

GENDER
FEMINISM
ACTIVISM +
PARITY

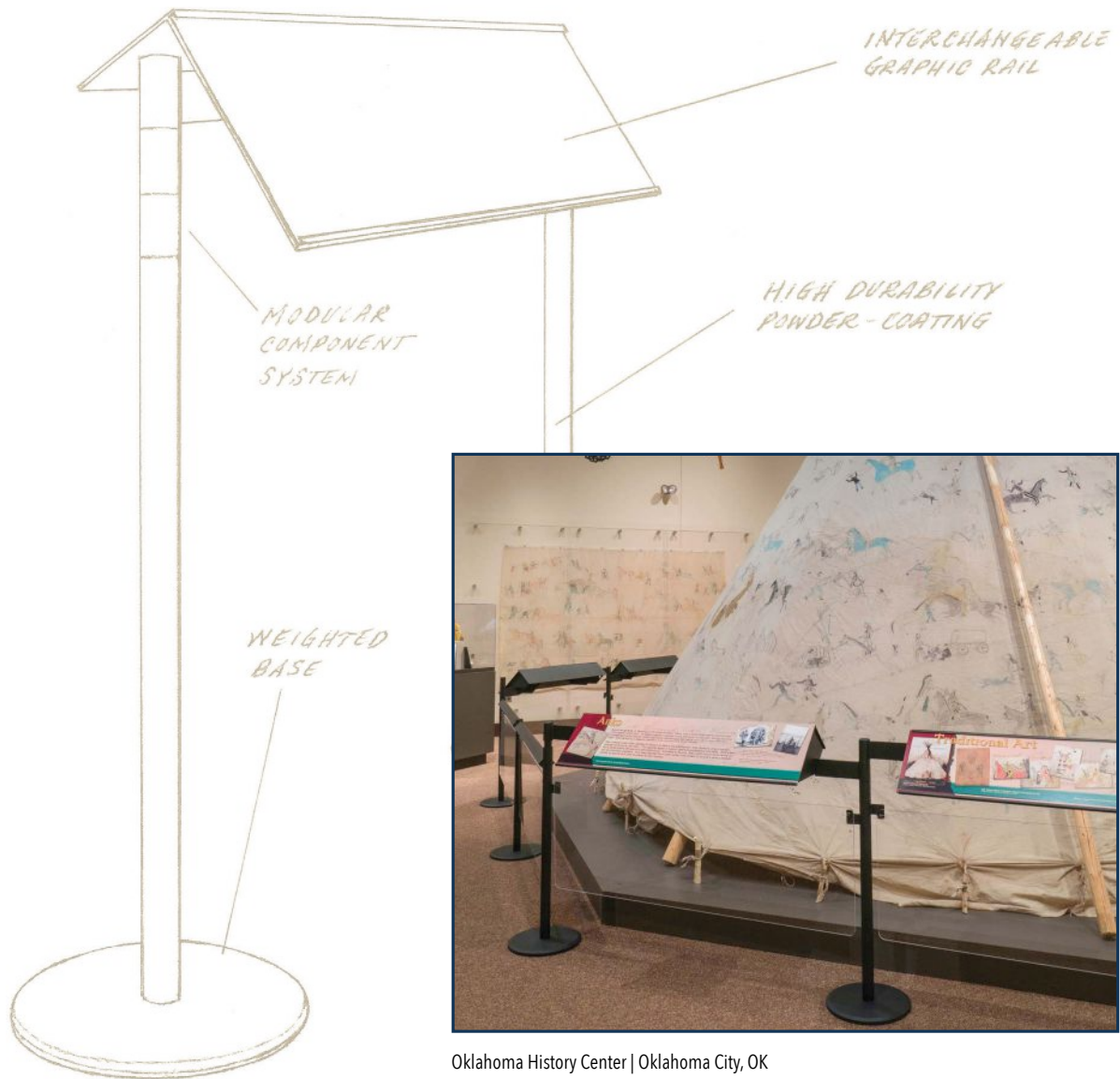
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CONTENTS



FEATURES

- 16** The Life and Legacy of Harriet Tubman
Paying tribute to a luminous spirit that enlightens our quest for human rights and dignity.

By Andrea DeKoter and Kimberly Szewczyk

- 20** Practicing What We Preach
Students co-curate a feminist art exhibition to test assumptions on inclusion.

By Paula Birnbaum

- 26** The Art of Conversation
The National Museum of Women in the Arts' "Fresh Talk" series focuses on the interplay between women, art, and social change.

By Emma Filar

- 32** Abstract Art, Concrete Goals
The Des Moines Art Center diversified its audience with an exhibition on queer abstraction.

By Kara Fedje and Jared Ledesma

- 38** Beyond Binary
An exhibition on the many faces of identity unmask the slippery nature of truths about gender.

By Melissa Alexander and Dina Herring



DEPARTMENTS

- 5** From the President and CEO
- 6** By the Numbers
- 8** First Look
- 12** Point of View
No More Platitudes
- 44** Alliance in Action
- 46** Tributes and Transitions
- 48** Reflection

What's Trending

Catch up on some of the most popular posts on the Alliance blog:

- Reinventing museum careers
- Co-creating welcoming and equitable museums
- Direct costs for deaccessioning
- Customer journey analysis for museum stores

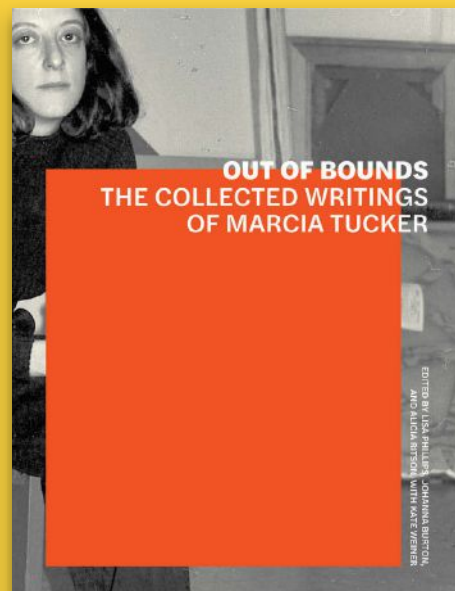


NEW & NOTABLE



**Activity-Based Teaching
in the Art Museum**
Movement, Embodiment, Emotion
Elliott Kai-Kee, Lissa Latina, and Lilit Sadoyan
The follow-up to the award-winning *Teaching in the Art Museum*, this groundbreaking book explores how and why to encourage physical and sensory engagement with works of art.

On Canvas
Preserving the Structure of Paintings
Stephen Hackney
The first truly comprehensive analysis of the history, practice, and conservation of painting on canvas, this book is destined to become an invaluable resource for the field.



Out of Bounds
The Collected Writings of Marcia Tucker
Edited by Lisa Phillips, Johanna Burton, and Alicia Ritson, with Kate Wiener
The first anthology of influential, hard-to-obtain writings by the groundbreaking art historian, critic, curator, and founding director of New York's New Museum.

Museum Lighting
A Guide for Conservators and Curators
David Saunders
Written by distinguished conservation scientist David Saunders, this indispensable guide to museum lighting provides practical information to assist curators, conservators, and other museum professionals.

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A BENEFIT OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS

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100 Years Later, Redefining Advocacy

Founded as the American Association of Museums in 1906,

AAM was initially based in New York City, home to more than half of our nine founding members. In May of that year, the first meeting convened more than 70 museum professionals from across the country.

I am struck that despite the complicated reality of travel 114 years ago, it was important for leaders from all types of museums to come together in person.

In 1923, AAM's headquarters relocated to the Washington, DC, area, our home for nearly 100 years (and counting). AAM's leaders knew then the power of being proximate to the nation's political decision-makers and the importance of advocating with one voice.

Fast forward to 2016, when AAM launched its five-year strategic plan and recommitted to advocacy (often thought of synonymously with lobbying or government affairs), simply and powerfully defined in the plan as "champion museums." Vital to these efforts is Museums Advocacy Day every February when the field comes together in Washington, DC, and virtually across the nation, to advocate for museums.

The results have been staggering. Repeatedly, advocates have secured bipartisan congressional support for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), as well as NEH and NEA. Amid a divided Congress and an administration calling for the elimination of federal cultural agencies, funding for the IMLS Office of Museum Services has jumped nearly 20 percent since 2016 thanks to our collective efforts.

Our strategic plan, however, asks us to think more broadly about advocacy. The Alliance aims to equip members and allies to make the case for museums and to help you tell your stories. **You are best positioned to promote a deeper understanding of museums**

with policymakers, the press, and the public. To effectively advocate on all these levels, you need a toolbox complete with messaging, data, templates, and training—and that's where AAM can support you.

As we enter the last year of our strategic plan, we are taking stock of the resources developed in recent years. On our website, you can find tips for advocating from anywhere at all levels of government, including training on how to effectively communicate with legislators, community members, reporters, funders, and other decision-makers. Engage your trustees in advocacy with our *Stand for Your Mission* guide; and craft your museum's impact statements with the compelling data, research, and graphics included in our first-ever national economic impact study, *Museums as Economic Engines*, and public opinion poll, *Museums and Public Opinion*. To create a comprehensive museum advocacy plan, consider using our newly released toolkit, "Speaking Up: Museum Advocacy in Action."

Particularly important in this election year, you can find our **Nonprofit Voter Resources** that include all the ways museums can participate in advocacy, nonpartisan election activity, and voter engagement. You may be surprised to find out you can do more than you think!

Be sure to sign up for **Advocacy Alerts** to ensure your voice is heard on policy issues that affect museums. And let us know how else we can support your advocacy.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Lott".

Laura L. Lott is the Alliance's president and CEO. Follow Laura on Twitter at [@LottLaura](#).

Gender and Sexuality

313%

Increase in Merriam-Webster dictionary searches for the pronoun “they” in 2019 vs. 2018. “They” was the dictionary’s 2019 Word of the Year.

99%

Percentage of countries where women can vote. (Vatican City is the holdout.)

142/55/70

142 countries provide at least some legal protections based on sexual orientation.

55 provide no protections . . . but no criminalization either.

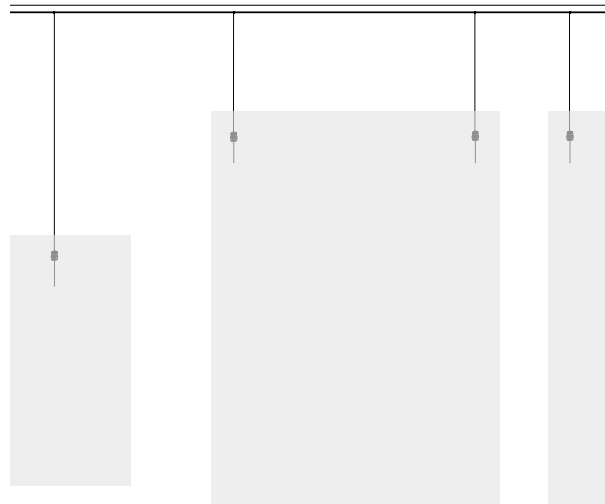
70 criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults.

