museums*, ed. Jenna Ashton (Edinburgh&Boston: MuseumEtc), 101.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 107 .

to people standing up for what they believe in and proclaiming it proudly. The issue of not being able to utter “the f-word” without being labeled a feminazi is no longer the case.<sup>179</sup>

Despite the change in culture since the 1980s, there still remains a lot of work to be done in terms of understanding woman in art. Feldman suggests that the solution is to look internally to museum leadership and focus on building a diverse staff to help stabilize the institution.<sup>180</sup>

While Feldman focuses on the nature of the museum, there is a growing presence of people online who have been tackling sexism and censorship in museums by reaching out online.

In some cases, women are furious at the way male artists have treated them and depicted their bodies, and in others they are furious at museums for removing them from their walls. While women have been the subject of art and art scandals for hundreds of years, it seems that in the wake of the social media justice movements it has become even more turbulent.

Issues regarding whether or not an artist should maintain respectability in the field due to their technical skill is challenged when questionable facts about their past are uncovered. There have been countless artists throughout history who have been praised as masters despite leading less than morally acceptable lives. The stories of Caravaggio murdering a man, Picasso taking advantage of countless women, and Pollock having a temper are all well-known facets of their canon. These men drank too much and behaved badly, yet it is ignored because their work is considered so “masterful.”

These issues become even more apparent when discussing living artists. It could be argued that the aforementioned men are acceptable to praise because they are no longer among the living and cannot profit from their widespread appreciation. However, when we consider

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 110.

living artists and their wrongdoings, this distinction does not exist and by supporting them we are acting as patrons of their work. Many find this off-putting—how can you support the work of an artist when you know the details of his crimes? The example mentioned previously relating to Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta is a perfect example. Despite the suspicion that Andre was responsible for her death, he was able to continue to have a very successful artist career. More current examples can be found in the accusations of sexual misconduct by artist Chuck Close.<sup>181</sup> It is harder to separate the work from the man when they are still taking up space in the world rather than merely existing in books.

Adam Kirsch of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an article that discusses this very issue. Kirsch identifies the public image of the artist as a brooding, subversive, misunderstood outsider that captures the hearts and attention of his admirers, through this aura of mystique.<sup>182</sup>

Moreover, the patrons of these artists are equally questionable. G. Roger Denson acknowledges that many of the dictators of the last century were also supporters of the arts when he writes:

“Wilhelm, Romanov, Hitler, Goering, Stalin, Mao, Pinochet, Pol Pot, Amin, Milosovic, Saddam, Bin-Laden, Kim Jong-il: all had been known to sit raptly at the opera or ballet, or enthusiastically attend exhibitions of fine art, only hours after supervising collective murder in gas chambers, gulags and firing squads — or at the very moment that storm troopers or terrorists were mowing down scores of victims.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, “Four More Women Allege Sexual Misconduct by Chuck Close.” *Hyperallergic*. January 16, 2018. Accessed April 6, 2019 <https://hyperallergic.com/420538/four-more-women-allege-sexual-misconduct-by-chuck-close/>

<sup>182</sup> Adam Kirsch, “What Should We Do About Scandalous Artists?” *Wall Street Journal*. January 24, 2019. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-should-we-do-about-scandalous-artists-11548352964>.

<sup>183</sup> Denson, 2017.

In this case, Denson notes how these men were only acknowledging the artistic endeavors that they viewed as being worthy of their attendance. Ballet and classical art shows are accepted canons of bourgeois art forms. The avant-garde was not supported in these ventures.

Further, art has also played a critical role in the promotion of these men's ideas. Consider the fact that many of them relied heavily on propaganda works to promote their causes. These works were commissioned by the regimes and were—even if ever so slightly—supporting the artists that were tasked with the job. This leads to questioning the intentions behind a work of art's creation.

Regardless of this alluring artist image, art has continually been a victim of censorship as it pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable for public consumption. Art almost always is a commodity. New works are produced and criticized for being overly risqué, sexual, or generally inappropriate in nature. However, the censorship of works differs today in that we have access to all of the world's art through the sharing of images online. While social media is supposed to induce freedom of speech and the spread of ideas, the notion that some things might be too inappropriate still prevails. What should be used as a way to prevent the sharing of non-consensual or pornographic images is also being used to prevent the sharing of art work.

It is the museum's job to judge whether or not something should be exhibited within its walls. If a troubling piece—or a piece with a troubling creator—is included in an exhibition, the museums needs to contextualize it accordingly or face the possibility of public backlash. This backlash is something some museums have already experienced.

Hilde Hein's article "Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective" challenges the modern museum by accusing them of trying to accomplish too many things. She states that the



modern museum is still restricted by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century ideologies that originally founded the institution while simultaneously embracing the ideas brought about by the modern technological age. Summarized nicely she asserts “the museum suffers less from the failure of ingenious ideas than from their surplus and the confusion of the system that brings them forth.”<sup>184</sup>

Hein continues with her evaluation of the art world; with her assessment stating:

“Museums face a dilemma; they must make a putative choice between presenting objective knowledge of truths certified by reliable, value-free standards, or the alarming universal principles and total relativism, the claim that ‘anything goes.’ Museums have been more tolerant toward the second option than most mainstream institutions, but at some cost to their credibility and authority.”<sup>185</sup>

The article reiterates that visitors do not leave behind their experiences when they walk through the doors of a museum, but rather take those experiences and use them to interpret what they see. Thus, Hein argues that museums should stop trying to belittle their visitors by giving them a concise interpretation of a piece, but rather should embrace the fact that visitors “remain personally inflected participants in a conversation, inclusive of other visitors, past and present, within an environment staged by the museum.”<sup>186</sup>

In principle this seems great, but in practice it has proven to be difficult. Both society and the museum struggle to reconcile the intense emotions faced by the present social movements with their feeling of loyalty to tradition and the practices that come with it. As a result, museums have faced backlash from the principles that Hein calls “anything goes” and have had to

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<sup>184</sup> Hilde Hein, "Looking At Museums From A Feminist Perspective," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy Levin (Oxon, Routledge), 53.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

backtrack on what they present. Each museum handles it differently and it does not appear that there has been a reliable solution for dealing with these problems.

While discussing these issues, it is important to keep in mind that all of these cases have arisen in the past few years because many of them have been a direct response to the #MeToo movement, a movement to help survivors of sexual violence by sharing their stories and building a community of shared experience. #MeToo was founded by Taran Burke, in 2006, but did not go viral until the fall of 2017.<sup>187</sup> Much of its success has been due to artists and actors coming forward to share their stories, causing those in the creative industries to reevaluate their policies and collections.

Priscilla Frank, an arts and cultures reporter for *The Huffington Post*, has recently taken up writing about the #MeToo movement and its impact on the art world. Frank, like Feldman, seems to have a particular interest in women working behind the scenes of the art world.

Frank covered the story of an open letter titled “Not Surprised” in her article “2,000 Women Are Speaking Out Against Rampant Sexual Harassment in the Art World.” In the article she describes the stories of a variety of young women who have felt personally subjected to sexual harassment while trying to build their careers as artists, curators, gallerists, and the like. It was a group of these women who wrote the open letter where they state that they would no longer cover up the sexual misconduct that occurs in their workplaces. They said that the abuse of power from their sexual harassers comes as no surprise and that this is no longer acceptable.<sup>188</sup>

Frank responds to their message by saying:

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<sup>187</sup> You Are Not Alone. "Me Too." *You Are Not Alone*. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://metoomvmt.org/>

<sup>188</sup> Priscilla Frank, "2,000 Women Are Speaking Out Against Rampant Sexual Harassment In The Art World," *The Huffington Post*, October 30, 2017, accessed March 09, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/2000-women-are-speaking-out-against-rampant-sexual-harassment-in-the-art-world\\_us\\_59f740c0e4b077d8dfcb2d43](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/2000-women-are-speaking-out-against-rampant-sexual-harassment-in-the-art-world_us_59f740c0e4b077d8dfcb2d43).

“There is no single person or issue at the root of the sexual mistreatment that plagues the art world. Rather, a complex networks of power imbalance, wealth and inequality, misogyny and lack of regulation make it so. An open letter won’t solve all the art world’s problems, but it can announce a new normal, where discrimination, abuse and condescension will no longer be ignored.”<sup>189</sup>

Frank recognizes that this is not the first time that sexual misconduct has occurred in the art world, but she also realizes that the issues run even deeper. The art world also has issues when it comes to displaying a woman’s body, and unfortunately men are often the ones who have been in the position of power to determine whether or not something is socially acceptable. Frank alluded to this in her article “A Brief History of Art Censorship From 1508 to 2014.”

In the article she writes that works have been “altered, silenced and even erased due to unacceptable content... Yet artists have long pushed boundaries of ‘offensive’ through their imagery and content.”<sup>190</sup> Throughout the rest of her article she talks about various works of art that have been censored due to the images they portrayed. Unsurprisingly six out of the fourteen pieces discussed are of women. The remainder relate to either religious or political events.

The offenders are not limited to men taking advantage of women; women can be abusers, too. When NYU Professor Avital Ronell, was accused of sexually harassing a male student, people were quick to defend her. Women are not the socially acceptable ones to be named as offenders. But this does not mean that the accusation was not accurate.<sup>191</sup> The story is similar to others that came after the start of the #MeToo movement. An advisor took advantage of a student. The only difference in this case is that the advisor was a woman and the student was a

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<sup>189</sup>Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Priscilla Frank, "A Brief History Of Art Censorship From 1508 To 2014," *The Huffington Post*, December 07, 2017, accessed April 08, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/16/art-censorship\\_n\\_6465010.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/16/art-censorship_n_6465010.html).

