

## Against Sexual Violence in the Museum: Art, Curating, and Activism

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### ABSTRACT

Depictions of sexual violence are frequently found in the collections and displays of art museums, and material that represents and affirms violence against women often is displayed unchallenged. This article poses questions about how the presence of this material has been addressed in the relations between feminist activism against sexual violence, art made by artists responding to and participating in feminist activism, and the curatorial activities that have arisen to address the challenges that these activities present to art museums. The chapter investigates the 2021 exhibition *Titian: Women, Myth and Power* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and its handling of themes of rape in the central exhibit, Titian's *Rape of Europa*; the history of themes of rape in feminist art since the 1970s and in exhibitions of this art that have taken place in museums in the last two decades; and curatorial engagements with sexual violence and rape in recent art exhibitions in the US and in the UK. The article argues that new strategies for the presentation and interpretation of artworks dealing with sexual violence are needed for museums to redress the patriarchal and colonial presence of sexual violence in their collection.

**Keywords:** sexual violence, curating, activism, museums, art

### DO WOMEN\* HAVE TO BE NAKED TO GET INTO THE MUSEUM?

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” In 1989 the anonymous feminist artist group The Guerilla Girls famously used this question in the context of their public poster and billboard activism. The question, posed on the streets of New York City, deliberately conflated the presence of living women\* and of the cultural imaginings and social and political imaginaries of women\*<sup>1</sup>. Do women have to take their clothes off to buy a ticket and see a show at the Metropolitan Museum? Do women artists have to disrobe in order for their works to be collected by the Metropolitan Museum? Reformulating their provocation in this way makes very clear that the traffic between social realities and cultural imaginaries is complex. Seeking to strategically expose the misogynist exclusion of the works of women artists by the modern museum institution, this campaign raised awareness that women\* were very present in art museums as nude bodies in the paintings and in the sculpture of men, yet not as creators of art. The Guerilla Girls' bold visual critique publicly exposed the museum as an organization of patriarchal power. This was just one example of feminists calling for changes in the museum and curatorial orientations.

Museums, one of the key institutions of modernity in the newly built public infrastructures of the modern metropolis, are an important site for the visual articulation of the culture and civilization of modernity. Through the ordering, and norming, of gendered, sexualized, and racialized taxonomies of humans and their

<sup>1</sup> The asterisk is included throughout our text to indicate that we are using the term women in the most inclusive way.

environments, museums including art museums have fostered the heteronormative, racialized and patriarchal order of modern western society. The systemic exclusions of particular kinds of material as well as forcible inclusions of others, are the focus of feminist and decolonial activism and scholarship, including studies of what may be called museum violence (Hicks, 2020; Reilly, 2018; Adair and Levin, 2020; Krasny and Perry, 2020; Ashton, 2017; Krasny et al., 2022). These works were preceded by studies that undertook feminist analysis of museum collections and exhibitions which often focused on the representation of women\* artists as an extension of art historical concerns about the presence or absence of women\* in art historical knowledge more broadly understood (e.g., Dimitrakaki and Perry, 2013; Reilly, 2018; Hayden and Skrubbe, 2010). In a parallel development, some writers have undertaken analysis of museums and collections as a specific form of visual culture that represents gender and sexuality in normative ways (e.g., Levin, 2010; Duncan, 1989; Tyburzsky, 2016; Perry, 2006).

The treatment of female sexuality in art museums is most often explored through the status of the nude in art: the nude figure is central and treasured, cared for as cultural heritage, and proudly exhibited in ways that typically separate the appearance of a nude figure from its narrative or documentary implications (Duncan, 1989; Nead, 1992; see Smith, 2001 as an exception). In 1977, in the first issue of *Heresies. A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, Carol Duncan (1977: 50) observed that ‘most of us have been schooled to believe that art, *qua* art, if it is “good art”, is never bad for anyone, never has anything to do with the powerless, and never imposes on us values that are not universally beneficial’. Writing about acknowledged masterpieces, Duncan goes on to argue that ‘they acquire an invisible authority that silently acts upon the consciousness, confirming from on high what social customs and law enforce from below’ (ibid). Modern museum institutions themselves have been the biggest advocates of this perspective and seem to deliberately avoid the difficult questions which juxtapose ‘good art’ with ‘bad’ life. The relationship between nudity and sexuality—and the polite conventions of art museums that refuse or downplay that relationship—has been a focus of feminist critical commentary on the nude in art, and in museums: as Jennifer Tyburzsky (2016: 1) provocatively points out, ‘[a]ll museums are sex museums’ although few present themselves as such. In this article, we extend her observation to assert that by virtue of their replication of the taxonomies of modernity, all museums are *sexist* museums which require critical scrutiny of their practices to identify the ways in which they enact sexist norms including one that most concerns us here: the normalization of sexual violence particularly against women\*.