4 in 10

Number of history museum-goers who think history museums should be inclusive, including sharing stories of women and LGBTQ people.

Sources: Clockwise from left: Merriam-Webster; womensuffrage.org; The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association; Virginia Revolution 250 National Survey in partnership with VTC and Virginia Museums, fielded by Wilkening Consulting, 2019

By the Numbers was compiled by Susie Wilkening, principal of Wilkening Consulting, wilkeningconsulting.com. Reach Susie at Susie@wilkeningconsulting.com.



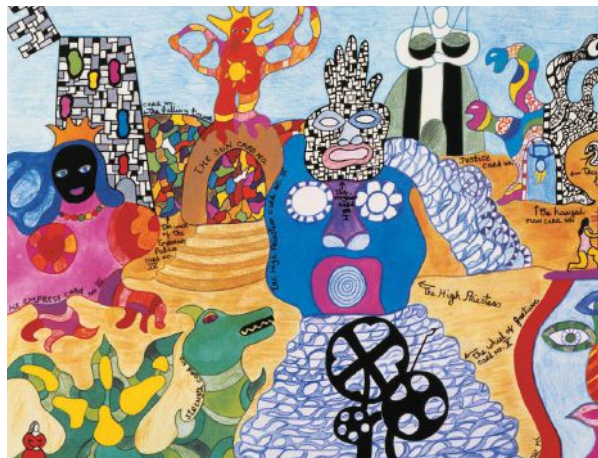
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Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College

“Passages: An Installation in Progress by Cheryl Harper” is a site-specific installation exploring themes of heritage, identity, persecution, and privilege. Harper’s ongoing investigation of her ancestry, as well as that of her husband, reveals complexities and contradictions from a distinctly female point of view. She includes original family wedding dresses overlaid with other clothing and accessories owned by her mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. Hand-printed wallpaper brings together imagery culled from family photographs and objects that refer to immigration, plantation life, and slavery.

Location: Lynchburg, VA

Dates: through May 3

Learn more: maiermuseum.org/art/current-exhibitions

The Museum of Modern Art PS1

Niki de Saint Phalle created exuberant works intended to transform environments, individuals, and society. The first New York museum exhibition of the work of this visionary feminist and activist artist will feature more than 100 works that highlight Saint Phalle’s interdisciplinary approach and engagement with pressing social and political issues. Central to the exhibition is an examination of Saint Phalle’s large-scale outdoor sculptures and architectural structures.

Location: New York, NY

Dates: through Sept. 7

Learn more: moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5111

Greenwich Historical Society

“An Unfinished Revolution: The Woman’s Suffrage Centennial” features a wide variety of historic objects from museums, libraries, private collections and descendants of suffragists to illustrate the long struggle for the right to vote. Featuring striking protest banners and historic clothing, sashes, and heirlooms worn by prominent suffragists, visitors are immersed in the atmosphere of activism that defined the Progressive Era. Original correspondence, vintage photographs, and works of art from the Greenwich Historical Society’s collections open another window into this tumultuous period.

Location: Greenwich, CT

Dates: through Sept. 6

Learn more: greenwichhistory.org/exhibitions

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Montclair Art Museum

In “Federico Uribe: Animalia,” the artist’s brightly colored landscapes and life-size animal sculptures address modern-day turmoil while representing his conviction that destruction and death can be turned into peace and beauty. With more than 60 pieces on exhibition, audiences will experience the breadth and depth of Uribe’s work, such as *Plastic Coral Reef*, comprised of hundreds of pieces of plastic waste, carefully arranged to raise awareness of the effects of pollution on marine ecosystems.

Location: Montclair, NJ

Dates: through June 21

Learn more: montclairartmuseum.org/exhibition/federico-uribe-animalia

The Fralin Museum of Art

Moving forward, The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia will focus on historically underrepresented artists in at least half of its exhibitions. This action is the result of recent data showing that well into the 21st century the majority of artists featured in US museum exhibitions are not diverse. The museum defines underrepresented artists as those with diverse racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, Indigenous, disability/ability, socioeconomic, geographic, religious and/or age identities.

Location: Charlottesville, VA

Learn more: uvafralinartmuseum.virginia.edu/in-the-news

George Eastman Museum

On January 6, 2020, the George Eastman Museum broke ground for a new visitor center that is expected to be completed by July 2020. The project, which involves relocating the main entrance to the west side of the building, is the most significant structural change to the museum since the gallery and collections building was constructed in 1989. Through the new entrance, visitors will be served by a new admissions desk, gathering places, a renovated meeting hall and screening room, a more mission-focused shop, and a relocated café that includes seating in the historic Palm House with views of the Terrace Garden.

Location: Rochester, NY

Learn more: eastman.org/new-visitor-center

What’s New at Your Museum?

Do you have a new temporary or permanent exhibition, education program, partnership/initiative, or building/wing? Tell us at bit.ly/MuseumNewsAAM, and it might be featured in an upcoming issue.

Courtesy of Montclair Art Museum; courtesy of The Fralin Museum of Art, photo by Leah Stearns; photo provided by the George Eastman Museum



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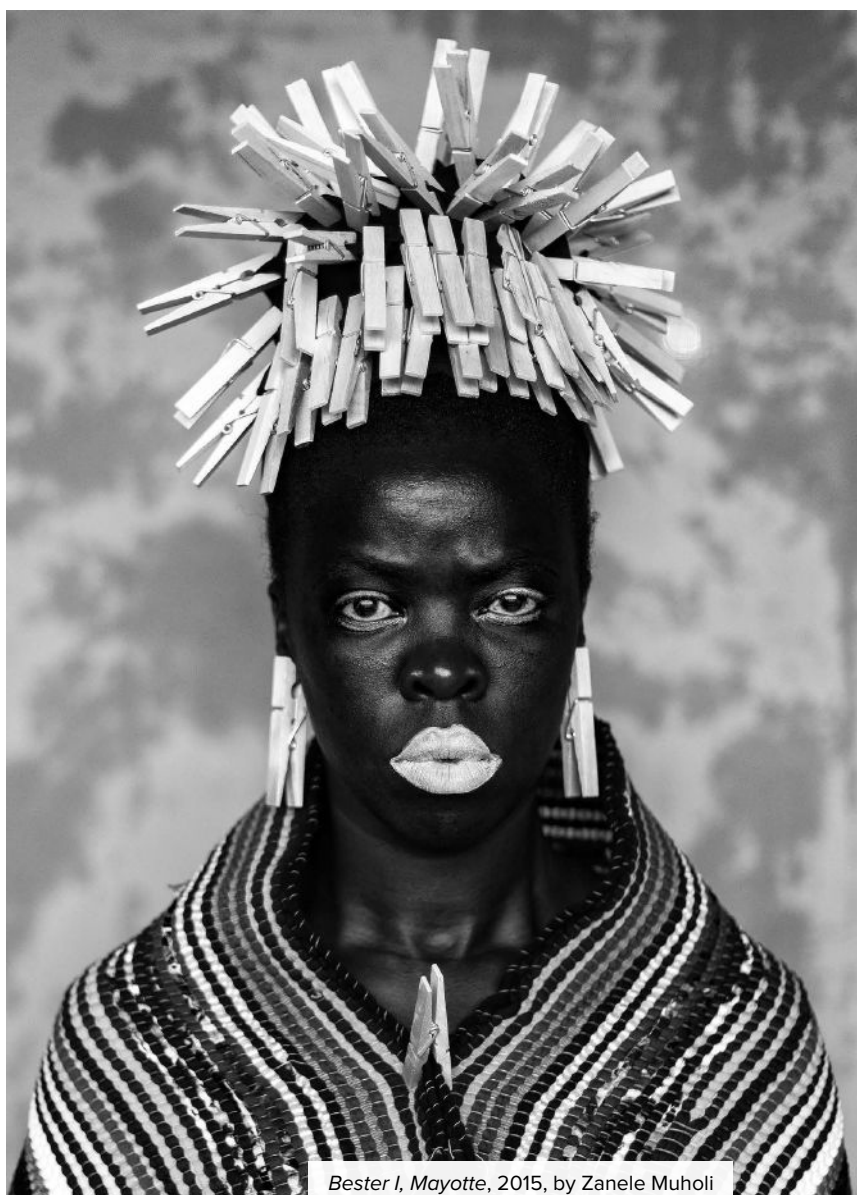
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No More Platitudes

Fifty years after women's lib and Stonewall, we're still behind in advancing gender equity in museums.

By Amy K. Levin



Bester I, Mayotte, 2015, by Zanele Muholi

In 2015–2016, the Amsterdam Museum hosted the “Transmission” exhibition, which focused on the history of transgender individuals in the city. The displays evolved during the exhibition, with early stages emphasizing photographs of a well-known figure in the community and later stages presenting more on the everyday lives of individuals.

The latter phase included recordings from oral history interviews and objects that were meaningful to those who donated or loaned them to the museum, such as a trans man's first razor, given to him by his father. The close, consultative relationships among individuals, LGBTQ organizations, and the museum continued after the exhibit closed. The curator even passed along job information to participants.

In fall 2019, however, the museum was the center of negative attention surrounding “Nr. 1 Tourist Attraction,” an exhibition by Jimini Hignett on sex work. The most controversial piece was a reproduction of *Belle*, a bronze sculpture in the city's Red Light District that depicts a prostitute in a doorway and honors members

© Zanele Muholi; courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York

of the profession. A video accompanying Hignett's replica depicted men carving their initials into the figure, a gesture the artist meant to show respect but that the sex workers' union interpreted as encouraging violence.

These examples illustrate why it is critically important for museums to study the material conditions of individual lives and to present them in complicated ways. Too often, exhibitions on females and LGBTQ people focus on celebrities such as David Bowie or historical turning points such as the Stonewall riots. Other exhibitions are temporary or pop-up, suggesting limited commitment

on the part of institutions, which move on to other themes, often demonstrating ignorance or neglect of intersectionality. Queerness this season might be followed by three months on immigration, but opportunities to bridge the themes are missed.

Aiming for Parity

In some museum offices, the social justice mission touted on a public website is downplayed in daily work. Similarly, local museums that claim to represent everyone in the community speak from an ethically questionable position when they fail to provide workers with the benefits that

INSTITUTIONAL CHECKLIST FOR GENDER EQUITY

- Mission statement
- Exhibition content
- Collections/acquisition policies
- Database/catalogue categories
- Volunteer guidelines
- Employee policies and benefits; hiring practices
- Focus groups/public consultations

enable a gender transition or parental leave. Administrators and board members who passively

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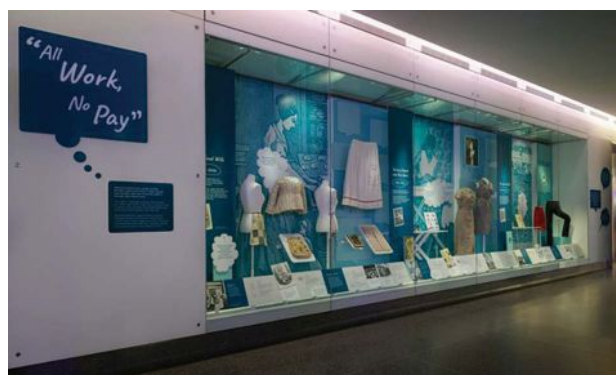
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The “All Work, No Pay” temporary display on women’s unwaged labor at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

accept such circumstances, often citing limited funding as an excuse, again reveal a lack of understanding and respect for the lived experiences of many females and individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

According to Elizabeth Merritt in her Center for the Future of Museums blog, the ratio of volunteers to paid museum professionals is seven to one. The majority of these volunteers are middle-class white females, who are required to pay for museum membership and sometimes a substantial training fee. To be available during the day, these women are generally independently wealthy or supported by a partner. Yet their work conditions would be deemed unacceptable for paid employees: for instance, no more than two absences a year and patronizing strictures about appearance.