<sup>191</sup> Zoe Greenberg, "What Happens to #MeToo When a Feminist Is the Accused?" *The New York Times*. August 13, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/nyregion/sexual-harassment-nyu-female-professor.html>.

man. *The New York Times*' article that broke the story detailed how the now 34-year-old student was working under Ronell since 2012. Over the course of his PHD, program, Ronell sent him emails that detailed how she wanted to kiss him and the acts she did to him when they were in person together. This included groping and randomly showing up at his house.

When asked about the allegations, Ronell stated that it was a consensual act between a lesbian woman and a gay man and denies knowing that it made the student uncomfortable. Several feminists have come to defend Ronell in this accusation.<sup>192</sup> If this were the other way around, no one would be questioning whether a man took advantage of his female student. There needs to be a fundamental shift in the way that we view these sorts of issues. It is not black and white, but much more multidimensional.

One artist who is not afraid to address this issue is Betty Tompkins. She recently presented an exhibition in which she juxtaposed statements by #MeToo defendants over important artworks. The exhibition titled *Will She Ever Shut Up?* was presented at the P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City. Tompkins expanded her earlier series *Women Words*, which she worked on from 2002 to 2015, with this new rendition. The series utilizes pages torn from photography and art history books that Tompkins has enhanced by painting the apologies of those accused of sexual harassment and other crimes on top of works that were either painted by women or featured them in the painting.

Tompkins used the statements from Ronell defending herself in a piece painted over a work by Artemisia Gentileschi, one of the few famous female artists from the baroque era who was also a survivor of rape (Fig. 12). While not as severe as the attack on Gentileschi, Ronell's

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

actions were inappropriate and worthy of criticism in much the same way that men accused of harassment in the wake of #MeToo have been. There is no reason why women should be immune to facing justice if the typical roles of attack and victim are reversed.



Figure 12 Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Artemisia Gentileschi #3)* 2018, acrylic on book page.

<https://www.ppowgallery.com/exhibition/5867/work/>

Tompkins is not afraid to challenge the typical dynamic and easily puts Ronell on the same level as well-known offenders such as Carl Andre and Chuck Close. Tompkins' series, "Apologia," takes the so-called apologies, but more often defenses, of suspected harassers and places them over historic paintings. The result is a series that forces you to question the place

women have held in the history of art. They are masked and silenced for so long by the men who viewed them merely as models for their work. By painting over works by great men, Tompkins is reversing the situation and making them accountable. By painting over works by women, Tompkins is raising awareness about the place they have held so long in history.<sup>193</sup>

In addition to inspiring art, the #MeToo movement has also caused controversy for the museum. The Met recently came under fire for the painting *Therese Dreaming* by Balthus (1908–2001). The scandal erupted after Met visitor, Mia Merrill, stumbled across the painting and found the image of a young girl with her legs suggestively posed and her head thrown back to be both disturbing and inappropriate given today’s understanding of sexual assault and harassment.

Merrill, who is a former art history major and strong feminist supporter, later wrote that she was shocked to see such a young girl in a sexually suggestive pose “given the current climate around sexual assault and allegations that became more public each day, in showcasing this work for the masses without providing any type of clarification, The Met is, perhaps unintentionally supporting voyeurism and the objectification of children.”<sup>194, 195</sup>

The argument, as *The New Yorker* put it, was not about censorship, but rather about contextualizing a piece accordingly. In the article written by Ginia Bellafante and published in *The New Yorker*, Bellafante summarized Merrills’ complaint as follows:

“...The initial provocation gives way to an utterly reasonable demand, not for censorship or destruction or an idle trigger warning to shield the fragile from being discomfited, but

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<sup>193</sup> Gallery, P·P·O·W. "Fullscreen Images of Works in the Exhibition Will She Ever Shut Up?" P.P.O.W Gallery. Accessed February 10, 2019. [https://www.ppowgallery.com/exhibition/5867/work/fullscreen\\_exhib#&panel1-1](https://www.ppowgallery.com/exhibition/5867/work/fullscreen_exhib#&panel1-1).

<sup>194</sup>Eileen Kinsella, "The Met Says 'Suggestive' Balthus Painting Will Stay After Petition for Its Removal Is Signed by Thousands." *Artnet News*. December 06, 2017. Accessed March 09, 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/met-museum-responds-to-petition-calling-for-removal-of-balthus-painting-1169105>.

<sup>195</sup> Ginia Bellafante, “We Need to Talk About Balthus.” *The New York Times*. December 8, 2017. Accessed March 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/nyregion/we-need-to-talk-about-balthus.html>

rather for some provision of context, in the form of expanded text for instance, around a work of art that is rooted in the kind of sexualized power abuses we are now so aggressively trying to dismantle.”<sup>196</sup>

After an initial reading of Merrill’s complaints, it would seem that The Met had no signage to contextualize or explain the piece. However, in the past the Met has frequently included plaques warning viewers of the disturbing content within a particular exhibition or gallery. One exhibition in particular focused on Balthus and was reviewed by art critic Jed Perl.<sup>197</sup> Perl made troubling comments in the review of Balthus’ work when he began his piece with, “Let us begin with the most obvious of the misunderstandings that have stood in the way of a full appreciation of his achievement: his paintings of girls.”<sup>198</sup>

The paintings Perl refers to often include girls as young as nine years old, naked, and posed in a suggestive manner. The review goes on to say “often dismissed as the work of a pornographer and a pederast, they can be properly appreciated only when we accept them as unabashedly mystical, the flesh a symbol of the spirit, the girl’s dawning self-awareness an emblem of the artist’s engagement with the world.”<sup>199</sup>

With the disturbing idea that “mysticism” or the belief that religion or spiritualism is at play allows an artist to sexualize pre-pubescent girls, Perl seems to be arguing that because Balthus has been accepted by the art world, that we are expected to rationalize and appreciate it regardless of whether or not we find it appropriate.

If we accept Perl’s assessment of Balthus’ work and apply it to older paintings it seems our bias to judge the piece fades away and we begin to accept his rationale. It seems that we are

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Kinsella, “The Met Says...”

<sup>198</sup> Jed Perl, “Don’t Bowdlerize Balthus’s Paintings—Or His Mystical Ideas.” *The New Republic*, November 29, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/115658/balthus-cats-and-girls-met-review>

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

capable of accepting images of renaissance cherubs, naked goddesses, and tormented religious figures as being either beautiful, wholesome, or religious when the content of the pieces can be just as troubling as works produced in later generations.

What makes modern images more troubling? It could be suggested that the figures paintings of the past were not naked, but simply just nudes. As art historian Frances Borzello puts it, "The representation of the nude in art is a victory of fiction over fact. Its great success has been to distance the unclothed body from any uncomfortably explicit taint of sexuality, eroticism or imperfection."<sup>200</sup> While some might argue that it is actually a much more complicated distinction, it provides a nice summary of the difference between a sexually charged piece by Balthus and a "wholesome" piece from the renaissance that shows nude children. The cherubs from the Renaissance are not sexualized in any way.

The Balthus piece that started the outrage, *Therese Dreaming*, can hardly be described as an innocent image of a nude child (Fig. 13). It is very obviously sexualized and has been described as such for decades, but has still been accepted by the art world as a great piece and Balthus has been praised for his work. *Therese Dreaming* was painted in 1938. The model, Therese Blanchard, died in 1950. Perhaps this is far enough removed from the present that some might argue that it no longer matters, and the piece should be valued for the artistic contributions. However, as late as the 1990s, Balthus was still using young girls as his models. During the 1990s, Balthus took almost 2,000 polaroids of an eight-year-old girl named Anna Wahli (Fig. 14).<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Jonathan Jones, "Naked or Nude? Laying Bare an Artistic Divide." *The Guardian*. November 28, 2012. Accessed April 08, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/28/naked-nude-art-divide>.

<sup>201</sup> Ingrid Sischy. "Balthus's Polaroids of a Teenage Girl: The "Messier, More Democratic" Truths They Reveal." *The Hive*. January 30, 2015. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2013/10/balthus-polaroids-photos-model>.





Figure 13 Balthus, *Therese Dreaming*, 1938, Oil On Canvas. New York, The Met.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489977>

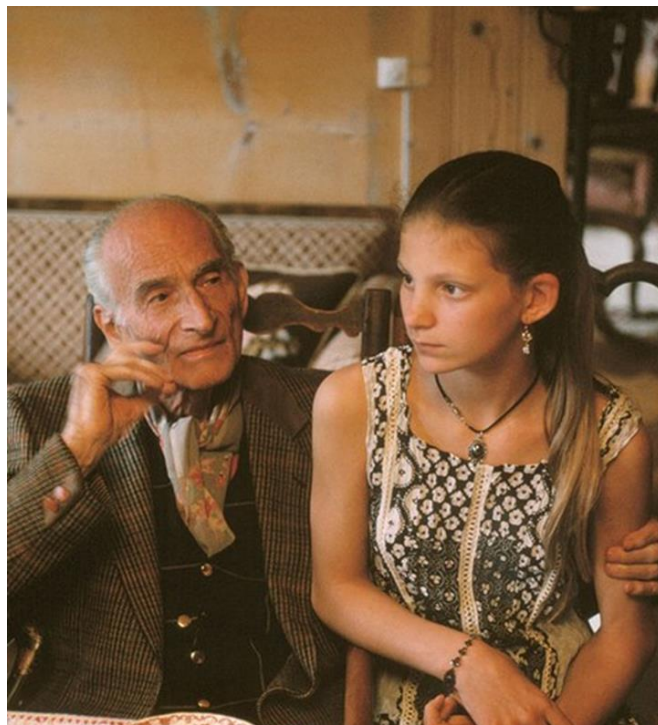


Figure 14 Balthus, *Anna's World*, Polaroid, 1995. Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2013/10/balthus-polaroids-photos-model>

In the early photographs of Wahli, she was fully clothed and posed in an armchair; however, as time progressed she gets positioned in a chaise lounge and wears a robe that is occasionally left open and exposing her as partially nude. One hundred and fifty-five of these Polaroids were included in an exhibition by the Gagosian Gallery in 2013. They were each priced at roughly \$20,000.