By invoking ‘normalization’, we are inviting reflection on how art museums in particular feature or rehearse visual or narrative accounts of sexual violence without due recognition that they clearly relate to the perpetration of actual sexual violence against living women\*. While what might be termed historical museums do sometimes narrate in a critical way the histories of sexual violence against women\* (for example, as discussed in Kwon, 2020) a meaningful distinction must be made between historical museums which may identify sexual violence as a factual historical event and art museums’ tendency to treat the content of images of sexual violence as secondary or even irrelevant to their status as artworks. An important article by Tania Weinstein asks us to consider whether we ought to be satisfied with this situation, since to demand otherwise is to expect more of feminist art and activism than we do of other, similarly critical but ineffectual practices in contemporary art (Weinstein, 2020). However, in the last decade, the ways in which the sexualization of women\* also codes violence against women\* have featured strongly in public discourses of feminism and activism such as #MeToo, Slutwalks, and campaigns against sexual assault on US university campuses. Some art historians have taken on this topic of sexual violence as it has been treated in works of fine art, tracing a long history of rape as a subject in Western forms of high art, including feminist works produced in resistance to and critique of that tradition (Wolfthal, 1999; Hammer-Tugendhat, 2015; Fryd, 2019; Princenthal, 2019). As one of them, Nancy Princenthal (2019: 182) writes, ‘the image bank for rape is as old as picture making, a historical record as illuminating as it is robust’. The highly eroticized sexual availability of the female nude, even her bodily violation, abduction, rape, or murder, is made visible, and widely available for visual consumption, on the walls of museums.

Such is the Museums’ normalization, and naturalization, of sexual violence, that people are very practiced in looking at its imagery as an expression of civilizational gain and a form of cultural achievement. In her 2021 book *Every Rape in the Met Museum*, Macushla Robinson collated the catalogue descriptions of 181 works of art in the New York Metropolitan Museum’s collection where rape appears as a word in the title or description, in works attributed to artists who are among the most celebrated in museums and art histories. Robinson’s project reveals the centrality of the theme of rape (particularly but not exclusively the rape of women\*) to artists across centuries and the repetition of particular narratives through multiple works, as well as the lack of critical attention to the implications of representing such content. Connecting the visual articulations of sexual violence against women\* presented as high art in present-day curatorial museum practice to the social realities of sexual violence today, in this article we seek to raise difficult, painful, and constructive questions to think through the epistemological implications, and cultural potentialities of this connection. Persistent transnational activisms, which make sexual violence visible and have led to changes in legal processes and regulations, play a role in our

analysis, alongside more disciplinary tools such as those developed in feminist visual studies, cultural studies and art history, in tandem with power-critical, race-critical, and decolonizing methodologies. These trajectories of feminist challenges to the presence of sexual violence in lived experience as well as cultural production offer starting points for the critical examination of the museum as visual perpetrator of sexualized violence.

As feminist cultural theorists concerned with the contributions culture and museums as public infrastructures can make to achieving ecological and social justice, we ask if, and how, museums will find new curatorial ways of meaningfully contributing to achieving the aim to eradicate violence against women\*. We have not undertaken a systematic survey of the subject but instead present a discussion of a selection of instances where feminist activism around sexual violence has found expression in museum exhibitions and programming. Our case studies have been chosen because they might serve as ‘landmarks’ (Daniel and Hudek, 2009) in the relatively new but evolving field of histories and studies of feminist curatorial practices. In keeping with the disciplinary practices of museum studies that treat museum exhibitions as discursive productions, constituted both by the artefacts displayed and the apparatus of their presentation, our discussion focuses on artworks and the interpretive material developed by curators to present them. We present our case studies here in three different sections: our first section discusses a recent exhibition at a US museum of a Renaissance painting of the ancient story of the rape of Europa and the strategies the museum used to mitigate what was, in bald terms, its celebration of an image of rape; our second section considers trends in curatorial responses to the production of artworks from the 1970s onward that address sexual violence from a feminist perspective; and our final section examines different ways in which rape and sexual violence have been or could be productively addressed in museums’ interpretive practices. In describing specific instances of how feminist activism around sexual violence has been recognized and represented by art museums, we consider how activist aspirations are also transformed by their relocation into museum curatorial projects and practices. While activism which addresses gender-based violence more broadly will also have something to contribute to this topic in a broad sense, we have retained a focus on artworks, artists and activism that address women\* as the objects of rape. Our case studies raise the alarm that despite the changes that are taking place to transform museum practices, there is still a continuance, and even cultural and civilizational justification of sexual violence, which manifests in museums. The presence of material that represents and affirms patriarchal sexual violence is one dimension of museum culture that requires, and would be rewarded by, renewed engagement with de-patriarchalizing acts.