The Museum on Main Street guide, *How to be a Great Docent*, accompanying the traveling exhibition “The Way We Worked” (about labor and American culture), asserts, “Confident professional docents **stand up straight!**” A Wadsworth Atheneum guide refers to “earned” vacation, which is to be requested at least six weeks in advance; moreover, docents are limited to two weeks off during the summer. Merritt and others question whether unpaid docents are taking jobs from trained professionals, but the system is so backward that it wouldn’t pass muster with an employment lawyer.

Given these circumstances, I propose a concerted focus on the lives of women and LGBTQ individuals that permeates every level and aspect of our profession. Administrators and boards must reexamine work policies as well as acquisitions and display guidelines. The decision by the Baltimore Museum of Art to restrict this year’s purchases to works by females should become a model, but such policies shouldn’t last for only one year. Collections development should aim for parity. No more excuses.

What Parity Looks Like

At the front of the house, imagine more exhibitions that focus on everyday experiences—women in manufacturing, child care, labor and childbirth, same-sex marriage certificates, gender-neutral garments (forget Dior and Chanel, try the Phluid Project), ergonomic design for women, and similar topics. “Queer California: Untold Stories” at the Oakland Museum, for example, included ephemera belonging to diverse communities.

“Everyday objects take on different context when they become a reference to a community,” says Branden Wallace, registrar at New York City’s Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art.

In 1990, Gaby Porter, a British museum consultant, argued that institutions should more systematically exhibit objects pertaining to women’s work in the home and elsewhere, yet this task remains mostly unaccomplished. Often, necessary objects are in collections but not properly catalogued and

therefore unavailable for display. The scarcity of exhibitions on the material conditions of the lives of those who identify as female and/or LGBTQ is evident when we consider the attention paid to the “All Work, No Pay” temporary display on women’s unwaged labor at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History—a single 30-foot case!

My proposal pertains to every kind of museum, not just historical institutions. Zanele Muholi’s images of herself wearing domestic objects such as clothespins are powerful because they ask what it means to conduct the menial tasks of housework, especially for black women. Science museums might pay less attention to space exploration or nanotechnology and explore how technology affects everyday life for women or LGBT individuals or how changes in hearing aids affect the elderly (who are predominantly female) and the daughters who are their primary caregivers. Why have museums ignored the lack of progress in developing menstruation products in the past few decades? Isn’t it time to present more widely the technologies available for transgender individuals seeking to transition or genetic studies on sex and sexuality?

In the interest of transparency, relevant exhibitions should include panels on the lives of museum workers of diverse sexes, genders, and sexualities, drawing attention to inequities within and across institutions. These exhibitions and conversations should not

replace or displace emphasis on other forms of diversity; instead, they should be intersectional, recognizing multiple identity factors. We must consider and adopt fair policies not only for the white female curatorial assistant who works business hours, but also for the single mother refugee from the Congo whose janitorial hours make it virtually impossible to spend time with her children during the school week.

My assumptions that women outlive their husbands, that daughters are more likely to be caregivers than sons, and that the majority of single parents are female are based on demographics, not stereotypes.

In the US, the gender pay gap persists, and the average woman earns 80 percent of a male's salary for the same work. It might be instructive for a museum to experiment with recommending different admission fees for women and men based on this percentage or mount an exhibition where 80 percent of the works are by females. Creativity can teach lessons about gender and sexuality, though I admit I am dreaming here a little.

Finally, in the development of such exhibitions, museums will need to call in more community members as advisers and experts, providing child care, travel funds, and other necessities that show

their commitment is genuine. Bringing varied groups into our institutions stimulates dialogue both in the front and the back of the house.

It's time to stop mouthing platitudes and to make significant and systemic change. If we advocate for equity and social justice, let us inhabit these ideals at every level, from exhibition content to work-force policy. We will be better for it.

Amy K. Levin is a former Northern Illinois University professor who studies gender and immigration in museums around the world.

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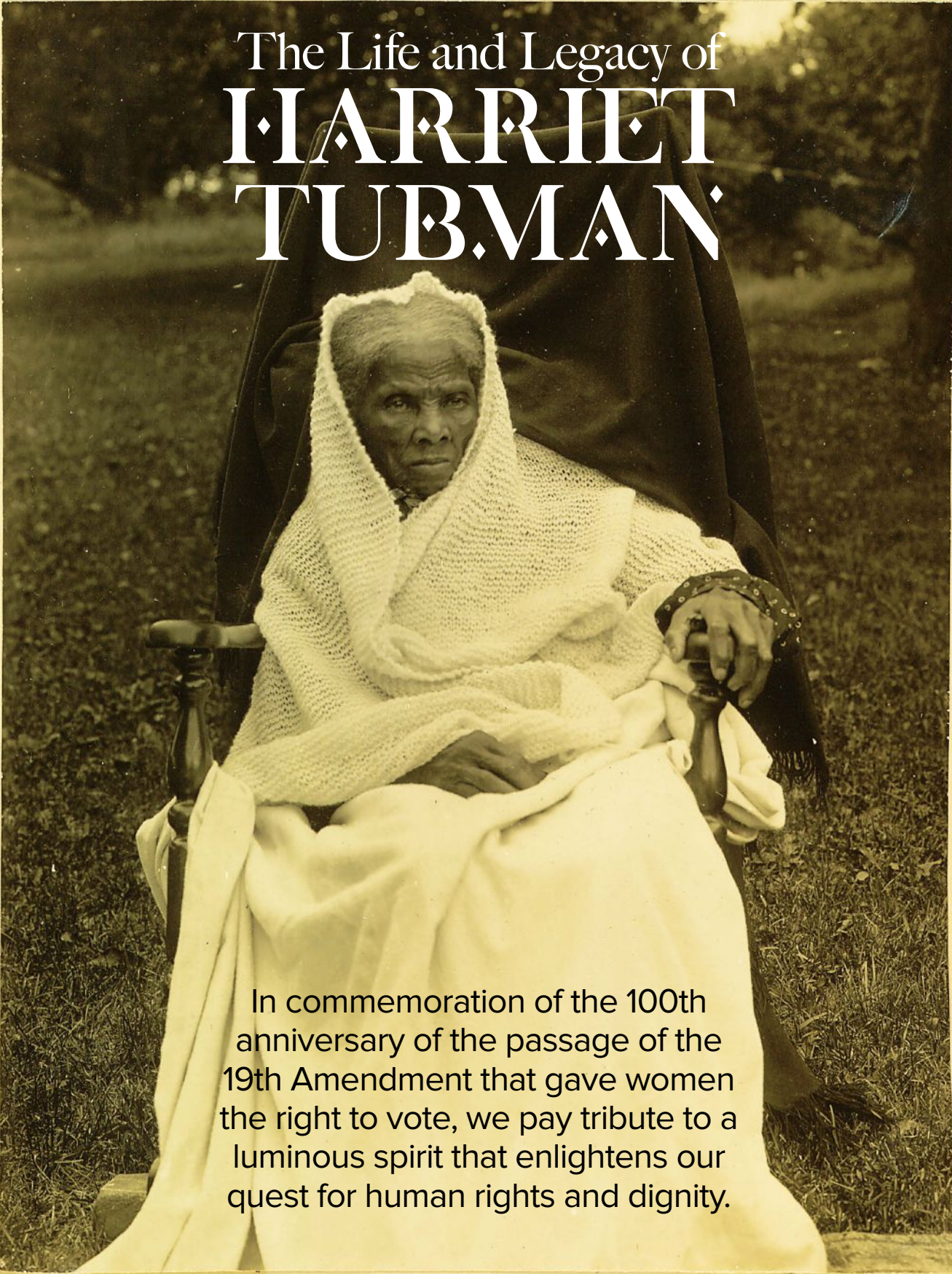


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The Life and Legacy of HARRIET TUBMAN

In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote, we pay tribute to a luminous spirit that enlightens our quest for human rights and dignity.

By Andrea DeKoter and Kimberly Szewczyk

Harriet Tubman looms large on

America's historical landscape. At a time when academic scholarship and digitally accessible records have revealed the tarnished characters and actions of many a historic figure, Tubman's extraordinary reputation has only grown. Scholars such as Kate Clifford Larson have shed light on lesser-known aspects of Tubman's life, and the 2019 biopic *Harriet* underscored the dangerous work she undertook to secure freedom for African Americans.

Tubman has two national parks named after her, an honor only two other historic figures (Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt) can claim. The Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park (formerly the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument) was established as a partnership with the state of Maryland in Dorchester County in 2014. And the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park was established as a partnership with Harriet Tubman Home, Inc., in Auburn, New York, in 2017.

Tubman is widely known as a central figure in the Underground Railroad, which helped enslaved African Americans escape to freedom, but she was also a committed women's suffragist and social activist who focused on education and caring for the elderly. She never stopped fighting for human rights for all.

Becoming Harriet Tubman

Many Americans are familiar with the powerful story of Tubman's early life told at the Maryland site, which stands on 480 acres of land where Tubman lived enslaved, and eventually escaped, returning repeatedly to rescue dozens of other enslaved African Americans.

Born Araminta Ross around 1822, she suffered a severe blow to her head as a young girl when an overseer struck her with a metal weight purportedly aimed at an enslaved person attempting to escape. Though she recovered, the injury led to seizures, violent headaches, and blackouts throughout her life. During her blackouts, Araminta would experience vivid visions and dreams, which she attributed to God speaking directly to her, reinforcing her already strong spiritual beliefs.

Araminta, or "Minty" as she was known to her family, took the name Harriet Tubman sometime after she married a free black man named John Tubman in 1844. Under threat of being sold and permanently separated from her family when plantation owner Edward Brodess died in 1849, Tubman decided to seek her freedom in the North.

She successfully escaped to Philadelphia, but she was determined to return to Maryland to bring her family members to freedom with her. Over the next 10 years, she served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, orchestrating the emancipation of more than 70 enslaved African Americans. Her feats catapulted her into the national spotlight and brought her into contact with famous abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, who noted years later in a letter to her that "Excepting John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have."

For many people, this is where Tubman's incredible story ends. However, this was only the first half of her life. The national park in Auburn, New York, offers a glimpse into Tubman's post-Civil War life and her pioneering work as a humanitarian and suffragist, aspects of her life that have only recently surfaced in the popular public consciousness.