Wahli wrote in an essay for the catalog of the exhibition. In it she describes how she would visit the artist on Wednesday afternoons, and he would take photographs of her. She wrote:

“It took such a long time to change what seemed to be a minute detail and, from my point of view, all the photographs looked alike. I wondered why I had to return, week after week. On one hand, I did realize that in addition to taking pictures, he also needed to observe me and bask in a contemplative atmosphere so as to be able to fashion a mental image, which he would then strive to render on canvas in his painting studio.”<sup>202</sup>

The catalog was published by a German company called Steidl and shows the polaroids that were featured in the Gagosian Gallery. In the essay she wrote that she began sitting for Balthus when she was eight years old. Over the course of the next nine years, she would come to his house on Wednesday afternoons and pose for him.

This brings us back to the issue at hand. Is it appropriate for museums to show naked images of children? It is clear that Merrill would argue no, as would the over 10,000 signers of the petition asking the Met to remove the painting from its walls. The Met refused, with their spokesman Kenneth Weine stating:

“[Our] mission is to collect, study, conserve, and present significant works of art across all times and cultures in order to connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas...

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<sup>202</sup> Jeremy Sigler, “Balthus’ Soft-Core Polaroids Splash Down in Paris.” *Tablet*. March 23, 2015. Accessed February 21, 2019. <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/189509/balthus-polaroids-paris>  
The book that this quote was taken from was unable to be obtained, but it comes from *Balthus: The Last Studies*, and was printed in 2014 by the publisher Steidl.

Moments such as this provide an opportunity for conversation, and visual art is one of the most significant means we have for reflecting on both the past and the present.”<sup>203</sup>

The museum acted in accordance with the National Coalition Against Censorship’s policy for Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy. According to the policy— which is backed by the American Alliance of Museums and other similar organizations— if there is a complaint from the public the museum should not change exhibition, but rather use it as a tool to create a learning opportunity. It also stresses the importance of mentioning the museum’s mission and how the exhibition aligns with that mission statement.<sup>204</sup> These are both things that the Met did.

While the idea of censoring a piece that was made by a well-known and successful artist may be off-putting to some, Merrill’s main argument is not overly absurd. “At the end of the day, we’re talking about an artist who asked very young girls to come to his studio and take their clothes off,” Ms. Merrill said. In some instances, she pointed out, he painted the daughters of his servants. “What does that do to the question of consent?”<sup>205</sup>

This seems to be the root of the problem. Are the women depicted and hanging in galleries the stories of models who gave consent or who were forced into posing nude to satisfy a male gaze in the most insidious ways? How can museums judge this and contextualize it in such a way that appeals to both the anti-censorship art historian and the women’s activists that want to give a fair voice to those who couldn’t speak up for themselves?

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<sup>203</sup> Natalie O’Neill, “New Yorkers Call for Removal of Met Painting That ‘sexualizes’ Girl.” *New York Post*, December 04, 2017. Accessed April 08, 2018. <https://nypost.com/2017/12/03/new-yorkers-call-for-removal-of-met-painting-that-sexualizes-girl/>.

<sup>204</sup> Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy. *National Coalition Against Censorship*. Accessed February 22, 2019. <https://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>

<sup>205</sup> Bellafante, “We Need To Talk.”

It seems like the only reasonable suggestion to give a museum would be to suggest contextualizing things more fully and opening them up for public debate. If a museum wants to advertise themselves as being a public collection, then the public should have a say in what is displayed, how it is contextualized, and whether or not it is removed. The fact that The Met did not even consider listening to the thousands of petitioner's places them in a position of power and authority; the act of not acting can be interpreted as their claiming to know best and this can be alienating for audiences.

More than a year after the initial scandal, one artist decided to take the situation into her own hands. Michelle Hartney is a performance artist who in early November of 2018 visited the Met in an effort to recontextualize the pieces hanging on the walls. Hartney quietly moved through the galleries and affixed new wall labels next to the original ones. The pieces she targeted were by Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso.

The label for *Two Tahitian Women (1899)* by Gauguin that was written by The Met describes his work as focusing on “the beauty and serene virtues of the native women” without mentioning that these “women” that modeled for him were often quite young—his native wife, Teha'amana, was only thirteen years old when they married. In response to the lack of context included in The Met's text label, Hartney quotes Roxane Gay, a well-known feminist writer and professor. In Gay's essay titled “Can I Enjoy the Art but Denounce the Artist,” she questions whether we can appreciate an “artistic legacy” when confronted with the knowledge of the crimes they committed. Specifically, Gay references her childhood admiration for Bill Cosby.

She concludes that Cosby's comedic art is "rendered meaningless in the face of the pain he caused."<sup>206</sup>

The portion of Gay's essay that Hartney quoted for her performance art is a powerful statement about the role artists have played in society for generations. She wrote:

"We can no longer worship at the altar of creative genius while ignoring the price all too often paid for that genius. In truth, we should have learned this lesson long ago, but we have a cultural fascination with creative and powerful men who are also "mercurial" or "volatile," with men who behave badly.

These men are given wide berth. Their prominence grants them a certain amount of immunity. We forgive their trespasses because they create such brilliant work, because they are so charismatic, because there is such an allure to people who defy cultural conventions, who dare to do whatever they want."<sup>207</sup>

Gay's conclusion is clear. She does not think that society should appreciate the art of men who behaved badly. She continues to say that creativity is not limited to those who fit the stigma of being a dangerous artist. Creativity can be found among kindhearted people who have ideas just as brilliant as others, but may not live up to our expectation of a scandalous life that makes the artist so appealing. These are the artists that Gay would like us to focus our attention on.

While most would agree that praising the artists for acts of sexual assault should not be condoned; it hardly seems possible to diminish the popularity of these artists, many of whom have been accepted figures in art historical canon for decades.

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<sup>206</sup> Roxane Gay, "Can I Enjoy the Art but Denounce the Artist?" *Marie Claire*. May 08, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a16105931/roxane-gay-on-predator-legacies/>.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

Hartney's opinion seems more feasible for museums than Gay's. She maintains that she is anti-censorship, but believes that museums are failing in their public responsibility to educate their viewers by omitting important details about an artist's life. When asked about her performance piece and her opinion of art labels she said:

“Museums almost infantilize viewers by thinking they can't handle having this biographical information. What's wrong with having an aesthetic opinion about a piece of artwork and other feelings about the artist himself? I look at Gauguin's painting on an aesthetic level, and they are amazing and beautiful. But I also think he was pretty horrible to take three teenage brides. I can have those two feelings about it.”<sup>208</sup>

The Met's label for this particular piece is informative but rather short and doesn't offer much in terms of interpretation. Instead it provides more biographical information about Gauguin and a description of his own musings as well as a provenance on the figures depicted. It reads:

“As Gauguin brought his work in Tahiti to a close, he focused increasingly on the beauty and serene virtues of the native women. In this painting, he depended on sculpturally modeled forms, gesture, and facial expression to vivify the sentiments he had used to describe the "Tahitian Eve": "very subtle, very knowing in her naïveté" and at the same time "still capable of walking around naked without shame." These two figures first appear in the artist's monumental frieze *Faa Iheihe* (Tahitian Pastoral) of 1898 (Tate, London) and again in the even larger *Rupe Rupe* (The Fruit Harvest) of 1899 (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), which he composed for the upcoming Exposition Universelle of 1900.”<sup>209</sup>

This is not problematic in and of itself as the label is informative and not misleading, but it could be argued that other museums have provided better interpretive labels for works by

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<sup>208</sup> Sarah Cascone, "Museums Almost Infantilize Viewers': An Artist Puts Up Her Own Wall Labels at the Met to Expose Male Artists' Bad Behavior." *Artnet News*. November 08, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/michelle-hartney-met-protest-picasso-gauguin-wall-labels-1387801>.

<sup>209</sup> *Two Tahitian Women* by Paul Gauguin exhibit label, Gallery 825, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY label accessed via website April 6, 2019 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436446>

Gauguin. The Guggenheim, for instance, wrote a very well-informed and interpretive label for the artwork *Haere Mai* (1891).