### The Rape of Europa

In November 2021, tens of thousands took to the streets in Paris, France, calling for an end to sexual violence (DW, 2021). In December 2021, civilians protesting the military government in Khartoum, Sudan, were retaliated upon with threatened and actual sexual violence (United Nations, 2021). In these same months, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston hosted the exhibition *Titian: Women, Myth & Power*. The exhibition’s centrepiece was the Renaissance artist Titian’s (1488-1576) painting titled *Rape of Europa* (ca. 1560). In 1896, the American philanthropist and art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, who subsequently founded the museum named after her to display her collection, bought Titian’s *Rape of Europa* from the Earl of Darnley and had it shipped to America. Today, the museum’s website states that the painting ‘became the crown jewel of her museum’s growing collection’. Its *Titian: Women, Myth and Power* exhibition brought together the series of six paintings by Titian called ‘the Poesies’ for the first time in 400 years. Commissioned by King Philip II of Spain and painted between 1551 and 1562, the Poesies make use of motifs from Roman mythology, as they are known through the poetry of Ovid. In their recreation of ancient narratives and subtle flattery of their patron, the Poesies are widely considered to be exemplary works of Renaissance art.

The aesthetic accomplishments of the painting were at the centre of the curatorial rationale for the exhibition. A video recording of Nat Silver, the collection curator speaking about the upcoming exhibition, refers to the exhibition as a ‘life changing event, a once in a lifetime opportunity’ (The National Gallery, 2020: 0:26) because of the opportunity to see Titian’s works assembled again in their original group. Silver speaks of the ‘kinds of fireworks that ensue from the moments’ when ‘gods come into contact with humans’, stating that Titian’s paintings are ‘pictures of lust and tragedy, and sometimes of death’ (0:53). While Silver’s discussion is candid about the subject of the painting and uses words including rape, kidnapping, panic and terror to describe the narrative, there is no hesitation or mediation of the implications of the violence that is both depicted and implied in the painting. In its presentation of the exhibition, the museum however did balance the promotion of the exhibition work by developing accompanying content that was evidently commissioned in order to contextualize the exhibition with perspectives that were more aligned with the increased social awareness around sexual violence against women\* and in the specific context of US-American discussions of sexual harassment, coercion and rape.

The museum crafted several interpretive elements to address the dissonance of celebrating an image which depicts rape. Dedicating space on its website to ‘The Representation of Sexual Violence in Current Exhibitions’,

the Museum sought to demonstrate, and reconcile, ethical awareness, social responsibility, and cultural sensitivity through the following statement: “Depicting the sensual mythological heroine Europa on the back of Jupiter (assuming the form of a bull), the painting is a stunning example of the artist’s technique. However, as the title suggests, the painting depicts the titular character’s abduction and (eventual) rape”. This makes clear that the museum had understood the specific challenge of presenting a painting titled rape as ‘the most famous Renaissance artwork in America’ (Gardner Museum, 2022). This is one of three strategies that were used by the museum to mitigate the possibility that its exhibition could be perceived to condone or even celebrate rape: in addition to publicly and openly addressing on their website the problematic of exhibiting a Renaissance painting depicting rape, the Museum commissioned two new art works as feminist responses to rape; and worked with the Boston Area Rape Crisis Centre to create content warnings for the exhibition’s visitors. The website also introduced audiences to the work of the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center as a resource for advice on ‘potentially triggering themes in the exhibition’ as well as further resources for ‘survivors of sexual violence and their supporters, and for all those, who want to take action’.

The newly commissioned art works were presented as ones which aimed to ‘transform the roles of women, power, and sexuality in Titian’s artwork for the modern day’ (Silver and Cavalchini, 2021). They included a piece for the museum’s façade by postmodern conceptual feminist artist Barbara Kruger, who came to prominence in the 1980s with her highly stylized reworkings of commercial advertising imagery with texts that challenge the authority of the images. This commission instead used a detail from Titian’s *Diana and Actaeon* (1559) that shows a man’s dark and muscular leg extended over a woman’s knee with the text ‘Body’ applied at the top of the banner and ‘Language’ applied at the bottom. A film by artist couple Mary Reid Kelly and Patrick Kelley, reuses the title the Rape of Europa, using it as a platform to retell female-centred narratives from antiquity and specifically to adapt the character of Europa to a character with contemporary features. Both of these works strategically adapt content from the central exhibition into contemporary formats which may be perceived to allow visitors to reflect on that content from their own perspectives on sexual assault and violence, although these were presented by the museum through the terms of ‘power’ and ‘sexuality’ that are relevant, but which could be considered to have withdrawn somewhat from the directness of the central exhibit itself.