Built by Harriet Tubman and other family members in 1883 after her original home burned, her residence stands as a testament to Tubman's 50 years in freedom.

Working for Social Justice

Known today for its wine and lakeside recreational opportunities, the Finger Lakes region of New York in the early to mid-19th century was a hotbed of religious fomentation and civil rights activism. The Second Great Awakening that swept the area in the early 1800s led famed minister Charles Grandison Finney to refer to it as a “burnt district” of fiery religious revivalism. Some of this zeal was channeled into reform movements, including abolition and women’s rights. The First Woman’s Rights Convention took place in Seneca Falls, just 15 miles down the road from Auburn, in 1848.

Into this environment came Tubman, who by the late 1850s was seeking a more comfortable place to live for her aging parents and other freedom seekers she had brought to Canada. It may have been Auburn resident Martha Coffin Wright, one of the five organizers of the First Woman’s Rights Convention, who introduced Tubman to William Seward, the US senator from New York at the time. In 1859, Seward sold Tubman a seven-acre property in Fleming, New

York, including a house and barn, for the fair market price of \$1,200. Following her work as a scout, spy, and nurse during the Civil War, it is here Tubman would care for her parents and other family members and begin the second chapter of her life as a champion for social justice.

Recognizing the poverty that many free African Americans found themselves in after the Civil War, Tubman raised money for the Freedmen’s Bureau to support its work in the South teaching freed blacks to read and write. Tubman used proceeds from an early biography about herself to care for those in need within Auburn’s black community. When necessary, she opened her own home to care for those too ill or indigent to care for themselves. Though she had very little herself, she never hesitated to offer assistance to those in need.

Tubman’s faith was central to her life; to that end, she pledged \$500 of her own money toward the building of the Thompson Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on Parker Street, which she would attend for 30 years. The site is currently

Park Ranger Rufai Shardow greets a young visitor attending a special event at the park.



EXPERIENCING HER LIFE

The Harriet Tubman National Historical Park in Auburn, New York, was established in 2017 as the 51st national historical park. The park was created in partnership with the nonprofit Harriet Tubman Home, Inc., which operates the Harriet Tubman Visitor Center, the Tubman Home for the Aged, and the Harriet Tubman Residence, all located together. Harriet Tubman Home, Inc., has stewarded the site since the 1950s.

The Visitor Center includes a timeline of Tubman’s life, and tours of Tubman’s restored Home for the Aged are offered Tuesday through Saturday. Additionally, sites throughout the city of Auburn explore Tubman’s life and legacy, including the Equal Rights Heritage Center, which features a statue of Tubman; the Seward House Museum, where visitors can learn about the connections between Tubman and William H. Seward, who was a US senator, New York governor, and secretary of state; and Tubman’s gravesite at Fort Hill Cemetery, where she was laid to rest with military honors.

The National Park Service (NPS) also operates the grounds of the Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church. In the coming years, NPS will stabilize and rehabilitate the church building, which currently can only be viewed from the outside.

For more information, visit harriettubmanhome.com and nps.gov/hart.

NPS Photo

undergoing rehabilitation and in the future will be open to the public as part of the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park.

In later years, Tubman focused on helping elderly African Americans, who were more vulnerable to poverty. She raised money to create a home for the elderly and poor, carrying on the work that she said “the Lord meant me to do.”

In 1896, she purchased 25 acres of land in Auburn, New York, adjacent to her property, and began raising the monies needed to convert one of the two homes on the property into a home for the aged. Unable to attain the necessary funds and advancing in age—by 1903 she was into her 80s—she deeded the property to the AME Zion Church, which opened the Tubman Home for Aged and Infirm Negroes in 1908.

Tubman spent the last two years of her life in John Brown Hall, the original location of the Tubman Home for Aged and Infirm Negroes. Her mind remained sharp, but her body had failed her. Visitors to Harriet Tubman National Historical Park can now tour the second location of the Tubman Home for Aged and Infirm Negroes, walk her farmland, and see her residence.

Fighting for the Right to Vote

Tubman’s commitment to social justice also manifested itself through her involvement in the women’s suffrage movement. A symbol of female empowerment, Tubman joined her friends Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the campaign for women’s right to vote.

She was an honorary lifetime member in the Geneva (New York) Political Equality Club, whose members included Rhoda Palmer, an attendee at the First Woman’s Rights Convention who lived to see women vote in New York state in 1917, and Elizabeth Smith Miller, a dress reform advocate and cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

In 1896, Tubman was invited to speak before a meeting of the newly formed National Association of Colored Women, an organization that advocated for African American rights and women’s right to vote. She spoke of her work on the Underground Railroad and in the Civil War and ended by stressing the need to care for the elderly.

At 91 years old, Harriet Tubman passed away on March 10, 1913. Her burial service was held in the Thompson Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and she was laid to rest in Auburn’s Fort Hill Cemetery. Harriet Tubman National Historical Park commemorates Tubman and her life’s work on the land where she spent more than 50 years in freedom, at her church where she worshiped for 30 years, and in the community she helped mold that continues to honor her legacy.

Andrea DeKoter, Ph.D., is acting superintendent of the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Auburn, New York, and Harriet Tubman National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York. **Kimberly Szweczyk** is a senior interpretive specialist who manages outreach programs and community partnerships at Harriet Tubman National Historical Park.



Young park visitors get a lesson in archaeology by searching for artifacts in a mock dig steps away from the actual archaeological site at the Harriet Tubman Residence.



Yolanda López,
The Nanny, from
*Women's Work
 is Never Done*
 series, mixed media
 installation, 1994





Photo courtesy of the University of San Francisco

Practicing What We Preach

Museum studies graduate students co-curate a feminist art exhibition to test assumptions on ideal approaches to inclusion.

By Paula Birnbaum

Across the United States, a wave of feminist exhibitions and programs are responding to the current political climate and gender and racial inequities and violence. Drawing from the #MeToo movement, LGBTQ+ advocacy, Black and Brown Lives Matter, and Decolonize This Place, museums and alliances like the Feminist Art Coalition are bringing activism into the exhibition space.

Given the multiplicity of definitions of feminism, the negotiations of our own identities, as well as the dynamics of our respective institutions, what are the challenges of such projects? What can we teach emerging museum professionals about best practices in inclusion?

In my role as a professor of art history and director of the Museum Studies M.A. program at the University of San Francisco (USF), I taught the annual curatorial practicum course in the fall of 2019. Along with 13 graduate students, I co-curated an exhibition focused on feminist art. “Emboldened, Embodied,” held at Thacher Gallery, USF, November 21, 2019–February 16, 2020, featured seven San Francisco Bay Area artists.

In collaboration with Thacher Gallery colleagues, Director Glori Simmons and Gallery Manager Nell Herbert, our goal was to teach students the nuts and bolts of curatorial practice in 14 weeks. How could I expose the class to theoretical approaches to feminist art, and the challenges in presenting it, while empowering these emerging museum professionals to promote equality by creating exhibition spaces and programming that is welcoming of all genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, classes, ages, and abilities? In essence, how could I practice what I preach?

The Initial Groundwork

To begin, it was essential to examine my own identity, privileges, and motivations. As a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual woman, I entered the field of feminist art history in the 1990s at about the time legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to address bias and violence against black women in the United States. In her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989), Crenshaw described how the interaction of race and gender was previously unaccounted for in feminist theory and

antiracist policies and laws. Today, the term “intersectionality” is often used without crediting its historical origins in black feminism.

Feminist thought and practice have evolved in the past three decades to include a diverse range of perspectives and approaches to the questioning of power and bias. I was inspired to understand recent shifts toward intersectional feminism as they relate to Crenshaw’s work. In titling the show “Emboldened, Embodied,” I aimed to connote empowerment, a political call to action, and a celebration of the lived experiences of all who have been historically silenced or omitted from dominant narratives of art, history, and culture.

Given our unusually tight planning schedule, I identified and reached out to the artists before the course began. Thacher Gallery promotes the work of California artists and collectors whose works resonate with issues of social justice, in alignment with USF’s Jesuit Catholic mission. I sought to present diverse voices that would reflect the shifting approaches in feminist art.

The final list included seven artists working in diverse media spanning four decades: Kim Anno, Lenore Chinn, Angela Hennessy, Yolanda López, Jessica Sabogal, Na Omi Judy Shintani, and Shanna Strauss. All identify as women of color; many of them are also queer. Each artist’s work addresses themes of systemic inequality, while also honoring the everyday lives, experiences, and communities of their subjects.

Early conversations with the artists helped me examine tokenism in the art world and language choices in defining the exhibition concept. For example, in response to my use of “marginalized voices,” drawn



Shanna Strauss,
When she rises,
mixed media on
found wood, 2018



from *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) by bell hooks, artist Yolanda López pushed back. She pointed out that the term reproduces traditional power relations and assumptions of who resides in the “center” versus the “margins.”

López’s response made me confront the challenges of language in addressing themes of oppression and resistance through a feminist lens. Similarly, my colleagues—and later, the class—questioned whether the term “woman” is still relevant in the context of intersectional feminism, wanting to ensure that the exhibition was inclusive of trans, gender fluid, and intersex artists and subjects. One of the student curators, Dana Klein, reflected on our choice not to feature the term in the exhibition title and introductory wall text: “I realized the problematic nature of naming a singularly ‘female’ experience; it began to feel nonessential and even tangential to the mission of our artists and the gallery.”

Preparing the Students

Once the artists were secured and the course began, I developed methods for engaging the class in self-reflection and scholarship around identity. In addition to Crenshaw, we read “Re-Thinking Intersectionality” (2008) by scholar Jennifer Nash, for further background on black feminist theory and intersectionality. The 13 graduate student curators in

the class all identified as women and most as white. Critical self-reflection with the subject matter was a must: How do power and race inform the curator-artist relationship in museums and galleries today?

To introduce the class to the historical context of feminist and queer art exhibitions in the US, I assigned Maura Reilly’s *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (2018). Reilly uses the term “curatorial activism” to designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principal aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists, “the under- or unrepresented, the silenced, and the ‘doubly colonized,’” are no longer ignored. Reilly’s work offered both a theoretical and historical framework for our exhibition.

Once the students were grounded in some of the literature pertaining to the curation of feminist art, we spent a class session at the whiteboard, brainstorming on the language and overarching message for our exhibition concept, or “big idea.” Together, the class composed the following statement: “Expressions of intersectional identities ignite conversations around justice, visibility, and community.” This statement guided their work in developing the exhibition concept and design.

Working with the Artists and Artworks

The next step—and perhaps the most important—was to pair groups of students with an artist whom



Thacher Gallery Director Glori Simmons guides students in the installation process before Angela Hennessy’s *Body for a Black Moon*, 2019.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

The following can help museum professionals engage in successful, collaborative feminist art curation and programming.