“Prior to his first voyage to Tahiti in 1891, Paul Gauguin claimed that he was fleeing France in order “to immerse myself in virgin nature, see no one but savages, live their life, with no other thoughts in mind but to render the way a child would . . . and to do this with nothing but the primitive means of art, the only means that are good and true.” Gauguin’s desire to reject Western culture and merge with a naive society for the sake of aesthetic and spiritual inspiration reflects the complex and problematic nature of European “Primitivism.” A concept that emerged at the end of the 19th century, “primitivism” was motivated by the romantic desire to discover an unsullied paradise hidden within the “uncivilized” world, as well as by a fascination with what was perceived as the raw, unmediated sensuality of cultural artifacts. This voyeuristic engagement with underdeveloped societies by artists, writers, and philosophers corresponded to French imperialistic practices—Tahiti, for example, was annexed as a colony in 1881.”<sup>210</sup>

The label continues on to describe how the piece is an example of primitivism with its idyllic landscape, inspiration in composition from western culture, and misuse of the Tahitian phrase “Haere Mai,” which means “Come here!” and does not do much to enhance the piece other than intrigue the Parisian public whom Gauguin was trying to entice with his work.<sup>211</sup>

This seems to be the sort of label craved by individuals like Hartney and Gay. Their argument being that any piece with a problematic history or subject should have an interpretive label like the one above. This, however, would require a lot of work from museum staff and does not always remedy the problem. Museums can also be criticized for reading too much into what the public wants and need to be careful when it comes to making assumptions about what is best for the viewers of an exhibit. This is something the Manchester Art Gallery learned

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<sup>210</sup> *Haere Mai* by Paul Gauguin exhibit label by Nancy Spector, The Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY accessed April 6, 2019 via website <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1412>

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

quickly in January of 2018 when they removed a painting from their walls in an attempt to make a statement.

The painting in question was *Hylas and the Nymphs (1869)* by John William Waterhouse. Similar to the mysticism discussed in Perl's reading of Balthus, Waterhouse, who was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, also conveys a sense of spiritualism. The painting shows a moment from Greek mythology where the companion of Heracles, named Hylas, was abducted by water nymphs. The painting has long been admired for its beauty, a trait that is often attributed to the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Waterhouse depicts the moment when a group of beautiful, fleshy, and naked women are able to capture a strong and powerful warrior; thus it could be argued that Waterhouse painted a feminist piece in an era when feminism did not exist. The vulnerability that can be associated with a nude female is not present in *Hylas and the Nymphs*. Despite their docile appearance, these nymphs are powerful and succeed in capturing Hylas, leaving Hercules searching for his love for eternity. A woman with this much power could cause mild disapproval, which is why this has led many to accuse them of being *Femme Fatales*.<sup>212</sup>

Despite the multiple interpretations of the Waterhouse painting, it is one of the Manchester Art Gallery's most beloved pieces. Whether the nymphs could be interpreted as sexual deviants intent on preying on the young Hylas or just pretty things to look at, the gallery decided to remove the painting from its walls. According to the gallery, they removed the

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<sup>212</sup> Mark Brown, "Gallery removes naked nymphs painting to 'prompt conversation.'" *The Guardian*. January 31, 2018. Accessed February 17, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/31/manchester-art-gallery-removes-waterhouse-naked-nymphs-painting-prompt-conversation>



painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* in late January 2018 in an effort to “to prompt conversations about how we display and interpret artworks in Manchester’s public collection.”<sup>213</sup>

This created public outrage. Artists, historians, professors, and average art lovers were quick to share their opinions online regarding the removal of the painting. Many of them questioned the gallery’s understanding of the piece and its role in art history. Professor Matthew Leigh of St Anne’s College in Oxford pointed out that the piece is not an example of a male artist using a woman’s body as a decorative artform, but rather an image of nymphs tempting a young man. Professor Leigh alludes to the gallery hall’s name, Pursuit of Beauty, when he states that “the pursued and objectified body is male.”<sup>214</sup>

The curator of the Manchester Art Gallery seemed embarrassed by the name given to this particular hall, but it seems that there were a wide range of “beauties” on display.<sup>215</sup> Some of these beauties included men. With a fuller context it seems like it could be unnecessary to change the hall name, and very unnecessary to remove paintings.

Many were quick to point out that the removal of the piece bordered on censorship and that the act could lead to more pieces being wrongfully removed. Artist Michael Browne accused the gallery of “using their power to veto art in a public collection” and that he supported protests because “unless there are protests it [the painting] might never come back”<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Letters, "Banning artworks such as Hylas and the Nymphs is a long, slippery slope." *The Guardian*, February 02, 2018. Accessed March 09, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/02/banning-artworks-such-as-hylas-and-the-nymphs-is-a-long-slippery-slope>.

<sup>215</sup> Reporters, "Manchester Art Gallery's #MeToo-inspired Removal of Nude Nymphs Painting Branded a 'pathetic Stunt'." *The Telegraph*, February 01, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/manchester-art-gallery-s-metoo-inspired-removal-nude-nymphs-painting/>.

<sup>216</sup> Brown, “Gallery Removes...”

Strangely, the act of removing the painting was an art act in and of itself as part of the exhibition by artist Sonia Boyce. Curator Clare Gannaway was quoted saying, “It’s not about saying these things can’t exist in a public gallery—it’s about saying maybe we just need to challenge the way these paintings have been read and enable them to speak in a different way.”

In place of the painting, visitors were encouraged to write their views on sticky notes and place them on the vacant wall space. The sticky notes expressed much outrage, such as “Good subject for debate - but please put it back!” to “Feminism gone mad! I’m ashamed to be a Feminist!”

After the widespread outrage the museum posted to their blog that “following a fantastic response to its seven day absence – both at the gallery itself and on-line – Waterhouse’s masterpiece *Hylas and the Nymphs* returned to public display.”<sup>217</sup>

The museum continued their statement by describing how Boyce was using the removal as a way to challenge how women are presented in art; specifically, they wanted to challenge the idea that “the female body is either a ‘passive decorative form’ or a ‘femme fatale,’ concluding “Let’s challenge this Victorian Fantasy!”<sup>218</sup> The idea that this is how we see the female body is troubling, but more so is the fact that the museum and Boyce seem to belittle the public by asking them to interpret the piece within a specific context that not everyone may agree with.

The language used in the press release is problematic because it assumes that people are reading the gallery in a way that they are not. It is based on the assumption that this piece is

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<sup>217</sup> "Presenting the Female Body: Challenging a Victorian Fantasy." Manchester Art Gallery. February 07, 2018. Accessed April 08, 2018. <http://manchesterartgallery.org/blog/presenting-the-female-body-challenging-a-victorian-fantasy/>.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

unacceptable for one reason or another. Once the gallery realized that the public did not agree, they tried to cover it up by saying that the piece needed to be removed to build up Sonia Boyce's solo exhibition and that they thanked those who participated in the conversation and the amazing "depth and range of feelings expressed" towards the removal of one of the highlights of the gallery's collection.<sup>219</sup>

Interestingly, this public relations nightmare happened just two months after the Met-Balthus incident. This could link back to Hein's point that the museum as an institution is having a hard time grappling with the various ideas surrounding today's culture.<sup>220</sup> It could be argued that the Manchester Art Gallery was trying to jump on the #MeToo movement bandwagon and attract praise for being forward-thinking, but this is a case where it clearly backfired.

They ended up coming across as clumsy. What is even worse is that they attribute the removal of the piece to an artist who never actually released a public statement about the incident. Whether Sonia Boyce wanted to distance herself from the incident, or the museum just used her exhibit and feminist clout for their own personal use, remains up in the air.

The lesson from this museum faux-pas would be to know the audience and whether or not a piece will be sorely missed. If the museum was troubled with the presentation of the women in the hall Pursuit of Beauty, they could have attempted to contextualize the pieces better as Hartney suggested in her performance art or as the Guggenheim did with their interpretation of their Gauguin piece. Instead they decided to interpret the piece for themselves and remove it entirely. This backfired greatly.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Hein, "Looking At Museums From A Feminist Perspective," 53.

These two situations are unique in that The Met stood their ground and kept their exhibition as planned while the Manchester Art Gallery had planned to make a feminist statement and ended up abandoning their initial plan. Still, there are many cases when a museum plans an exhibition and feels forced to remove a painting from the walls because it is considered too scandalous.

In May of 2018, the University of Southern Maine (USM) removed several paintings from their exhibition *Industrial Maine: Our Other Landscape*, after outrage over the artist's sexual offense history. Bruce Habowski is a local artist well-known in Maine for his realistic paintings of urbanscapes. The curator of the exhibition, Janice L. Moore, featured him in the exhibit because it fit her vision for the space. When a concerned member from the public called and informed the university of Habowski's 1999 conviction for unlawful sexual contact, the university removed the paintings.

Habowski and the university have declined to comment on the matter, but Moore actively spoke out about the issue. Her comment may seem controversial to some as she wrote: "He was convicted for his crime and he paid his debt... The act of making art, to me, it seems is a very positive thing. You are contributing to society in a positive way. I don't understand how that should be punished."<sup>221</sup>

Reiterating points made by others, Moore wanted to remove the personal life of an artist from the work they create. The argument being that we should judge the art and not the artist.