What remains absent from this curatorial introduction to the exhibition and in particular the central piece, *the Rape of Europa*, is an acknowledgement of the wider cultural implications of the exhibition continuing to reify sexual violence as aesthetic pleasure. If we accept that there is a connection between the continued public display of the god Zeus raping the female and racialized body of Europa, a Phoenician princess (celebrated as the literal and figurative birth of Europe and its culture) to today’s misogynist and masculinist rape culture—an acceptance which is implied in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s programming around the Titian painting—then museums are still far from having become institutions dedicated to promoting and practising sexual justice. Examining the ethical dimensions of contemporary museum work it is important to place curatorial strategies in relation to what can, or could be learned, from engaging with the visual and artistic strategies that have been developed and tested by feminist activists and artists both in terms of the potential for such works to challenge the patriarchal positions that are commonly encountered in museums.

## **LEGACIES OF THE 1970S: RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN FEMINIST ART IN AND OUT OF THE MUSEUM**

While the canonical art works valued, conserved and displayed in art museums tend to present images that comply with or even celebrate patriarchal norms of sexual coercion and violence against women\*, the history of art more broadly conceived can offer many alternatives to this visual landscape. Images which defy the normalizing of sexual violence against women\* have been produced both within the domains of what is now called visual activism, and within works that would more properly be considered more situated in the domain of art as it is recognized in art museums. Feminist activists have orchestrated campaigns against both state-imposed and criminal sexual violence against women\* since at least the 1870s, and these campaigns occasionally entered into museum cultures, but the relationship between art and opposition to sexual violence is most easily identified in the feminist movement of the 1970s. As what might be described as a more culturally oriented feminist movement evolved, the relationship between feminist activism and feminist-inspired art-making became strengthened, and work that has been themed around the relationship between sexuality and violence has been produced by artists and visual activists ever since. However, this work has arguably remained marginal to the collections and exhibitions even of feminist art, which have tended to focus on representing feminist work that is more thematically and aesthetically palatable.

The tendency for feminist art that addresses sexual violence to be very graphic in its reference to lived experience makes it arguably more difficult to assimilate into museums as art. One of the most long-standing strategies of feminist activism against sexual violence is the mobilization of testimonies and the production of

evidence or documentation of sexual violence. An approach which we might call forensic feminism was first practiced on a very large scale at the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women. For four days in March 1976, 2,000 women from 40 different countries gathered in Brussels for this tribunal. One of its aims was to make violence against women understood and recognized as a crime. The tribunal set out to ‘denounce the crimes perpetrated against us by the male-dominated nations in which we all live, and to develop strategies to combat them’. (Russell, 1977: 1) Collecting personal testimonies, the tribunal produced evidence covering a wide range of crimes against women including rape, pornography, and femicide. South-African born and US-based feminist activist Diana E. H. Russell, who together with Belgian feminist activist Nicole Van de Ven organized the tribunal, importantly contributed to literature and research on rape as well as to the definition of femicide:

We must realize that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide. We must recognize the sexual politics of murder. From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for ‘honor’, we realize that femicide has been going on a long time. But since it involves mere females, there was no name for it before the term femicide was coined (Russell, 2012: n.p.).

Artists have taken diverse approaches to addressing the subject of sexual violence in their work, but when they do it is often directly related to wider strategies of feminist activism.

Artists whose work has engaged with the feminist movement have produced a number of significant art works that were intended to function in part as interventions in the public awareness of violence against women\*. In the 1970s, Suzanne Lacy (1945-) and Leslie Labowitz (1946-) devised a number of large-scale multi-part and participatory works that generated new representations of sexual violence, forensically collecting and documenting specific instances of sexual assault and exhibited or practised outside gallery or museum spaces. *Three Weeks in May* (1977) was a project that represented the information reported to the police of the locations of specific sexual assaults, with daily updates of incidents recorded on a map installed in a shopping mall and in sidewalk drawings, to make publicly visible the extent of sexual assaults in the neighbourhood. This was complemented with a map/calendar of sources of aid for survivors and injured women. Later that year, their work *In Mourning and in Rage*, realized a public performance which was strategized to command the local and regional television news to the reporting of murders of women being perpetrated by the ‘Hillside Strangler’. These works (not the only ones in which Lacy addressed rape as a subject) were designed as highly visual interventions into public awareness and to create new information networks between citizens, police and the media. In 2012, when Suzanne Lacy restaged the anti-rape project, this time titled *Three Weeks in January* (2014) she emphasized the importance of visibility in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* (Finkel, 2012). Lacy said: “We have a spiritual or emotional connection to aesthetics that we aren’t even aware of”. Reading this back to what being exposed or confronted with rape and sexual violence celebrated in canonical art works means, tells us how much work of learning, unlearning, and relearning there is to be done to see, that is to understand, the aesthetic justification of the masculinist perpetuation of violence made visible in the art works themselves.

That there was a visual dimension to the problem of violence against women\* was an insight that was decisively centred by anti-pornography feminist campaigns of the 1970s, mainly in that reproduced in magazines but also other forms of popular visual culture including cinema and the emerging and generative format of videotape. Grassroots campaigns such as Women Against Violence Against Women addressed the normalization of representations of violence against women as part of a wider opposition to domestic, civic and police violence. Carolyn Bronstein (2011) has argued that the activist drive to end the violence, rather than the sex that was represented in contemporary pornography, has been forgotten in the historical recollection of these events which culminated in some of the most divisive debates between what was characterized as ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ feminism, a development which may have had significant consequences for the legacy of awareness of sexual violence within art histories.