- Promote open and honest discussions of race, intersectional identities, experiences of institutionalized inequalities, and privilege.
- Acknowledge and embrace the differences and multiplicity among feminisms.
- Invite local communities to discuss approaches during the research phase of the project.
- Create platforms (programs, artist statements) for artists to speak for themselves and share their ideas. Remain open to revising messaging, including sharing label copy.
- Design and test interactive activities that promote reflection and community building.
- Discuss museum politics and culture around feminist topics.



USF museum studies graduate students Hannah Baldwin, Dana Klein, Sarah Wehlage, and Ginger Daley prepare labels for the exhibition's interactive "identity quilt."

they would research and interview. Students generated questions, both general and specific to each artist's practice, including a guiding question asked of all artists: How do you self-identify and respond to being labeled by curators and in the art world?

Students were surprised when several artists avoided the question. Among them was Lenore Chinn, who has documented the lives of San Francisco's artists, activists, and the LGBTQ+ community for more than five decades. She responded to the students' question about identity by describing herself as a "documentarian" who simply wished to "represent her friends." Chinn's most recognized body of work, her "Family Portrait" series, utilizes traditional portraiture and photorealism to demand social legitimacy for her queer subjects.

Again and again, the artists redirected questions about self-representation. Through this experience, the class came to understand the subtleties of each artist's unique way of describing their practice as a political act in itself.

Of the works presented, perhaps Yolanda López's *The Nanny* (from her "Women's Work is Never Done" series, 1994) best exemplifies the power of feminist art in calling out the oppression of women of color by white women. In one of the earlier chronological works in "Emboldened, Embodied," López places a nanny's uniform between two advertisements, one from *National Geographic* in 1961 and the other

from *Vogue* in 1991, that exoticize Latin American culture while depicting women of color in subservient positions. The installation calls out the ways that Indigenous and Latina women have been exploited for their labor in the United States by highlighting the asymmetric power relations between white women and women of color.

The Nanny became a catalyst for the students' critical reflection on the exhibition's engagement with intersectionality on multiple levels. At an artist roundtable during the exhibition opening, López urged white women in the audience, whom she described as "women of non-color," to speak out against systemic inequities and racism.

One of the most impactful parts of the "Emboldened, Embodied" exhibition was an interactive "identity quilt" project, loosely inspired by artist Shanna Strauss's work. In a corner of the gallery, visitors entered a "studio space" framed by a label titled "Origins of the Term Intersectionality." After reading about Crenshaw's work as inspiration for the exhibition, guests were encouraged to select a colored index card containing symbolic images on one side and several questions on the back, including "What part of your identity are you most proud of? What part of your identity is in flux? Is fixed?"

After writing responses to these prompts, visitors used twine to attach their cards to others hanging on the wall, forming a paper "identity quilt." This quilt

RESOURCES

To learn more about "Emboldened, Embodied," visit usfca.edu/thacher-gallery/emboldened-embodied.

Jenna C. Ashton, *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, 2017

Kimberlé Crenshaw "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989
chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, 2019

Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, 2018

grew each day over the three months of the exhibition. Sam Sanders, one of the student curators, reflected, “USF is a very diverse community in a very diverse city. We want anyone coming into this space to feel comfortable or reflected in the space.”

Lessons Learned

Bringing museum studies and feminism together into the curriculum was a rewarding experience, and I am eager to take what I have learned to my next project. Teaching a curatorial practicum course focused on feminist art showed me that theoretical context is not enough to train the next generation of curators.

In retrospect, I think more team-building exercises early on would have helped create space for personal reflection on intersectionality within the group. Iyari Arteaga, a student curator, emphasized how “crucial it is for us to acknowledge and discuss the identities and privileges each of us carry.”

What was most important, I found, was listening to what the artists had to say and what they taught me

and the students along the way. Through interviews, roundtables, performances, and other public platforms, we need to create more opportunities for artists to speak truth to power.

In training the next generation of museum leaders, we must promote listening, grappling, and self-reflection. The willingness to consider our own positionalities brings stronger relationships with artists; a more thoughtful, critical practice of contemporary curation; and an honest engagement with the ways power and race can inform the curator-artist relationship in museums and galleries today.

Paula Birnbaum, Ph.D., is professor and academic director of the Museum Studies M.A. program at the University of San Francisco. She will expand on this topic in the panel discussion “Intersectional Feminism in the Museum” at the AAM Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo in San Francisco, May 17–20.



Kim Anno, *Charlie* (from *90 Miles from Paradise*), photograph accompanied by sound loop, 2015

Courtesy of the artist

The Art of CONvErSatiON

The National Museum of Women in the Arts' "Fresh Talk" series gives breath and breadth to bold ideas about the interplay among women, art, and social change.

By Emma Filar

Photograph by Yassine El Mansouri



After the Fresh Talk “Who are the new superwomen of the universe?” at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, attendees continue the conversation at a post-event cocktail hour.

What happens when a museum becomes a hub for socially engaged conversation? This is a question the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) is answering.

In Washington, DC, NMWA has established itself as a center for the exchange of ideas at the intersection of women, arts, and social change. The museum's public programs gather diverse audiences, foster dialogue, and build connection around a range of social topics and issues.

Specifically, NMWA's Women, Arts, and Social Change (WASC) initiative focuses on women and the arts as catalysts for change. Public programs offer a platform for speakers and attendees to advance ideas to address society's most pressing issues—especially those affecting women—and inspire action in the arts and beyond.

As museums everywhere reimagine how they can engage local communities in meaningful ways, WASC is a model that is working.

Connecting Around Social Engagement

The museum introduced WASC in 2015 as its signature public programs initiative focused on highlighting the power of women and the arts to create meaningful change. The initiative's Fresh Talk series convenes prominent women in the arts with change makers *outside* the field for creative conversations

on art, gender, equity, the environment, identity, education, health, social and economic opportunity, and more.

Speakers are carefully selected—and have included artists Carrie Mae Weems and Ann Hamilton, poet Nikki Giovanni, artist and activist Emma Sulkowicz, curator and bestselling author Sarah Lewis, Tate Modern Director Frances Morris, and many more—but the conversations are open and honest.

“By allowing speakers a platform to express ideas from their place of practice and expertise, we’re creating room for real conversations to take place,” says NMWA Director of Public Programs Melani N. Douglass. “We work to diversify the voices at the table. Since DC is a city with both local and global reach, we can create space for people who think or work globally to connect locally.”

Post-event communal suppers and interactive cocktail hours help foster these connections. Inspired by the on-stage conversation, attendees gather to play games, write poetry, or make a craft. These activities spark engagement around the evening's topic.

“Institutions are, understandably, reluctant to create platforms that amplify speakers with bold ideas and calls for change,” Douglass says. “However, what will museums become if we are not sites where challenging conversations can happen? We have to remember who we serve and what we want our audience to know about us.”

In the four years since the first Fresh Talk, nearly every program has sold out. An average of about 20 percent of attendees are first-time visitors. Attendees unanimously say that they have a better understanding of the museum's mission to champion women through the arts as a result of attending a Fresh Talk program.

“When we created the Women, Arts, and Social Change initiative, we wanted to present programs that reflected who we are as an institution—a museum that redefines what it means to advocate for art and artists,” says NMWA Director Susan Fisher Sterling. “Since then, we have built an innovative, talented, and solution-oriented community comprising 60 outstanding presenters and nearly 7,500 participants who vary by age, occupation, gender, economics, educational level, culture, and outlook.”

Audience reactions for all Fresh Talks are overwhelmingly enthusiastic.



Photograph by Margot Schulman

Sterling sees the programs as a natural extension of current conversations around socially engaged art, in which an artist's practice involves creating work that addresses a social or political issue and aspires to empower change. In fact, women artists have been at the forefront of socially engaged art—but are often relegated to showing their work in spaces outside the traditional art market.

For example, Mother Art, a collective of women artists in the 1970s and '80s, was dedicated to creating social-political art through installation and performance in nontraditional spaces, including laundromats, stores, and conferences. Ntozake Shange's renowned theater piece *For Colored Girls...* was initially performed in bars. Faith Ringgold used the

mural format to respond to disparities between black and white people during the civil rights era. Harmony Hammond, whose cloth-based sculptures probe issues related to class, was a founding member of New York's A.I.R. Gallery, the nation's first artist-run nonprofit gallery for women, which opened in 1972 as an alternative to mainstream institutions.

Today, socially engaged artists confront a broad range of urgent topics affecting women and girls around the world, from climate change and racism to misogyny and rape culture.

Turning a Legacy into a Program

Reflecting on this rich legacy of arts activism, museum staff sought to translate it into public



At a communal supper following the Fresh Talk "Righting the Balance—Can there be gender parity in the arts?" attendees connect around the evening's topic.

Photograph by Kevin Allen



Museum-goers hang messages on artist Mónica Mayer's bilingual participatory installation "El Tendedero/The Clothesline Project," which facilitates dialogue on women's experiences with gender-based violence.

programming. They decided to start the series by looking inward. The first Fresh Talk, "Righting the Balance—Can there be gender parity in the arts?," faced the art world's gender inequity head on. Artists, curators, critics, and representatives of auction houses and galleries were paired with activists, social media entrepreneurs, and researchers to consider strategies in the quest for gender equity.

In later programs, the topic expanded. "Righting the Balance—How can the arts advance body politics?" explored how the arts might address issues of discrimination, sexism, and sexual violence. But instead of a cadre of visual artists, a group of activists, filmmakers, and writers framed the discussion.

Other programs affirmed the series' commitment to fostering cross-disciplinary conversations and an expanded definition of art. Scientists and engineers discussed ways that technological innovations can heal the environment. Female comic book writers and illustrators discussed gender roles in superhero tales. Douriean Fletcher, the jewelry designer for the film *Black Panther*, talked with anthropologist Ayana Flewellen and Maia Nuku, a curator from the

Metropolitan Museum of Art, about the ways adornment communicates gender and power. One evening was devoted to the bicycle, with experts discussing its impact on women's mobility and empowerment.

Museum staff continue to experiment with program formats in a quest for deeper, long-term audience engagement. Mexico City-based artist Mónica Mayer came to the museum with her bilingual, participatory installation "El Tendedero/The Clothesline Project." The artist transformed the clothesline into a tool to facilitate dialogue around women's experiences with gender-based violence. Mayer's visits included community-based workshops and culminated in a Fresh Talk.

In fall 2020, NMWA will present "Reclamation: Recipes, Remedies, and Rituals," a project consisting of a series of talks, workshops on the connections between food and art, and a participatory food-related exhibition. The programming explores how traditionally feminine roles in the family, home, and community powerfully intersect with ethnic and ancestral identities.

The Fresh Talk programs are produced internally by a team of two with the help of a program fellow, an intern, and a core group of volunteers. Partnerships—like with Together We Bake, a bakery in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, that employs former prisoners—enhance the programs.

Fresh Talk topics are informed primarily by current events, and though planning is done months

RESOURCES

To view Fresh Talk videos, please visit nmwa.org/freshtalk4change.

Visit Get the Facts for more information about gender equity in the arts: nmwa.org/advocate/get-facts.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Following are some things the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) has learned over the four years that the Women, Arts, and Social Change (WASC) initiative has existed.