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<sup>221</sup> Bob Keyes, "Sex Offender's Art Removed from Lewiston Exhibit." *Portland Press Herald*. May 5, 2018. Accessed February 22, 2019. <https://www.sunjournal.com/2018/05/05/sex-offenders-art-removed-from-lewiston-exhibit/>

The Union of Maine Visual Artists argued that the removal of paintings is a violation of the First Amendment rights to freedom of expression.<sup>222</sup>

The issue is not limited to gender-based disputes. Museums have faced controversies for displaying works that have angered animal rights activists, proponents of capital punishment, as well as other social issues. The Guggenheim was threatened repeatedly after the opening of their exhibition *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* in 2017 because it had several pieces that depicted animal cruelty. They released a statement that said

“...explicit and repeated threats of violence have made our decision necessary. As an arts institution committed to presenting a multiplicity of voices, we are dismayed that we must withhold works of art. Freedom of expression has always been and will remain a paramount value of the Guggenheim.”<sup>223</sup>

The works were troubling, but had been exhibited before elsewhere in the country. Three works ended up being removed from the exhibition. The works ranged from a video that depicted pit bulls being trained to fight, a performance piece that had live insects and reptiles trapped in a dome forced to kill each other for survival, and a work showing a boar and a pig mating who were branded with meaningless symbols that are a strange mix between Chinese and Roman characters.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Statement Regarding Works in “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World.” MoMA. September 25, 2017. Accessed February 22, 2019. [https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/works-in-art-and-china-after-1989-theater-of-the-world?utm\\_source=hootsuite&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=srgm-twitter](https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/works-in-art-and-china-after-1989-theater-of-the-world?utm_source=hootsuite&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=srgm-twitter)

<sup>224</sup> Travis M. Andrews, “Art of Animal Cruelty? Guggenheim pulls display of live reptiles fighting for survival.” *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2017. Accessed February 22, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/09/27/art-or-animal-cruelty-guggenheim-pulls-display-of-live-reptiles-fighting-for-survival/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f18f99b9f688](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/09/27/art-or-animal-cruelty-guggenheim-pulls-display-of-live-reptiles-fighting-for-survival/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f18f99b9f688)

The exhibition was meant to make a statement about Chinese experience with globalization and their new found political power after the end of The Cold War through allegories that may have been misunderstood by the public.<sup>225</sup> Chinese artists are living in a very different environment than American artists who are given a certain level of freedom and security with their creations. Chinese artist have to be careful with what they produce as they live under a regime that is not accepting of criticism; therefore, they often revert to allegories that can be used to mask their true artistic statement if confronted by unforgiving government officials. The Guggenheim should have used this as an opportunity to educate the public about this cultural difference, rather than remove the pieces.

Guggenheim director Richard Armstrong released a statement saying that the matter was not up for debate, causing art critics at *The New York Times* and *PEN America* to question the Guggenheim's decision. PEN America is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting writer's freedom of expression; they called the museum's response a "worrying precedent."<sup>226</sup> *The New York Times* raised the point that the Guggenheim planned an exhibition to raise awareness about Chinese culture and the oppression that exists within the country, only to take those artists and censor them in a country that is supposed to be free from such prejudices.<sup>227</sup>

*The New York Times* article states that by bending to threats of violence, the Guggenheim is encouraging this behavior as groups will now see that museums and similar institutions respond to these claims. Instead, they argue that the Guggenheim should have asked for

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<sup>225</sup> *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, The Guggenheim Museum of Art, accessed April 6, 2019 <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/art-and-china-after-1989-theater-of-the-world>

<sup>226</sup> Travis Andrews "Art of animal cruelty?"

<sup>227</sup> "The Guggenheim Censors Itself." *New York Times*, 13 Oct. 2017, p. A24(L). *Academic OneFile*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A509292173/AONE?u=buffalostate&sid=AONE&xid=41302615>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2019.

increased police patrol and implemented better security.<sup>228</sup> The article points out that this problem will only get worse as social media becomes more and more ingrained in daily life. Radicals who threaten violence can get their message out to millions instantaneously and find others who are similarly inclined. This can create an online mob-mentality that is detrimental to freedom of speech and artistic endeavors.

As we continue to become more intertwined with social media, museums will surely learn how to handle situations accordingly. It seems that the most important advice they can take is to build a relationship with the online community and provide as much contextual information as they can.

In complicated situations where there is a strong opposition to a piece, like with the Balthus, perhaps they should open it up to a public debate. Museums need to be institutions for the community and listening to how the public feels about their collection is important; provided they are conscious of the possibility of mob-mentality and do not let criticism drown out the educational intent of the arts. Even something as simple as a label directing museum-goers to a website that provides more information for them to learn about a piece could be sufficient. Utilizing digital tools opens up endless possibilities for museums in terms of providing context and a dialogue between visitors, academics, and the like.

There is an opportunity for museums to partner with social media platforms in order to stop the censorship of images online, provide a platform for people to share their opinions of the art, and learn from these instances how to move forward when displaying these pieces. The use of hashtags to spread messages of positivity and inclusivity are vital to the future of social

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

movements. By capitalizing on these digital tools, museums can make meaningful connections to the community. While the #MeToo movement has been all-around positive, it comes from a point of shared negative experience. Not all social media hashtags need to have their start from a point of negativity. Two examples that are striving to make a positive presence online by raising awareness that does not necessarily stem from a point of suffering would be the #womensart movement and The Girl Museum.

The #womensart movement is an excellent example of Elke Krasny's notion of global citizenship and the ease at which it can be achieved in the digital age. The movement exists via social media; mainly on the Twitter account @womensart1, but it also exists in the form of a blog. The account was founded by P L Henderson, a writer and artist who is an active feminist and activist. She aims to raise the profile of women artists beyond "the token inclusion of Kahlo or O'Keeffe."<sup>229, 230</sup> Henderson advocates creating a platform that allows women to explore their own "female gaze" rather than the historically forced lens of the male gaze.<sup>231</sup>

Social media, Henderson implies, is the perfect platform to explore and promote cultural inclusion of underrepresented groups. She notes that women's art is not a genre in and of itself; however, women have historically been known to create certain kinds of work. This includes decorative arts as was discussed in the analysis of Dianne Sachko Macleod's work, the emphasis Mildred Constantine took later in life in fiber arts, and the sphere of influence that exists within the home of Middle Eastern homes.

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<sup>229</sup> P L Henderson, "#WOMENSART @womensart1 A CASE STUDY" in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, vol. 1, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 265

<sup>230</sup> P L Henderson, "#WOMENSART" womensartblog.com Accessed November 17, 2018  
<https://womensartblog.wordpress.com/about/>

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.



Henderson writes “#WOMENSART reflects social media as a potential leveler in which anyone can be promoted and therefore may surpass the social, economic and cultural limitations imposed on more marginalized groups and people. Social media is also a tool that enables easy access in a busy contemporary world, and in which art establishments are still not comfortable or convenient venues for all.”<sup>232</sup>

Museums can use social media and incorporate these theories into their own practices to accomplish the same feat. Using online platforms to display and narrate stories can help museums share objects and histories they may not feel comfortable presenting on their traditional walls and allow for it to be contextualized more fully and incorporate interpretations by both visitors and museum professionals. They should use this as a tool to gauge visitors’ responses before incorporating it into their physical space.

Hashtags and online movements are also being used to act as a catalyst for internal museum change. #MuseumWorkersSpeak is an example of social media and the museum world meeting. In this case, museum workers are using online tools to act as “a collective of activist museum workers interrogating the relationship between museums’ stated commitments to social value and their internal labor practices.”<sup>233</sup>

The movement seems to be a continuation of the practices started by women during the 1960s-1980s as discussed earlier by various essayists in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*. The Museum Workers Speak organization is much more inclusive in their goals as

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<sup>232</sup> Henderson, “#WOMENSART,” 267.

<sup>233</sup> “Museum Workers Speak.” [museumworkersspeak.com](https://museumworkersspeak.com). Accessed March 30, 2019  
<https://museumworkersspeak.weebly.com/>

they define that they are specifically “barriers to entry and advancement rooted in race and class.”<sup>234</sup>

Museum Workers Speak criticize the tendency of museums to define themselves as “agents of social change” when they follow what the workers consider to be a traditional set of “internal labor practices.”<sup>235</sup>

Other similar organizations are the “Incluseum,” a blog that hopes to “advance new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building and collaborative practice related to inclusion in museum;” MASS Action, a group committed to stimulation conversation on “topics of equity inside the museum, relevant programming, and community engagement;” and Museum Hue, a group that acts as a “multicultural platform for diversity, advancing people of color within arts, culture and museums. Community, Culture, Careers.”<sup>236,237,238</sup>

All of these organizations are hoping that by stimulating dialogue they can make changes within the museum—with the internal changes museums will become better at creating external change and continue with the idea that they are acting as “agents of social change.” A museum that seems to be trying to do all of this without generating any sort of negative feedback is The Girl Museum, and it is the focal point for the remainder of the paper as it explores the successes of a digital museum in its goals to creating meaningful social dialogue.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> “Inclusion | Museums” The Incluseum. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://incluseum.com/>

<sup>237</sup> “Museums as Site For Social Action” Mass Action. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.museumaction.org/>

<sup>238</sup> “About Hue” Museum Hue. Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.museumhue.com/about-hue>

### The Girl Museum

The Girl Museum is an excellent example of what it means to be a feminist curator—that is, giving a voice to a historically underrepresented group and brainstorming creative methods to empower their target audience. Girl Museum is the creation of Ashley E. Remer. It is a completely virtual museum that only exists through their website, blogs, and social media platforms. Thus it is the epitome of a global museum. The Girl Museum goes further than Elke Krasny's definition of a feminist museum that has adapted the notion of a global citizenship, because The Girl Museum is a boundless, digital museum that can be accessed anywhere in the world that has an internet connection. A visitor to The Girl Museum will not receive censored content because they are located in the Middle East, Asia, South America, or any region that may control what is allowed to be presented in a physical space. As Krasny addressed, global museums are the ideal that other institutions need to look to for inspiration. Global museums provide a space for the display of various cultures, ideas, and histories to be presented as one complete story and thus further the idea of global citizenship.<sup>239</sup>

The museum is run entirely by volunteers, but functions much the same way that a brick and mortar museum might. The museum is divided into several tiers. They have a Board of Directors, an Advisory Board, a group of Senior Staff (long-term volunteers who have been assigned specific projects), and a group of Junior Girls & Boys (their interns and new volunteers).<sup>240</sup> While the Girl Museum strives to be inclusive in their exhibitions, it should be noted that the majority of their board is white and that they are lacking a strong minority presences on their board. Despite this, their content is still exemplar and worthy of discussion.