A number of women\* artists (and a very occasional male one) did take on the production of images that dealt directly with rape and which developed new vocabularies for representing women’s perspectives on sexual violence. The visual strategies of these works were diverse but often unflinching in their reference to violence and the disruption of the integrity of the body. From Ana Mendieta’s (1948-85) experiments with creating realistic scenes of apparent violence, drenched in what appeared to be blood, to Nancy Spero’s (1926-2009) *Torture of Women* (1976), 125 feet of drawings that combine extracts from texts describing violent acts interspersed with classically inspired figure drawings, feminist artists produced images that refused the relating of pleasure and sexual violence that characterized pornographic depictions. Direct and intrusive in their confrontation with the effects of sexual violence on women\*’s bodies, such works seemed to some to avoid more complex discussions of the question of the relationship between art and pleasure, pain and pleasure, and the role of sex in culture that some women\* artists and writers advocated (Princenthal, 2019: 165-71). As well as

being a subject of debate within feminist circles, the backlash against feminism in the 1980s and 1990s frequently caricatured feminist anti-violence positions as reactionary and fundamentally conservative.

The historic body of feminist work that engages in opposition to sexual violence through methods that foregrounded testimonies of rape and visual violence has arguably tended to be avoided or at least downplayed by developments in the production and mapping of feminist art by curators and art historians. In 1985 the Ohio State University Art Gallery mounted an exhibition, which then toured, called *Rape* (Princenthal, 2019: 177; Fryd, 2019: 148-86); but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, exhibitions that reflect on histories of feminist art have typically not centred issues of sexual violence in their selection and interpretation of works. Hilary Robinson selects five survey exhibitions of feminism to discuss in her 2016 essay 'Feminism meets the big exhibition: Museum Survey Shows since 2005'; of these, she identifies only one whose selection of works connects in a clear way to feminist activism including activism against violence against women\* – the exhibition *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* curated by Xavier Arakistain in Bilbao in 2007. One of the examples selected by Robinson, the exhibition *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), was surprisingly minimal in its representation of artistic activism against sexual violence although the subject was extremely prominent in the body of work it surveyed. The visitors' gallery guide suggests that there was a section with a few works dealing with the theme of 'Body Trauma', within which works by only one artist (Ana Mendieta) are specifically identified as addressing rape. The introduction to the 'Body Trauma' section compares the visual strategies for addressing 'Body Trauma' to those described as representing artists' approach to 'Pattern and Assemblage', a comparison which has the effect of subsuming the content of both sections to a question of aesthetic strategy (Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 2007: 5). One essay of 4 pages in the 360+ page catalogue for *elles@centrepompidou* takes on questions of violence under which rape is subsumed (Dumont, 2009). Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, the curators of the exhibition *Global Feminisms* (2007) more boldly selected a significant number of works that explicitly and graphically registered themes related to state and in some cases gender-based violence in feminist art of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (including Rebecca Belmore's *the Named and the Unnamed* discussed below) but were criticized in a feminist journal for making an exhibition that 'appeared to be replacing the sense of global sisterhood... with a sense of the universal violability of the female body' (Muller, 2008: 472). Posed as an ethical concern about the replication of images of female victimization, the review (though not the exhibition) estranged certain visual forms of activism from feminist practice.

One explanation for this marginalization of feminist activist work against sexual violence from the domain of feminist art is to correlate the forms of feminism that tend to inhabit museum and curatorial practices with what we might now refer to, following Françoise Vergès (2021: 35), as 'civilizational feminism', or feminism that concerns itself with the gender inequality replicated in colonizing cultures. 'Civilizational feminism' as it pertains to feminist art could include issues of artistic reputation/visibility and sometimes of artistic labour itself; of the relation between the female lived body and its aestheticization; and of maternal experience, birth, childrearing and domestic labour as a preoccupation of women\*'s lives. Under the reign of civilizational feminism, feminist art is something that is more likely to celebrate desire than fear, to mark the presence of desire rather than violence, and to concern itself with issues of identity and status rather than those of bodily integrity. In her exhibition catalogue for *This Will Have Been: Art Love and Politics in the 1980s* (2012), Helen Molesworth argues that the exemplary feminist art of the 1980s in the US is characterized by its address to *desire* (erotic, historical, and social), reflecting the art that developed in relation to emergent queer theory rather than the 'sex wars'. The usefulness of understanding feminist art as having shifted to 'theory' in the 1980s has been widely debated by feminist artists and their critics, but its impact on museum representation has yet to be analysed.