- **Diverse voices are essential.** Museum staff seek out different viewpoints and personalities, asking who needs to be in the room to encourage a compelling conversation.
- **Institutional buy-in is vital.** Many museum departments contribute to the WASC initiative. Spearheaded by a team of two, museum staff are able to act quickly to respond to current events and have the support to make timely decisions.
- **Markers for success go beyond attendance and income.** While the WASC programs took some time to become established, they have been instrumental in shaping public perceptions of the museum. Attendees say the program gives them a better understanding of the museum's mission to champion women through the arts.

in advance, staff members keep tabs on relevant hot-button issues and the women who are addressing them. In selecting speakers, Douglass looks to experts in their fields but also at personalities, aiming for a mixture of introverts and extroverts to keep talks balanced. The speakers usually have dinner before the program so they can get to know each other before their public conversation.

Encouraging a State of Query

Audience reactions are enthusiastic and generally positive—but Fresh Talk conversations also prompt attendees to consider new perspectives, ask questions, and, on occasion, get introspective.

“This changed my opinion that I am experiencing challenges that no one else is. We are all going through some struggles,” said one attendee. “The women on the panel said a lot of things that were new to me and that I needed to hear,” said another. Many indicate a desire to make a change in their own lives: “I’m inspired to start taking a more critical eye in my corporate creative work to promote and ensure diversity has a priority.” The Fresh Talk was “inspirational and gives me more energy to become more socially active,” said another. Others described feeling uncomfortable during the programs—which staff members view as a good thing.


“My goal is for 10 percent of the audience to feel like they are aligned with the views expressed, 10 percent to feel uncomfortable and shaken, and 80 percent to be in state of query—challenged or

excited about the content and rethinking what museums can be,” Douglass says. “Success is determined by our ability to present the conversation in a way that keeps everyone at the table, engaged, and willing to add their voice.”

In starting the Fresh Talk series, staff decided early on that attendance and income would not be the key determinates for success. The ticket prices (typically \$20–\$25) are intentionally low, especially for programs that include dinner and drinks, to minimize barriers to entry. Fresh Talk programs are inclusive and have been invaluable in shifting public perception of the museum—an institution with open doors, where anyone can take a seat at the table.

Fresh Talk events are live-streamed and recorded and available online shortly after each presentation. Audiences at NMWA and beyond are invited to add their voices via social media using #freshtalk4change.

“If the art is important, then the conversations that inspired the art are just as important,” Douglass says. “Museums must be spaces where artists and change agents can come together and speak freely. Our programs resonate with our audience because the framework supports the expression of bold ideas and tough conversations.”

 **Emma Filar** is the communications and marketing manager for the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC.



Drag story time readers Karma Kills and Vana B read *Heather Has Two Mommies* in the "Queer Abstraction" exhibition during the Des Moines Art Center's "Entirely Kids Day."



ABSTRACT ART CONCRETE GOALS

The Des Moines Art Center diversified its audience—and educated its staff—with an exhibition on queer abstraction that transformed the frame of reference for its cause.

By Kara Fedje and Jared Ledesma

During the summer of 2019,

Iowa's Des Moines Art Center mounted "Queer Abstraction," a landmark exhibition focused on contemporary artists who visualize themes related to sexuality and gender identity through abstract art.

The exhibition presented many firsts for this nationally renowned modern and contemporary art museum. "Queer Abstraction" was the first exhibition in the art center's 70-year history to focus on queer subject matter and the first time a major museum recognized "queer abstraction" as a phenomenon in the development of modern art.

This exhibition came to life at an art museum that was nervous about—or even uncomfortable with—the use of the word "queer." As the art center prepared for this more inclusive exhibition and educational programs, it faced a variety of challenges. Over the course of two years, the art center underwent institutional changes that prepared itself to overcome these obstacles.

Laying the Groundwork

In 2017, the art center embarked on a three-year strategic plan that ensured a commitment to inclusive practices. This plan promoted exhibitions representing all people and not only the voices belonging to white, heterosexual, male artists who have dominated the canon of art history. Toward this end, the art center hired Jared Ledesma as assistant curator, in part because of his background in queer art history.

Ledesma's first exhibition with the art center, "I, too, am America," featured many works from the permanent collections by lesbian and gay artists that had not previously been on display. The show created



AAM LGBTQ Alliance, *Welcoming Guidelines for Museums*, May 2016
aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/lgbtq_welcome_guide.pdf

momentum for exhibitions and programming that focused on LGBTQ artists, aimed at attracting Des Moines' LGBTQ community. This included two sold-out tours of queer art in the art center's collection led by Ledesma and Daniel Hoffman-Zinnel, the former executive director of One Iowa, a statewide LGBTQ organization dedicated to preserving and advancing equality for Iowans.

The tours were designed to show a queer presence in the art center galleries and promote advocacy for LGBTQ equality in Iowa. Meanwhile, "Queer Abstraction" was added to the exhibition calendar to be displayed in two years, and the institution would need to prepare.

In 2016, the AAM LGBTQ Alliance published *Welcoming Guidelines for Museums*, an assessment tool to help LGBTQ museum professionals and allies effect change at institutions that serve LGBTQ persons and families. With "Queer Abstraction" on the schedule and an increase in future LGBTQ programming at the art center, staff formed a resource group to review the welcoming guidelines.

The resource group did not initially receive senior leadership support until a member from the group was recruited to the art center's Inclusion Team, an internal group comprised of mostly senior leadership created to support diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. While the Inclusion Team was making progress on procedures and policy, the resource group

was developing staff trainings on sexuality, gender identity, and standard LGBTQ terms.

Trainings were conducted by Becky Smith, director of youth engagement at Iowa Safe Schools, a nonprofit that provides safe, supportive, and nurturing learning environments and communities for LGBTQ and allied youth through education, outreach, advocacy, and direct services. Smith conducted four trainings—two for administrative staff, one for security staff, and one for docents—that included an overview of sex, sexuality, and gender identity; an introduction to LGBTQ terminology; and a brief dive into the concept of privilege.

One of the challenges Smith faced was explaining the importance of the word "queer." A handful of art center staff members were uncomfortable using the word because of its history as a derogatory term. In fact, when announcing Ledesma's arrival in the art center's membership newsletter, there was uneasiness about whether to include that he focused on "queer art history." Though this uneasiness was never put to rest, it was helpful for staff to learn about the relationship of the word to LGBTQ culture.

Creating an Experience Through Installation

The Des Moines Art Center is known for its distinct architecture. The museum comprises buildings designed by Eliel Saarinen, I. M. Pei, and Richard Meier. "Queer Abstraction" was presented in both the art

A D&I CHECKLIST

When emphasizing diversity and inclusion for institutional change, remember to do the following.

- Make an effort to hire a diverse staff to support change.
- Provide an internal voice for staff through resource groups.
- Invite community participation early in the process.
- Look to other museums as examples and for resources.
- Allocate funding for LGBTQ community partners to implement training classes.
- Remember: not everyone will participate or be comfortable.
- Be ready: growth and change are slow and difficult.

Iowa Safe Schools staff and Des Moines Art Center staff after helping children and families make identity bracelets during "Entirely Kids Day."



“Because of ‘Queer Abstraction,’ the community now knows the art center not only as a jewel of an institution, but also one that is mindful of the LGBTQ community in its programming and exhibitions.”

center’s temporary exhibition gallery in the Saarinen wing and in the I. M. Pei wing.

The installation of “Queer Abstraction” was crucial to the show’s message. Typically, temporary walls are constructed within the exhibition space to create smaller, intimate galleries. But with this exhibition, it was important to have unobstructed sightlines so that all objects were visible, suggesting a dialogue between them and a sense of community. After all, though the objects were different in terms of medium, dimensions, etc., they all shared the common theme of queer abstraction.

On the title wall at the exhibition’s entrance, visitors were met with the introductory text as well as a key that defined “queer” and “abstraction.” This key not only functioned as a framework for the exhibition, but it also helped educate those who were unfamiliar with the terms.

The exhibition’s extended labels were also different than normal. Typically, labels are well over a paragraph.



But in “Queer Abstraction,” most labels were only three to four sentences. This reiterated that queer abstraction cannot be entirely defined by certain works of art. Instead, viewers came to their own conclusions as to why the work was included in the exhibition.

At the end of the temporary exhibition gallery, visitors found an interactive glass board mounted on the wall near a table and stool. Beside the board was a question: What does “Queer Abstraction” mean to you? The art center received hundreds of drawings and notes from the public during the exhibition.

The opening celebration of “Queer Abstraction.”



Diversifying the Opening and Programming

The opening night for “Queer Abstraction” was at the beginning of LGBTQ Pride Month, June 1, 2019. Therefore, it was important for the celebration to be just that: a party.

To ensure that the opening represented Des Moines’ LGBTQ community, the art center held a meeting of various community leaders three months before June 1. After an introduction to the exhibition and its concepts, the first few questions from one community member set the tone for the entire meeting: “How many artists of color are in the exhibition? Why are there no bisexual artists in the show?” It was clear that the exhibition needed equal representation, beyond lesbian and gay members of the LGBTQ community.

The group discussed diversifying the opening night by including vendors, disc jockeys, and artists who

DID YOU KNOW?

Iowa was the third state to legalize same-sex marriage when its state Supreme Court unanimously upheld a lower court ruling in April 2009, six years before the US Supreme Court made its ruling.

represented more of the queer spectrum. The opening celebration for “Queer Abstraction” was as diverse and inclusive an event as most staff had ever witnessed.

Programming surrounding the exhibition included a lecture, “The Possibility of Queer Abstraction,” by David Getsy, a noted scholar of contemporary queer art and a contributor to the exhibition’s catalogue. The art center also hosted tandem gallery dialogues with visiting artists Carrie Moyer and Mark Joshua Epstein.

Becky Smith of Iowa Safe Schools provided a training called “How to be an Ally” for museum visitors that proved to be a lively, interactive discussion. Families with queer youth attended as well as grandparents of queer grandchildren. It was an incredible step forward for the art center.

Inspired by other institutions that offer free family events for LGBTQ children and their families, the art center hosted “Entirely Kids Day” on July 20, 2019. That day, 700 children and their families visited the art center, welcomed by a 30-foot pride flag. Entertainment included drag story time, docent tours, art making, and an LGBTQ dance performance. Iowa Safe Schools helped children and their families make bracelets that show support for all identities.

In addition, One Iowa used “Queer Abstraction” as a learning experience for its Leadership Institute, a program that trains queer folk to become better leaders. Institute participants met at the art center, toured the exhibition with its curator, and heard from an artist featured in the show.

Becoming More Inclusive

Marginalized audiences who had previously not been a part of the museum’s scope prior to this exhibition were beginning to see themselves at the art center. The art center had accomplished a lot in two years, but everyone had more work to do.

Today, the museum includes LGBTQ individuals as a target audience. This spirit is reflected in the art center’s new positioning statement:

The Des Moines Art Center believes in the power of art to inspire personal, political, and social transformation. We commit to exhibit and explore thought-provoking modern and contemporary art. We connect people and art by offering opportunities for feeling, imagining, dreaming, and creating.