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>240</sup> "Meet Our Team." Girl Museum. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/about/team/>.

Since Girl Museum exists only in the digital world, it has the ability to create quality content while not being restricted by huge expenses. The museum announced a fundraising campaign to celebrate their 10-year anniversary. According to their 10-year report, they can sustain the museum with as little as \$185 in donations per year.<sup>241</sup> On the donation website, Patreon, Girl Museum staff break down what the funds go to. They state that for every \$1 raised \$0.57 goes to exhibits and programs, \$0.32 goes to operations such as maintenance of the website, and \$0.11 is spent on development and marketing.<sup>242</sup>

These amounts are so small it is impressive what the Girl Museum is able to do on this budget. The people involved are more than just staff members, they are passionate enough to work for the organization for free. Their methods seem to be working, as they just celebrated their 10-Year Anniversary. In celebration of this milestone, Girl Museum is starting a new series that advocates for the development and research of the field they are coining “Girl Studies,” a subset of gender/women’s studies.

In the opening interview for the series, the Girl Museum talks with Anastasia Todd, Assistant Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Kentucky. Todd’s research focuses on disabled girls in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When she was asked to comment about the rise of social media and its impact on girlhood, Todd had this to say

“I see social media as an extremely valuable tool of connection and community for disabled girls/young women who may not know any other disabled folks IRL (in real life). As someone who grew up with the Internet, I look back, for example, at the connections I was able to make with other girls on livejournal, an online diary, and myspace, and view the Internet as such a special part of my girlhood and an integral part in the process of constructing my identity...The Internet is just a space that can augment and replicate the racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia that is already embedded in

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<sup>241</sup> “Celebrate Girlhood 2009-2019, 10-year report,” *Girl Museum*, Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GM-Pitch-Deck-2.pdf>

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

our world. I think the important thing is that the Internet has become a space for girls to articulate their feelings and push back on systems of oppression, too.”<sup>243</sup>

Todd’s sentiment seems to be echoed in the history of the museum itself. Remer discusses how she came to the idea of the Girl Museum in 2008. At the time she was working for the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a security guard and noticed how visitors interacted with the art work. Remer quickly learned some visitors felt that it was okay to make racist, sexist, or misogynistic comments about the art.<sup>244</sup> With this in mind, she decided to create a space online that would address some of these concerns, specifically focusing on issues surrounding girlhood. She writes in the museum’s inaugural exhibition titled *Defining Our Terms* that:

“Often girls are shown unclothed in art and the meanings of this vary according to time and context. Innocence was often represented by a nude girl, however, the older the girl, the less innocent her body. These ideas were not from the girls themselves, but the male dominated societies that produced the images. These and other visual contradictions are everywhere for society’s consumption, whether or not they approve.”<sup>245</sup>

In an attempt to remedy this situation, she sought out new material to be presented from the girls’ point of view. When searching for material for the online platform, she quickly realized that it would be difficult to find accessible material as “girl culture has not been valued as a topic worthy of museum narratives, existing merely as the beauty or surface of a work rather than the subject of intense analysis.”<sup>246</sup> This echoes the role that women have held in art history—

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<sup>243</sup> Anastasia Todd, "Why We Need Girls' Studies," *Girl Museum*. January 25, 2019. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/why-we-need-girl-studies-anastasia-todd/>.

<sup>244</sup> Ashley Remer and Tiffany Rhoades, “Girl Museum: Using Digital to Showcase Feminism in Cultural Heritage.” in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, vol. 1, ed. Jenna C. Ashton. (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc), 300.

<sup>245</sup> "Defining Our Terms," *Girl Museum*. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/project/defining-our-terms/>.

<sup>246</sup> Remer & Rhoades, “Girl Museum...” 302.

arguably going even further to limit girls within a very narrow role that has a finite expiration date.

The adult female nude was more or else placed on a pedestal of idealism. She was a figure to be lusted over, admired, and praised for her innate beauty and divine-like qualities. This is problematic in and of itself, but at least she was a point of admiration. Girls were given little thought at all or had too much thought put on their undefined sexuality. In the former they are silenced and in the latter they are exploited.

The best a girl may hope to represent in traditional art history is virtue—something she is likely expected to lose later in life. A girl is typically an empty place holder for the larger scene. She in an unknown that no one cared to look into deeper. This is what Girl Museum hopes to rectify.

They do this through a series of online themed exhibitions. The themes range from discussing the nature of girlhood in *Defining Our Terms* and *Becoming Girl*, to complex social issues that deal with problems concerning heavy issues such as human trafficking in *Girls for Sale*, and lighter issues such as the stigma surrounding the “gamer girl” in the exhibition of the same name. All of these programs aim to raise awareness about the nature of girlhood. They do this through informative content and access to education guides. All the education guides are created to align with US and UK education standards. They ask the students to look at certain aspects of an exhibit, imagine themselves in that same role, and then are tasked with a craft based on that scenario. All the guides can be found at the end of the exhibition they are paired with, or on the “Learn” page of the website. In addition to the guides, the Girl Museum also has coloring pages for younger students and informative pamphlets for older students. The pamphlets cover issues like healthy relationships, bullying, environmental concerns, and body image.

All of their exhibits are very thorough. *Defining Our Terms* was the Girl Museum's first exhibition to discuss what it is they are trying to do at the organization. It details how the museum works by breaking their exhibitions down into categories. Those categories are: Girlhood in Art, Art of Girlhood, Girls in the World, and Girlspeak.<sup>247</sup>

*Defining Our Terms* gives a narrative describing the history of girlhood, a history that rarely gave them a place to be depicted in art. When they were incorporated into a work of art, they were dressed up like little adults. The exhibition notes how childhood in general was not depicted because childhood was not a formal concept until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If a child is depicted from certain eras (the museum specifically looks at works pre-Renaissance), then it was likely an image of death.<sup>248</sup> *Defining Our Terms* discusses the etymology of the word "girl" and how it evolved from simply meaning "child" to describing a pre-pubescent female, and in the case of some languages the word could be used to describe a servant or slave as well.<sup>249</sup>

Girl Museum wants to reclaim girlhood and give a voice to those who experience it. So often girl's history is only narrated through their older, male family members. To do that, Girl Museum also redefines what it means to be a museum. The following is taken directly from their exhibit website and defines their goals clearly.

"Museum, defined:

Girl Museum is a new kind of institution. Traditional museums are primary storehouses of material culture, places to learn about art, culture and natural history through objects of the past. They collect and they care for these artifacts for future generations. **While we are this, it is the intangible—the ideas and memories of girl history, how they brought us to the present, and their future implications that we are collecting.**

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<sup>247</sup>"Defining Our Terms," *Girl Museum*. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/project/defining-our-terms/>

<sup>248</sup> Remer & Rhoades, "Girl Museum..." 302.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

Our goals include building an archive dedicated to preserving and learning about girlhood. As we gather information about girls and girlhood, we hope to be encyclopaedic when possible, to include all manner of material culture. In this way, we are crossing over categories and integrating learning about the subject of girlhood as both the parts and sum.

This new museum model of practically no overhead is an experiment. Like a new garden, we are seeing what we are able to grow on the web—an archive and a point of reference to look at art and social history in a different way. Girl Museum is also a virtual venue for our global community to celebrate and explore the importance of girlhood of the past, present and future through collaborative and interactive exhibitions and projects.”<sup>250</sup>

They exist simply because one girl, Ashley Remer, saw a void in the global narrative.

They do not function in hopes of bringing in substantial profits. They have no paid staff members, and everyone admirably volunteers their time to produce the best content they are capable of. They are perhaps the greatest example to date of a museum existing solely to empower a group of people, and they strive to be globally aware in their efforts.

In *Defining Our Terms*, they discuss the nature of girlhood in non-western societies. The exhibit details how henna is used in many Middle Eastern cultures as a way to celebrate milestones and encourage bonding between the women and girls as they socialize throughout the process. The intricate designs give a creative, fun, and social experience to young girls that they will continue with their own children later in life.

In another section of the exhibit, it details how “exotic” cultures were often posed during the colonial era as a way to commodify a culture for public consumption in western society. Specifically, it mentions the Maori of New Zealand, which cannot help but evoke the work of Margaret Mead and the influence she had on packaging up unknown Polynesian cultures in a way that made western society curious. While Mead was a product of her era, and a trailblazer in

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.



terms of forward thinking, she did girls a disservice in her description of their promiscuity without giving a fuller description of their daily lives. To Mead, and her readers, the sexual practices of foreign cultures was much more interesting than the day-to-day chores and pastimes of the culture.

As the Girl Museum notes, ethnographic postcards were a common selling point for photographers. They would dress up the girls in their “traditional” clothing as a way to make them seem more exotic (Fig. 15). The Girl Museum states that while it is likely the girl in the image did own a flax skirt for dance performances that were a staple of the culture; it was much more likely that this was not what she wore in the day-to-day and was asked to don it for the photographer.<sup>251</sup>

What these postcards and histories fail to include is the richness of girlhood on the island. It was a history that relied heavily on island life and the incorporation of games. These games gave the girls an opportunity to practice practical life skills. *Defining Our Terms* describes how many of the games played by Maori children evolved from wartime training. They specifically cite the game of *poi*, which involves swinging balls attached to a string and is performed to song and dance. The rhythmic motion of the game builds the girls’ strength, flexibility, and dexterity.