Using Vergès's category of civilizational feminism, and its contrasting category of decolonial feminism, may provide a more helpful way to explain the relative presence or absence in art curatorial practices of the specific address to sexual violence. Viewed from the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum survey exhibition, feminist art's central themes did not include sexual violence. Issues of sexual violence seem much more likely to feature in works and exhibitions that address the situation of women outside the Euro-American 'centre' of the art world. In her catalogue essay for *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960-85* Andrea Giunta's essay (2017) addresses violence and sexual violence as distinctive themes in Latin American women's art arising from the specific and highly militarized wars that have rent the region in the period of the cold war and later. The US artist Jenny Holzer's (1950-) work *Lustmord* (1994) is a response to the violence against women perpetrated in the wars in Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia of the early 1990s – but is not a work that is frequently exhibited. Kara Walker's (1969-) works, which contain extensive references to sexual violence, are often interpreted primarily in relation to racial rather than gender conflicts. Ursula Biemann's (1955-) *Performing the Border* series of video works (1998-2008) explored the dangerous conditions of women working in factories or *maquiladoras* near the Mexico/US border where rape and murder were rife; her work has been shown in only one of the five key surveys identified by Robinson.

The power of decolonial insistence to ensure that activist art about violence against women is collected, shown and appreciated in art museums can be evidenced through a consideration of the visibility of Rebecca Belmore's 2003 video work *the Named and the Unnamed*. In 2002 Rebecca Belmore (1960-) of the Anishinaabe nation performed at the corner of Gore and Cordova streets in Vancouver a work titled *Vigil*, which addressed *in situ* the disappearance of a large number of women, mostly indigenous, from the city's streets. While the work was very site-specific it also was connected with activism against high levels of violence against indigenous women in many regions in Canada and across North America. Video from the performance was incorporated into a work *The Named and the Unnamed* which was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada some years later in 2009 (Emberley, 2014). In the decade that followed the purchase, the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) was foregrounded through many indigenous activist projects and through a formal national inquiry that reported in 2016. The significance of the work as an activist work that arose in resistance to gender-based violence was recently reiterated through an essay on the work by Greg Hill titled 'Rebecca Belmore: In Violation' that was published in relation to 2021's International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. It may be that we need to insist on much more intersectional approaches to analysing the presence of sexual violence in art museums, in order to understand and appreciate its presence there most fully.

Given the apparent likelihood that even exhibitions of feminist art shy away from the works that directly address sexual violence, it is unlikely that museum collections and displays will the works of art that expose resistant responses to sexual violence which specifically develop a better understanding of strategies which are used by visual artists to address sexual violence from feminist perspectives – the examples discussed above range from the production of mass-evidence and 'forensic feminism' to the re-signification of the female body from a source of erotic pleasure to a register of violence. How such strategies have been transformed into interpretative practices that can be employed in museums to address sexual violence in new and depatriarchalized ways.

## **WITHIN AND BEYOND THE REGIME OF THE CAPTION: NEW VALUES IN FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND CURATORIAL PRACTICES**

Even the most hegemonic of art museums has in recent decades been touched by the insistence of artists, audiences and curators to integrate feminism-related work into their collection and exhibition activities, resulting in a surge of activities that can be directly identified with feminist production although sexual violence has arguably not featured strongly in these developments. The limitations of museums' strategies for dealing with the implications of sexual and other forms of violence in their collections and displays have been exposed by new developments in social justice movements that are more than ever concerned with the relationship between symbolic and actual violence, and which have introduced debates into museum and heritage practices that have not yet and may never find a full resolution. The absence of 'real' violence against identifiable women in artworks, which are most often removed from actual acts of sexual violence, has mitigated the urgency of museums' need to respond to their participation in the normalization of this aspect of gendered violence. As Tanya Isla Weinstein (2020) has explored in relation to a 2015 exhibition of work by activist artist Lorena Wollfer, even where works that deal directly with sexual violence are featured in museum programmes, that does not guarantee that the institution is signalling a commitment to address the presence of sexual violence even within its own organization.

That there are scant existing models for most museums to manage their own histories of violence and potential for causing harm to audiences, is increasingly evident (Levin, 2020; McLaughlin, 2016). What are some of the strategies that could be adopted to allow museums to share and examine with their publics the implications and consequences of showing such work? The aesthetic, civilizational, and educational function claimed by art museums is, perhaps, best understood through the regime of the caption. The caption offers the key to sanctioned knowledge to art works as it gives the definitive, and short, explanation of their significance and meaning. Very often, when sexual violence, rape, or femicide are literally or figuratively depicted in art works, the caption conceals the social implications, power injustices, hurtfulness or trauma of what is shown by focusing on formal analysis. The imperative for art museums to subsume their interpretations of the content of specific works in favour of situating it within the overarching narratives of art history was observed for example in Tate Modern's 2010 installation of Anna Mendieta's work *Untitled (Rape Scene)* of 1973 (Perry, 2013). Rendering the visual presence of acts of sexual violence against women by way of using the caption to foreground the art historical relevance to the museum publics, reduces the complex polysemic layers of imagery to formalism and, at the same time, shares structures of concealment characteristic to societal structures of patriarchy aimed at rendering invisible sexual crimes.