Natalie Nease with Tandem Theatre and Dance/Hurley & Dancers performing during “Entirely Kids Day.”



We promote curiosity and embrace critical and empathetic thinking with a spirit of openness. We strive to be a welcoming and equitable cultural resource. This effort to ensure access to art for everyone has been a core tenet of the museum since its founding. Admission is always free for all.

As reflected in this positioning statement, the art center has become a more inclusive place, focusing on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. Because of “Queer Abstraction,” the community now knows the art center not only as a jewel of an institution, but also one that is mindful of the LGBTQ community in its programming and exhibitions.

Change within a museum is often challenging, difficult, and messy—especially when attempting to engage communities that have for decades been left out of the canon. But when you open a museum to these groups, the effort is appreciated, and many will benefit.

Kara Fedje, formerly museum educator at the Des Moines Art Center, is now the vice president of learning experiences at the Putnam Museum in Davenport, Iowa. **Jared Ledesma** is assistant curator at the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa.



Mercury MR-2, Gemini 11 and Apollo ASTP capsules, California Science Center, Los Angeles. On loan from the Smithsonian Institution.

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Gallery view of the Exploratorium's exhibition "Self, Made" in summer 2019.



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BEYOND

By Melissa Alexander and Dina Herring

BINARY

Developing an exhibition on the many faces of identity unmasks the slippery nature of truths and beliefs about gender.

At the Exploratorium in San Francisco, interactive inquiry-based experiences exploring a variety of phenomena are central to all of our museum offerings. Within the context of exhibition planning, individual exhibit development is often driven by the interests and passions of individual team members. This was the case with “Self, Made: Exploring You in a

World of We,” an interactive exhibition that examined the topic of identity that ran in the summer of 2019.

Throughout the exhibition development process, we were sensitive to and worried about how exhibits that challenged visitors’ ideas of race and gender might impact them. But going into the process, we didn’t realize how developing these exhibits would challenge us and illuminate our own diverse experiences and perspectives. Ultimately, this exhibition was as rewarding for our museum and its staff as we set out to make it for our visitors, and the work continues to inform our active institutional dialogue around inclusion practices.

Designed with families in mind, “Self, Made” included a mix of films, artworks, and artifacts alongside our typical stand-alone interactive exhibits. The exhibition offered ways to explore how identity is constructed personally, socially, and structurally. Four guest curators with diverse backgrounds offered outside advice and contributions. Elements ranged from challenging to expansive and joyful.

While developing the exhibition, the team often spontaneously engaged in conversations about identity and equity, developing activities for each other about race, gender, and privilege that informed our work. We wanted visitors to actively question their ideas about people different from themselves and question the source of those beliefs—so we began to practice this ourselves.

Prototyping Gender

When staff members had previously confronted hard subjects like race, skin color, and privilege, they had navigated challenging conversations with each other. Gender proved no different.

One team member shared that she is raising a child who identifies as non-binary. A former women’s studies minor, she was surprised when her child said to her, “Mom, your ideas about gender are so stereotypical.” She shared her own learning journey, and from this authentic personal experience, we began our research and prototyping on the topic. Concurrently, other staff members were conducting their own experiment with the phenomenon of socialized gender in a museum setting (see Bathroom Boundaries sidebar on p. 41).



Young visitors investigate *Gender Blender*, an exhibit that prompts exploration of how quickly we can assign gender to others based on surface clues like clothing.

The first prototype to emerge was intended to illuminate and playfully complicate the powerful urge to “decide” gender from surface cues when encountering someone. Inspired by a kids’ mix-and-match flip book, this gender blender offered ways to creatively combine a variety of animal heads with an equal

number of torsos and legs in a range of clothing normative to ideas of male and female. The urge to assign gender quickly becomes obvious when the available signals of heads, legs, and clothing are mixed or ambiguous. Choosing to use animal heads disarmed expectations for matching faces to clothing.

BATHROOM BOUNDARIES

By Sal Alper and Sam Sharkland

How can we experiment with the phenomenon of socialized gender in a museum setting? At the Exploratorium, we looked to our restroom signs.

As we developed the “Self, Made” exhibition, museum colleagues conducted an experiment on some of the staff bathrooms by changing the signage from symbols representing “men” and “women” to signs that read “brown eyes” and “blue eyes,” along with instructions for “other colored eye people” to go in an all-eyed bathroom in another part of the offices. For many of us, it was the first time we’d ever had to ask if we belonged in the bathroom of choice.

This intervention led to Bathroom Boundaries, a series of mediated inquiry experiences for visitor bathrooms during museum adult hours. In the experience, a visitor heading to the bathroom looks for familiar bathroom signs but is faced with unexpected, seemingly arbitrary categories. This moment quickly leads to confusion or discomfort.

By problematizing the basic necessity of toilet use, we challenged groups who previously may not have considered binary separation as an issue. We encouraged visitors to ask themselves who has the right to access and relief through an empathetic experience.



Here's how we developed Bathroom Boundaries.

We found allies. Tackling a topic that challenges deeply embedded norms in a personal area requires understanding and support. Our process started in casual conversation but led to staff experiments and a museum-wide discussion. This allowed for buy-in from decision-makers, which in turn supported the programmatic engagement for the public.

We prototyped. Experimenting with Bathroom Boundaries in staff areas gave us direct and honest feedback from our colleagues. We shifted variables to test reactions and feelings of comfort.

We engaged our audience. We used existing labeling practices to mark the site of the experiment and offer guidance for the experience. A writing board and visible staff to take feedback or contextualize the discussions allowed visitors to process the experience, which also provided anecdotal data for us.

Read more about the experiment at exploratorium.edu/files/pdfs/Bathroom_Boundaries.pdf.

Sal Alper is manager of the Field Trip Explainer Program and **Sam Sharkland** is public program developer in the Cinema Arts Program at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, California.

One of several signs used during the development and implementation of Bathroom Boundaries at Exploratorium After Dark, a weekly, evening program for adults.

But was asking visitors to question gender assumptions that played with surface cues commonly associated with normative male/female clothing enough? Our adviser and guest curator, Ramzi Fawaz, a scholar of queer and feminist studies, pressed us to offer visitors a more expanded view of gender that clearly decoupled gender from sex and included a way to explore queer, fluid, and emerging identities. He challenged us to present gender as the evolving, growing network it is today.

At first, this felt like a daunting task. But research uncovered Sam Killerman's "Genderbread Person," which offers a model that not only clearly separates gender from sexual orientation, but also introduces a multitude of gendered experiences in a range of male/female flavors. We began experimenting with the language and modalities to help communicate the differences between sex and gender, between a gendered body and a gendered expression.

In attempting this, we saw how everyone experiences gender differently. The many fraught conversations among team members were a sign of the topic's heft. We realized the importance of peeling apart gender for our visitors—separating body, identity, and expression into three distinct and variable parts of a person's gender experience. But would this approach be perceived as too facile or frivolous by those who struggle with forms of gender oppression daily?

Exposing the Layers

Another important discovery from our gender research was the book *Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity* by Brook Pessin-Whedbee. Simply and clearly, this book portrays gender as the complicated, layered personal experience that it is. Designed for young children, *Who Are You?* offered clues to clear and inclusive language. The author provides an interactive wheel in the back of the book that allows children to mix and match aspects of identity expression. This resource inspired the

next gender prototype that would become part of the exhibition.

Though our version of the gender wheel was inspired by the book, its design was ultimately driven by our overwhelming desire to expose visitors to the broadest range of gender options beyond male/female. The prototype we created includes four stacked discs that can be individually rotated to select your word of choice. The beginning of the phrase is matched with one of the many word choices available from the disc below. For example, "I am . . ." aligns with options like female, trans, gender fluid, non-binary, or just me. "I love . . ." has options like sewing, animals, dancing, and more. In completing each phrase, visitors are invited to consider gender as more than one part of themselves.

The centermost ring asks each visitor to think about their body ("I have . . ."). This ring had the fewest choices, and we struggled to reach consensus on the options to offer. After much debate and outside guidance, we landed on the following: "a body that makes people guess boy," "a body that makes people guess girl," "a body I am comfortable in," and "a body I am not comfortable in."

We wrestled with the responsibility to communicate clearly while potentially introducing unfamiliar words—often with fluid meanings—like "tomboy," "genderqueer," and "trans." We knew what we were doing was hard and risky. With each new prototype, someone on the team became concerned that we might neglect to represent options that aligned to a visitor's experience, causing them harm. Each version revealed the limits of language.

But a trans colleague encouraged and reminded us, "Gender is complicated and discordant, and we don't have all of the language we need to address it. If all I cared about was you calling me he and him, I'd have a *much* easier life, as would my trans brothers and sisters."

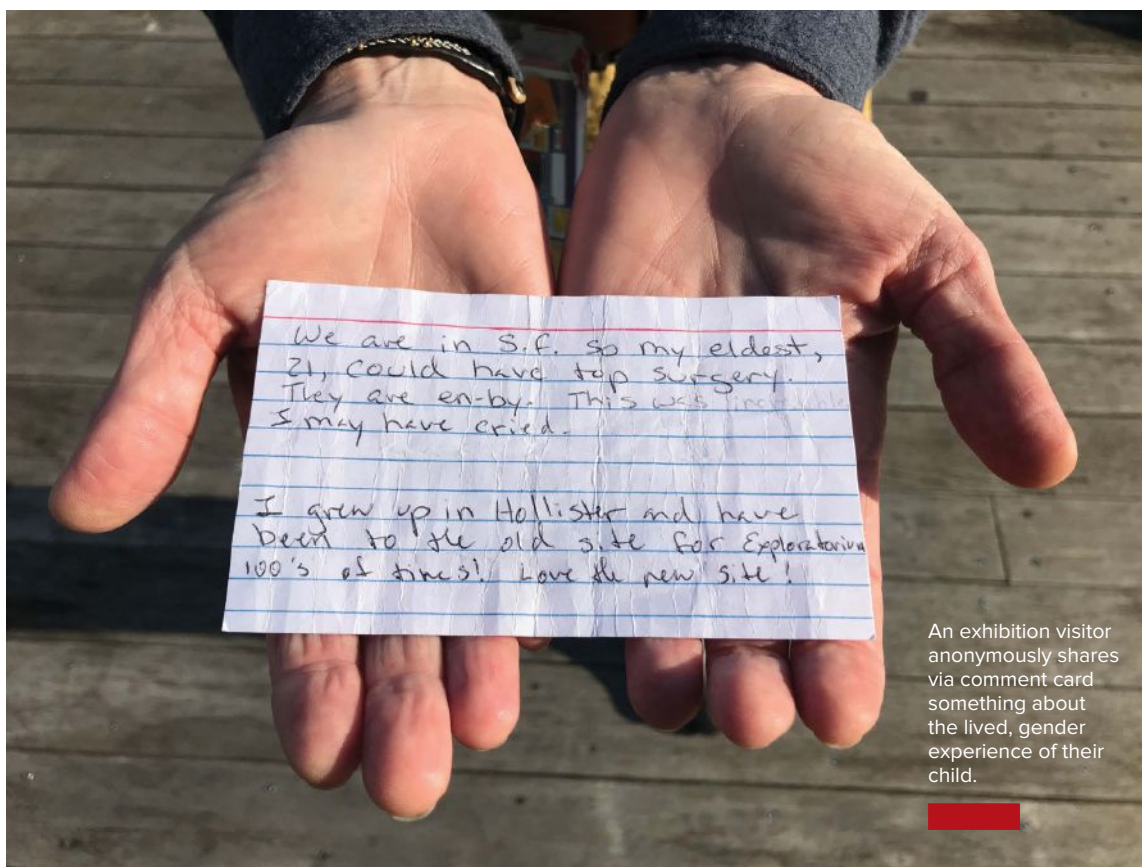
We were not prepared for the sensitivities that emerged in creating the gender wheel, and we struggled to find words and to empathize with each other. As the exhibition opening neared, we were still debating specific word choices and whether to include the wheel in the exhibition.