An exhibition from 2012, titled *Home and Away*, looked at girlhood during the reign of the British Empire. The exhibit showcases over 15 countries that were once under colonial rule. Each country is presented in the format of a postcard, as this was the most common way for citizens of the empire to see and experience the vast cultures under the British Empire. The exhibition shows what girlhood would have looked like during that era, and brings awareness to

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.



issues that girls would have faced during this time. Samoa is included in this exhibit and featured in the accompanying education guide.

*Figure 15 Unidentified young Maori woman, c 1900, unknown photographer. Reference #: PAColl-6407-14. National Library of New Zealand, Wellington.  
<https://www.girlmuseum.org/project/defining-our-terms/>*



## POST CARD FROM SAMOA

Girl Museum Limited Edition — *Home and Away: Girls of the British Empire*



Here five Samoan girls sit, surrounded by locally produced fruit, holding a sign saying 'Wouldn't You like to see Samoa!'. Made as a postcard, this image is a tourism ad. This lovely invitation was clearly arranged to attract visitors to come enjoy a tropical holiday. In this instance, young beautiful girls and abundant fruit are used to advertise their country, rather than lush landscapes and sweeping beaches.

Children, and especially girls, had long served as easy and apolitical symbols of nations. The beautiful ripe fruit placed around the girls, could be a symbol of beauty or fertility, samples of what is to be found in the islands. The fact that the girls are sitting on the grass suggests the casual way of life that exists in Samoa. All of these elements can be seen as both innocent and exploitive.

The postcard is obviously directed towards British, American or Australian tourists, as it is written in English. Although they are meant to be smiling prettily, a couple of the girls on the left look like they are a little bit unsure and they might not have really understood what they were meant to be doing. We don't know if the girls on the postcard knew what they were participating in and would have thought it was strange that this image of them was to travel around the world. However they could have thought it was an honour to advertise their country in this way.

From the end of World War I until 1962, Samoa was controlled by New Zealand. In 1956, when this photograph was taken, Samoans were undertaking preparations to become an independent country. Western Samoa became the first Pacific nation to gain independence.



Figure 16 *Wouldn't You Like to See Samoa!*, c.1956, Apia Western Samoa, B. Cave, *Images of Empire*, 7603.  
<https://www.girlmuseum.org/project/home-and-away/>

The postcard for Samoa illustrates the fact that the small island nation was a favored tourist destination for wealthy British vacationers (Fig. 16). The postcard highlights the notion that the island is a tropical destination filled with exotic fruit and pretty girls. The girls are posed on the grass in a way that could symbolize their natural life style, innocence, or exoticness. The Girl Museum points out how this sort of advertising was problematic; both for the general population of the island and the girls being exploited. In the education guide the museum asks students to ponder what made this an effective advertisement and then design their own postcard that advertises a location of their choosing. This activity makes students think about what is an important draw for tourists today. Is it the exoticness of a new culture? The food? The people? It gets students thinking in a way that allows them to think critically about societal values and the draws of various tourist destinations.

Another image of a girl from New Zealand is used in the 2009 exhibition *Across Time and Space*. This image, unlike the one above, is an illustration. However, like the photograph, it gives the sense that the girl is posed and her exoticness is being accentuated for the sake of western consumption. In the Education Activity Guide, a feature that almost every exhibition at the Girl Museum has, there is an activity that asked children to look at the image. The guide describes how the various facets of her outfit are meant to show the girl's culture. It then instructs the students to identify objects that represent their own cultural identity and to take a photograph of themselves surrounded by these items. Then it suggests sharing these images with their fellow classmates, putting them on a bulletin board, and discussing the variety amongst the images.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> "Across Time & Space," *Girl Museum*. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Across-Time-and-Space-Education-Guide.pdf>

It is this sort of programming that makes the Girl Museum a uniquely current, feminist, and globally aware institution. Their programs strive to educate children and adults of both genders globally by raising awareness about the nature of girlhood. The museum is not afraid to bring awareness to the atrocities that can victimize girls.

The exhibition *Girls for Sale* addresses the never-ending practice of human trafficking. The goals of the exhibit were to: (1) raise awareness about the breadth of the problem (2) challenge the notion that trafficking only happens elsewhere and to other people (3) illustrate how this is a form of slavery that is still active today.<sup>253</sup>

The exhibit was launched during a live event where the curators of the exhibition were present to answer any questions that visitors may have. They had a large projector that displayed the exhibit on a central wall as well as several on laptops arranged throughout the venue for interaction by participants.<sup>254</sup>

Those who attended the event acted as marketing agents; sharing their experiences and encouraging others to visit the site as well. The Girl Museum has led to an increase in discussion of issues that are present with girls today. The exhibition was created in partnership with the American Poetry Museum. It starts with a series of poems by girls and women who found themselves for sale at one point or another. The Girl Museum curators stressed that they did not want to interpret the poems for the visitors, but rather allow them to contemplate the poems for themselves. In some cases, the girl's age is added at the end of her poem. The girls who decided to reveal this information ranged in age from 11 to 21.

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<sup>253</sup> Remer & Rhoades, "Girl Museum...", 309.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 309.

After these highly emotive poems, the exhibit presents examples of art paired with the history of trafficking. This portion of the exhibition features images from art history with girls and young women being auctioned off, displayed before men four times their senior, or in a land foreign to their birth. Many of the images chosen for this section are works that were painted during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when “orientalism” was at its peak.

Attempting to be as informative, poignant, and contemporary as possible, the Girl Museum includes an exhibit in *Girls for Sale* that has a series of artworks created by victims of trafficking and photographs of contemporary victims. The images are paired with heartbreaking captions like “Have you seen my daughter?”<sup>255</sup>

The exhibit ends with an interactive map that shows the most likely places for trafficking to occur. In the United States, the cities of New York, Toledo, Atlanta, as well as many others are named—proving that trafficking isn’t something that only exists in third world countries.<sup>256</sup> The credits for the exhibition include an extensive list of resources for those needing help when faced with the traumas of trafficking.

The education guide for *Girls for Sale* adds to the narrative even more. The guide asks the students to write a poem about trafficking, create a poster to raise awareness and hang in their school, and to take a quiz that assesses their slavery footprint. The website [www.slaveryfootprint.com](http://www.slaveryfootprint.com) forces the user to confront the fact that the choices they make every day are affecting the lives of others elsewhere around the world. The quiz asks questions like what you eat on a regular basis, the items in your closet, the electronics you use, and other everyday items. After taking the quiz you are presented with the number of enslaved workers

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<sup>255</sup> “*Girls for Sale*,” Girl Museum, <https://www.girlmuseum.org/project/girl-for-sale/>

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

that contributed to the items used on a daily basis. When you are confronted with the fact that you are likely responsible for at least 42 forced workers, it makes you reassess your everyday purchasing power.

Women tend to have a higher footprint because of the makeup, jewelry, and quantity of clothing that most purchase. On each question of the quiz, facts like the amount of minerals needed to be mined for makeup are given. The numbers are troubling.

Having students take a quiz like this is the sort of meaningful activities that leave an impact on them to help them make better choices in the future. By educating students before they reach their full purchasing power, the museum can help to shrink the number of forced workers in the world today. The Girl Museum offers resources for students who want to explore ethical purchasing options. Preparing students for this when they are young can make them more conscious in the future.

The items The Girl Museum present on its website are not sensational. They are real stories about real girls. Sometimes the stories are painful and other times they are uplifting. The Girl Museum displays items based on the value they add to the narrative of girlhood; not because they are something that will get the most clicks, i.e. most “visits,” as a physical museum might. The benefit of being a purely digital platform means that the Girl Museum has no limit to a physical gallery space. They can show as many things as they want without having to worry about cutting something out due to spacing issues. In that regard, they really embody the description of Hilde Hein’s feminist museum. They are presenting stories and images thoughtfully and in a way that engages the viewer. The interactivity of browsing the website adds to this engagement.

The Girl Museum strives to engage their visitors in more than one way. The first is their “museum” that exists at [www.girlmuseum.org](http://www.girlmuseum.org), the second is their Instagram page, and the third is Girl’s News International. Each offers something different that allows for a more inclusive experience. The Instagram page allows for the immediate release of empowering stories. Both the past and present. They frequently post pieces with the tag #OnThisDay to share stories of important women and their contribution on that day in years past. Recent features include Amrita Sher-Gil, who was a Hungarian-Indian artist who won a gold medal in the 1933 Paris Salon, and Louise Bennet-Coverley, the first black student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

Intermixed with these posts about the past, the Girl Museum also features current events. When widespread environmental protests broke out in Europe in mid-February, the Girl Museum featured several posts of girls protesting in the U.K. and elsewhere in Europe.


On February 22, 2019 they posted a story about Jayme Closs, the kidnapping victim who survived 87 days after watching her parents being murdered and then abducted by her captor. It was part of a series titled “Criminal Girls” that looks at the impact of criminal activity on girlhood, both as victims and instigators.