The regime of the caption is well understood by feminist activist artists. In November 2018, Michelle Hartney walked into the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the very museum that had been called out in The Guerilla Girls' 1989 question and placed her own caption next to the museum's caption to correct what the public is

being told about *Two Tahitian Women* (1899) by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Her caption stated the following: “We can no longer worship at the altar of creative genius while ignoring the price all too often paid for that genius”, quoting Roxane Gay. “In truth, we should have learned this lesson long ago, but we have a cultural fascination with creative and powerful men who are also ‘mercurial’ or ‘volatile’, with men who behave badly” (Sayej, 2018: n.p.). This intervention connects to feminist activism and scholarship in several ways. Providing testimony and creating public evidence has been one of the most important, successful, but also painful and laborious strategies to make sexual violence against women\* understood as a crime, and ultimately acknowledged as a crime against humanity. Providing evidence to the public is one of the key functions of the museum. Feminist and race-critical art historical scholarship has been investigating these subject matters, as, for example, Abigail Solomon Godeau in her essay ‘Going Native’ (2013). It is possible for art museums to listen more closely to matters of concern and care as they are being articulated through art making, visual feminist activism and art histories concerned to fight against sexual violence, rape, and femicide. Responding to present-day debates such as the nature of sexual justice, consent, and sexualized injustice offers an opportunity to expand the knowledge and strategies of museum curating to devise new curatorial practices for working with art historical ‘master’ pieces and canonical art.

One such interventionist project was realized as part of Sonia Boyce’s retrospective at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2018. Programmed as *Manchester Art Gallery Takeover*, a format suggested by the institution, artist and curator Sonia Boyce (1962-) held a series of conversations with a group of 30 members of museum staff including curators and volunteers. These conversations offered the opportunity, for many of the participants for the first time, to speak about the way in which they experience art on display in the permanent exhibition including their observations on how the general audience interacts with sexualized visual content. In particular, the 1896 painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* by John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), one of the best-known paintings in the Manchester Art Gallery’s collection, was attracting selfie-traffic and new forms of visitors’ behaviour, in particular from ‘middle-aged men and teenage girls’ (Higgie, 2018: n.p.). Together, the group decided on a temporary removal of this painting. Its removal was used for different actions, both participation of the audience and artistic performances. Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (2020) have discussed how the temporary removal of the painting transgressed the gendered and raced structures of the museum as a colonialist institution and the response that such a move engendered: this included an invitation from the museum to its visitors to ‘write their thoughts about the painting and the representation of the female form on Post-it notes, which were stuck to the wall where the painting had been hung’ (Higgie, 2018: n.p.) but of course not confined to the wall space that had been freed up, and much less controlled by the museum institution and by the artist. Referred to as ‘Waterhouse-gate’ by journalist Mark Hudson (2018) in *The Telegraph*, the removal provoked public outcry on censorship and puritanism.

Removal of works might appear to be aligned with strategies of censorship that fell into disfavour with feminists in the 1980s. The current debates around sexual violence, sex work, issues of consent and the consequences for women of experiencing sexual violence are complex and sophisticated and invite us to consider a wide range of issues in addition to the representation of sexual violence. The shaming of women for sexual desire or activity which is endemic in many cultural traditions that inform the contents of art museums is another form of sexual violence that is considered in contemporary feminist activism, as is the consequent double victimization of some women who experience sexual assault. These dimensions of women\*s experience, alongside the right to access abortion, are at the forefront of contemporary feminist activism. Where women\*s\* experience of sex is the central theme of an artwork—rather than the representation of sex or rape itself—then museums often find themselves challenged to navigate the information in a way that avoids replicating cultural norms that are now identified as aspects of misogyny. As Mithu Sanyal argues in her book *Rape* (2016/19), the symbolic power that is accorded to sexual violence can often overwhelm our capacity to listen to survivors and their individual experiences, or to recognize their capacity to recover from and contextualize their experience. If we read women\*s lives primarily through their experiences of sexual violence, of sex work, or of sex more generally, are we subjecting them to a different but nevertheless destructive form of sexual violence?

In respect of museum practice, an illustrative example is in the presentation and interpretation of the work of Artemesia Gentileschi (1593-1656). One of very few prominent women artists of the early modern period, Gentileschi is known for a large (and retrospectively, growing) body of work that often took a distinctive perspective on themes that addressed sexual coercion and violence, including the subject of *Susanna and the Elders* (a biblical story relating to a woman who was falsely accused of sexual betrayal as punishment for refusing to be seduced) and two different treatments of the story of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, the beheading of an Assyrian general by a woman and her maidservant. In a period where it was common for the same story or theme to be treated by several artists in distinctive ways, Gentileschi’s work is often noted for its formulation of compositions that foregrounded the female characters. Gentileschi is also known as having been a victim of rape, whose accused was convicted after a lengthy and well-documented trial. The conventional art historical practice of

reading an artist's work through their biography, which normally underpins museum presentations and the expectations of their audiences, invited Gentileschi's work to be interpreted in light of her status as a rape victim.