A colleague argued that our visual gender exhibit with the animal heads was too easy—we were doing

RESOURCES

Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity
kidsguidetogender.com

The Genderbread Person
www.genderbread.org



An exhibition visitor anonymously shares via comment card something about the lived, gender experience of their child.

the safe thing. By providing the gender wheel, we would be doing the brave thing by allowing all kinds of bodies to be included. The wheel effectively acknowledges that there is a somatic experience to gender, but that alone cannot address the sum total of how gender should be described or assigned.

To our delight, most visitors to “Self, Made” greeted our two gender exhibits with enthusiasm. We paired the exhibits so that visitors could quickly and playfully realize how easily they assign gender based on surface cues and then take their time to explore their own layers of gender. Both *Gender Blender* and the interactive wheel remain in the Exploratorium’s human phenomena gallery where they continue to help families have conversations about gender.

Lessons Learned

Gender is dynamic and complicated. Our attempts to separate it from sex and create a more expansive view ultimately required us to confront our own gender perceptions. While many of us take gender perceptions for granted, others must daily weigh the value of comfort against the expectation of conforming.

Seeing the value in every personal experience, and making progress to create exhibits that represent these experiences, requires compassion, empathy, and patience. But when we have honest conversations and examine our own personal biases, we can make something that helps others (including ourselves and our colleagues) feel “seen.”

As the museum evaluates the exhibition’s impact on both visitors and its internal culture, museum staff have continued to engage with one another on the topic of gender. Creating “Self, Made” was an experience full of discomforts, but our ultimate reward was not just our visitors’ engagement, but our own opportunity to grow personally and culturally.

Our advice to any other museum looking to tackle a complicated topic like gender? Expect it to be hard and to make mistakes, but take the risks. Be open to accepting the limitations of your own experience. Listen to others and keep the conversation going.

Melissa Alexander is director of public programs and **Dina Herring** is a senior new media exhibit developer at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, California.

The Facing Change Initiative Forges Ahead

The American Alliance of Museums' Facing Change: Advancing Museum Board Diversity and Inclusion initiative launched in the fall of 2019. Through this first-of-its-kind, three-year initiative—funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Alice L. Walton Foundation, and Ford Foundation—museum boards across the country are working to diversify their ranks and become more inclusive and equitable by providing specific board training, resources, and support.

In the fall, some of the key accomplishments of the initiative included:

- Selecting the five regional hubs—Chicagoland; Twin Cities; Houston/Dallas/Ft. Worth; Jackson, MS; and San Francisco Bay Area region
- Conducting an Intercultural Development Index assessment to measure cultural competency for the 1,100 board members involved in the initiative
- Hosting 11 full days of in-person DEAI foundation retreats at different museum sites
- Engaging 56 museums from a range of disciplines as initiative participants

- Selecting 10 senior diversity fellows to help drive and sustain the work

In the spring, AAM will implement phase two of the initiative, which will include operationalizing the AAM Board Matching Portal, sharing updates on the *Advancing DEAI Excellence in Museums* report, and supporting the museum cohorts of learning (MCOs) through the development of actionable museum board inclusion plans and a deeper understanding of DEAI concepts and curriculum.

Welcome New Accreditation Commissioners

Earlier this year, AAM welcomed two new accreditation commissioners: Marise McDermott and Melissa Russo. They are both leaders of accredited museums and experienced accreditation peer reviewers with a deep commitment to advancing excellence in the museum and nonprofit field from the local to the national level. Their five-year terms began in January and run through the end of 2024.

McDermott has 30 years of experience in museums and the cultural arts, including as director, curator, editor and journalist, and board chair. Since 2004, she has



From top, Melissa Russo and Marise McDermott, who have become AAM accreditation commissioners.

been the president and CEO of The Witte Museum in San Antonio, Texas, where she oversaw the museum's last two reaccreditation processes as well as its recent facility and campus expansion. She is actively engaged in several San Antonio tourism boards and has received many local and state awards. She has also served as the executive director of The History Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and was the editor of the Texas Committee for the Humanities' bimonthly magazine.

Russo brings more than two decades of executive-level experience to the commission, successfully managing both government and private nonprofit museums, along with diverse nonprofit board leadership experience in social services, education, public policy, and the arts. Since 2015, she has been the director of the San Bernardino County Museum in Redlands, California, and oversaw its recent successful reaccreditation process. She is the museum's first female director. Previously, she was the director of institutional advancement at the Chabot Space & Science Center in Oakland, California, for seven years and executive director of the Western Museums Association for 10 years.

Critical Value of Museums Reaffirmed on Capitol Hill

This February 24–25, hundreds of advocates gathered in Washington, DC, for Museums Advocacy Day, now in its 12th year. Advocates from nearly all 50 states gathered for two days of networking, issue



South Carolina museum advocates meet with congressional staff on Capitol Hill during Museums Advocacy Day.

briefings, and visits to legislators' offices on Capitol Hill to share the critical economic, educational, and community impact of museums.

Advocates also heard from federal agency leaders, Capitol Hill insiders, and advocacy experts about the federal budget process, how museums can participate in voter engagement, and how to effectively make the case for museums to legislators. Participants gained lifelong advocacy and leadership skills that can be used year-round with state and local elected officials and to advance their own careers.

With congressional elections just months away, this spring and summer is a critical time for you to share your stories about the indelible imprint museums have had on you and your community.

Visit aam-us.org/programs/museums-advocacy-day to learn more about Museums Advocacy Day, get the 2020 advocate materials and media kits, and see how you can speak up for museums in 2020!

Join the conversation on social media using the hashtag **#MuseumsAdvocacy2020**.

TrendsWatch 2020 Offers a Fresh Eye on Financial Sustainability

AAM has just released the 2020 edition of TrendsWatch, a special issue devoted to museums' financial sustainability. This forecasting report provides a framework for examining any museum's financial performance and thinking about long-term strategies for financial success. Through examples of emerging practices and museum profiles of financial ingenuity, the publication will provoke candid conversation and offer practical advice and innovative insight on earned revenue, charitable contributions, government funding, and capital (including income derived from financial investments).

The report also debunks the widespread misperception that nonprofits should not make money. Rather, museums can use their profits to make themselves more accessible, serve more people in more ways, and provide good, stable jobs that pay equitable salaries. As the author, Elizabeth Merritt, points out, the question for nonprofit museums isn't whether to be profitable, but how.

New Jobs



Peter Bagrov, *Curator in Charge of the Moving Image Department*, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY



Tricia Edwards, *Deputy Director*, Smithsonian Affiliations, Washington, DC



Melora McDermott, *Chief of Audience Engagement Strategy*, Denver Art Museum, CO



Stacie Brennan, *Curator of Education*, Lehigh University Art Galleries, Bethlehem, PA



Marina Reyes Franco, *Curator*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan



Kelly McKinley, *CEO*, Bay Area Discovery Museum, Sausalito, CA



Christy Coleman, *Executive Director*, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Williamsburg, VA



Meredith Hines-Dochterman, *Director of Marketing & Communications*, National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library, Cedar Rapids, IA



Jim Miller, *Vice President of Development & Marketing*, National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library, Cedar Rapids, IA



Warren Denney, *Vice President of Creative Services*, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, TN



E. Tory Laitila, *Curator of Textiles and Fashion*, Honolulu Museum of Art, HI



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Danny Owen, Director of Communications, Huntsville Museum of Art, AL



Vanessa Scott, Museum Specialist, Appleton Museum of Art, College of Central Florida, Ocala



Mike Travis, Vice President of Development, Boston Children's Museum, MA



Beth Warren, Retail Manager, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, NC



Scott Winterrowd, Director, Sid Richardson Museum, Fort Worth, TX

Elizabeth Cropper, dean of the National Gallery of Art's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), has announced her retirement in 2020 after 20 years of leadership. Only the second dean in CASVA's 40-year history, Cropper led the institution in strengthening the fellowship program with a deepened commitment to primary research, producing more publications, embracing digital tools for research and communications, and growing the endowment and other financial resources.



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REFLECTION



I am woman watch me grow
See me standing toe to toe
As I spread my lovin' arms across the land
But I'm still an embryo
With a long, long way to go
Until I make my brother understand

Oh yes, I am wise
But it's wisdom born of pain
Yes, I've paid the price
But look how much I gained
If I have to, I can face anything
I am strong
I am invincible

I am woman

Excerpted from *I Am Woman* lyrics written by Helen Reddy and Ray Burton ©
Universal Music Publishing Group, BMG Rights Management

***America*, by Mary Whyte, watercolor on paper, 40 x 53 inches, Kella of Aberdeen, South Dakota, Army.**

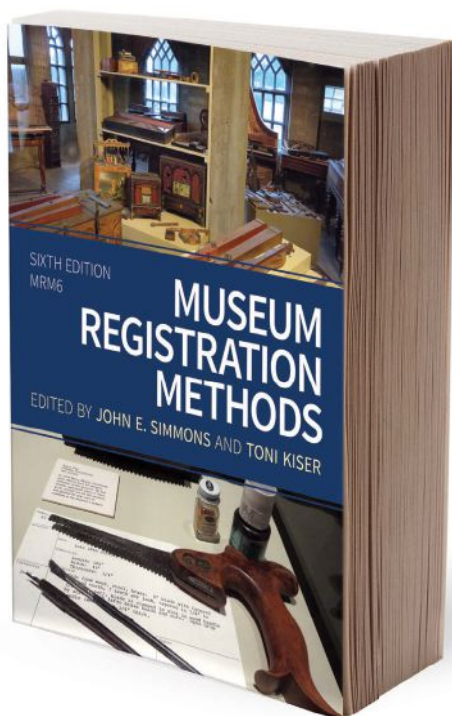


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The sixth edition of *Museum Registration Methods* is a comprehensive guide to registration and collections management for museums, from acquisition to use and deaccessioning.

John E. Simmons teaches workshops and museum studies classes and serves as Associate Curator of Collections for the Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum & Art Gallery at Penn State University. **Toni Kiser** is the Assistant Director for Collections Management at The National WWII Museum.

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