Jayme’s story is a heartbreaking one, and this is a message that the Girl Museum acknowledges; however, in their blog post they use it as a tool to spread a wider message. They highlight the fact that Jayme is not the only girl who has been abducted and suffered horrors at the hands of her captor, but many of the girls who are victims do not receive the same media attention as Jayme because they are not white. The museum encourages its visitors to take a moment to think about all the other girls out there who were not as fortunate as Jayme to have been found and asks them to consider ways of increasing the chances for all girls’ safety.




The Girl Museum responds to all the comments and concerns on their website (Fig. 17). One reader of the blog was concerned that the title of the series could lead viewers to interpret Jayme, and other victims featured in the series, as the criminal and not the attacked in the story. The staff of the museum responded promptly, ultimately deciding that while the title was in fact misleading, the story was too important to take down and therefore they would make an amended titled for the pieces. The commenter was satisfied with this solution and the museum didn't have to worry about issues of self-censorship.

### 5 Comments




**S. Duvall** on February 21, 2019 at 12:27 am  
This title is deeply misleading because Jayme Closs is not a criminal. I hope you will change it.

[Reply](#)




**Katie** on February 21, 2019 at 10:10 pm  
Hi Spring-Serenity.  
As a column, "Criminal Girls" looks not only at girls who have committed crimes, but also girls (like Jayme) who have been the victims of crimes. On a broader level, it also looks at the nature of criminality and how it relates to girls. In relation to the title, all our columns are titled by putting the name of the column followed by the topic. As Editor, I made the final call on the column title, as well as suggesting Jayme as a topic.  
Thank you for reading.  
Katie Weidmann  
Editor-in-Chief

[Reply](#)




**Spring** on February 21, 2019 at 11:18 pm  
Thank you for your response. I understand that it is a series title, but that doesn't diminish the fact that on it's own, this post is misleading. Her case and the topic are worthy of discussion, certainly. However, as a stand alone post it identifies her as a criminal and that is deeply unfair. I stand by my concern and hope you will reconsider.

[Reply](#)



**Ashley Remer** on February 22, 2019 at 12:17 am  
Dear Spring-Serenity.  
We have reviewed this situation and have decided to remove Jayme's story from this series.  
The post will remain up, with an amended title, as it is important to remember her and her case.  
We will also remove the Facebook promo post as to not cause further harm.  
Thank you again for bringing this to our attention.  
We are always learning how to do things better.  
Best,  
Ashley E. Remer  
Head Girl



**S. Duvall** on February 22, 2019 at 1:33 pm  
Ashley,  
I am so grateful for this outcome, which I agree more accurately tells Jayme's important story. The work your organization does is so important and I appreciate the willingness to discuss my concerns.

[Reply](#)

Figure 17 S. Duvall & Ashley Remer Comments on "True Crime & Girls: Jayme Closs" The Girl Museum, February 20, 2019. <https://www.girlmuseum.org/criminal-girls-jayme-closs/>

It is this sort of problem-solving that could benefit other museums. They do not need to react immediately by taking exhibitions down as the Guggenheim did, nor do they need to release statements that stand by their original intent without addressing visitor concerns as The Met did. There is a balance between communicating with visitors, addressing their concerns, and staying true to the artistic intent of an exhibition.

Perhaps the best part of The Girl Museum is their inclusion of a variety of voices. The diversity within The Girl Museum transcends any one group. They feature girls of all ages, races, and cultures. Boys are encouraged to participate as well. Participation with The Girl Museum can take place in a variety of formats. They highlight the success of girls through their ongoing series “Incredible Girls.” The girls featured in this series are all under the age of twenty-five and are striving to make change in the world.

Past features in this column include girls interested in climate change, professional athletics, STEM, and health. The girls that they feature are working world wide to make change. Haile Thomas is an eighteen-year-old from the United States who created a non-profit dedicated to nutrition. Greta Thunberg is a sixteen-year-old girl who was striking against Sweden’s reluctance to join the U.N. climate change Paris Accord. Shannon Glasson is a nineteen-year-old Australian water-life photographer. These girls have diverse interests and are from diverse places and yet The Girl Museum views them all as worthy of being featured in their blog.

The Girl Museum’s success comes from their flexibility, inclusivity, wide scope of study, and ease of access. This is why it is one of the best examples for a feminist museum and should be referenced by other organizations trying to build an inclusive and empowering institution. It is the accumulation of decades of feminist work in the museum, combined with the utilization of

digital tools that make the Girl Museum possible. Acting as a guide, hopefully more museums will adapt these principles to continue the work of feminist museum practices.

### Conclusion

The women discussed throughout this paper have all made meaningful contributions to the field of museum studies; many of whom were working independently, but paralleled each other in terms of furthering equality in the museum world. The early contributors—such as Phoebe Apperson Hearst, Margaret Mead, Dorothy Canning Miller, and Mildred Constantine—specialized their profession and cleared the path for international curators of current generations.

The initial impression that traditional museum practices and feminist principles are working in opposition to each other is proven false when contextualized through women's perspective. The museum institution has given women a platform for self-empowerment throughout their shared collective history. These women utilized their positions to further not only themselves, but also the identity of the artists, cultures, and objects they were displaying. Mildred Constantine is an excellent example as she was not concerned with showing the “best” objects in the museum collection, but rather the more mundane advertisements and crafts that we interact with day-to-day. Her work led to the recognition of an entire new form of art, elevating those who were typically considered craftsman to artists.

Curators working today also follow these principles. Adelina von Furstenberg has worked to make playgrounds for children in impoverished areas, has brought awareness to issues of climate change, and other social issues. The lack of a singular space dedicated to the organization helps define it as a sort of global museum without physical walls. The work of von Furstenberg is in alignment with Elke Krasny's argument for a connection between global citizenship and a global museum. As Krasny stated, this connection is necessary from a feminist perspective because it is only through this linking that inequalities can be challenged.

By synthesizing the dedication and hard work of past generations with contemporary ideas and digital tools, museums and other arts organizations have the chance to make meaningful change. Women have a unique opportunity to do this as they have historically found themselves as the keepers of culture. Worldwide, women are making a difference in their communities. The work done by female curators in the Middle East gives a sense of hope for peace and prosperity in a region that has been plagued by the bleak frustrations of war for so long. These women, despite facing constant repression for their sex, have been able to make meaningful careers for themselves in a society where there seems to be few options for them. They lead by example and are challenging the social norms within their own communities. By optimizing the tools available to them through social media, networking, and other similar functions, these brave women are able to bring new forms of creativity to their peers and allow for a nurturing of collaborative efforts between artists.

The struggle between remaining a neutral educational institution that presents only certifiable facts or an institution that allows for a dialogue of differing perspectives is something that many museums face. As illustrated, this is something that is an increasing concern as maintaining a web presence has become more important. Museums must respond to online critics while remaining mindful of how their online activity shapes the public perception of them. The #MeToo movement seems to have impacted every aspect of our social lives in one way or another, and museums have not been immune. Mistakes have been made by institutions like the Manchester Art Gallery and questionable positions have been taken by The Guggenheim and The Met. As museums continue to navigate this new form of critique, it seems likely that the way of handling these issues will become more standard and hopefully more graceful. The solution is not to ban the display of questionable work, but rather contextualize the piece better.

Arguably one of the best museums for social empowerment is The Girl Museum. I argue this as it is completely digital and generates little to no profit. The museum produces quality content through a group of dedicated volunteers. Not only are they representing a group that has historically been non-existent in history and art, but they are making the group—that group being girls—visible for the first time. The stories they tell are not glamorous and the exhibits created by The Girl Museum focus on mundane things like daily chores. The Girl Museum isn't afraid to challenge current understandings of girlhood as they strive to create a meaningful dialogue and educational opportunity. Their ability to reach audiences globally is impressive. The only requirement to visit The Girl Museum is access to the internet. Ability to travel or pay for a ticket is not an issue for visitors. Visitors don't need to feel intimidated by or uncomfortable in the museum, something that other museums have witnessed.

While digital tools can prove to be a challenging obstacle when museums choose to promote controversial exhibits, mindful curation on the part of the curator can help steer the museum exhibit to an educational dialogue about the disputed display. Using feminist curation can provide museums with the tool necessary to maneuver their dialogue in such a way that allows for the community to express their thoughts and concerns. As museums move forward with continued adaptation of technology and digital platforms, feminist curation should be used as a guide to help address these concerns as they arise.

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### Appendix A: List of Illustrations

Figure 1 Interior Hacienda del Pozo de Verona ca. 1900 Pleasanton California .....	7
Figure 2 Frida Kahlo Barbie .....	25
Figure 3 Margaret Mead Cape & Walking Stick .....	37
Figure 4 Installation shot of Francis Chapin at the Exhibition .....	49
Figure 5 Installation Shot of Knud Mead's Exhibition .....	49
Figure 6 Victor Moscoso, Sopwith Camel .....	57
Figure 7 Howardena Pindell, Untitled #101, 1979 .....	62
Figure 8 Esther Mahlangu's 1991 BMW Art Car .....	63
Figure 9 LOUD Art at Desert Designs Gallery .....	77
Figure 10 Fabrice Gygi, Playground, Deepalaya School .....	83
Figure 11 Eduardo Srur, Hora da Onca Beber Agua .....	86
Figure 12 Betty Tompkins, Apologia (Artemisisa Gentileschi #3) .....	97
Figure 13 Balthus, Therese Dreaming .....	101
Figure 14 Balthus, Anna's World .....	101
Figure 15 Unidentified young Maori Woman .....	126
Figure 16 Wouldn't You Like to See Samoa! .....	127
Figure 17 S. Duvall & Ashley Remer Comments on "True Crime & Girls: Jayme Closs" .....	133