Feminist art historians have debated whether Gentileschi's treatment of her subjects was directly tied to the rape or should better be understood as a fascinating and very able artistic contribution to the dynamic art scene of her time, which like our own, debated differences about gender roles. In a major retrospective held at the National Gallery in London in 2020, the display of the manuscript that recorded the rape trial alongside her paintings was a provocative material accompaniment to the display which suggested to visitors that this history was relevant to her art practice. To what extent did the juxtaposition of the material facts of the rape trial and the art practice (over)determine the reading of Gentileschi's art? One must ask here how many transcripts or recorded proceedings of rape trials involving men\* artists as perpetrators of rape have been displayed in a major retrospective or solo exhibition of their works, and whether such displays could or did change the perception of great artists and their canonical, colloquially understood, good art? Austrian artist Egon Schiele (1890–1918), accused of kidnapping and statutory rape in 1912, is one such example. With the celebration of his 100th anniversary of his death coinciding with the present-day #MeToo movement in 2018, journalists publicly celebrated his work, stating that Schiele was 'not a sex offender' (Kallir, 2018). In response to the public debate, and general awareness of Schiele having been tried for abduction and statutory rape that was consequently created, the Museum of Fine Art in Boston 'updated' a wall label as follows: '[r]ecently, Schiele has been mentioned in the context of sexual misconduct by artists, of the present and the past. This stems in part from specific charges (ultimately dropped as unfounded) of kidnapping and molestation'. It also notes that Schiele 'has long had a reputation as a transgressive at society's edges.' While the label provides information, it also manages to retain Schiele's recognition as transgressive (read: admirably *avant-garde*) daring, and bold (Sayej, 2018).

The treatment of prostitution can similarly be identified as a site in need of depatriarchalization in the museum. The subject of sex workers, if not sex work, is a familiar theme in Christian iconography (Mary Magdalen was often depicted in ways that refer to her sinful promiscuity or prostitution and subsequent repentance) and museums could be a constructive site through which sex work activism could be channelled. As Lena Chen argues in a forthcoming book chapter, the results that derive from artists engaging sex work as a theme for their own practice, even when it is the outcome of an earnest and authentic engagement with the implications of the relative positions of working as an artist and working as a sex worker, are likely to replicate some of the assumptions and stereotypes about sex working (Chen, 2023). Some sex workers are, at the same time, active as artists and use their art practices to address and advocate for their legal, human and social rights in ways that directly relate to the normative practices of artists and curators, but which also engage with the activist potential of such cultural practices. These are practices which could easily be integrated into museums and their programmes, as sometimes takes place at art institutions which position themselves at the intersection of activism and art, such as the ICA in London. Such collaborations have the potential to offer depatriarchalized perspectives on sex work although in practice they tend to arise as self-organized exhibition activities—not least because the processes of self-organization allow for disparate and authentic views of sex work to emerge.

What we see encapsulated in the highly constrained space of the museum, is arguably a microcosm of the contests over public space and visibility for feminist perspectives that arise in global feminist movements. Global feminist activism today invite a deeper investigation of the coming together of the right to gather in public space and the political struggles against misogynist harassment, rape, and femicide. One such example is *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Woman Less), an intersectional feminist grassroots movement which, from the streets in Argentina, grew into a global contemporary movement against rape and femicide, and which strategically employs the visibility and performativity of art-based activism. Another example is the long-running campaign One Billion Rising, first initiated by artist Eve Ensler in 2012, and since grown into a large-scale mass action against rape and sexual violence against women\*. The billion refers to the UN Women (2022) statistic of the global estimate of '736 million women—almost one in three—having been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life'. The prominent presence of feminist activism in public space is an invitation to more critically link the historical realities and the political imaginaries which are present in the public space of museums. Popular activist aesthetics and art-based strategies created in resistance to crimes against women present an ethical and epistemic obligation to feminist visual and cultural analysis and critical feminist art history to work in alliance with those practices.

## CONCLUSION

Today, in connection to transnational as well as locally grounded visual activism and art making against the rising tide of violence against women\*, the museum has been diagnosed as a perpetrator of visual sexual violence, validated and justified in the cultural appreciation of canonical art works. There is, of course, no one-size-fits-all answer to the presence of sexualized violence in art works of the past, which are implicated with the

cultural acceptance of such violence throughout centuries. Seeing the museum as a site of de-sensitization to the mental, emotional, affective, spiritual, and corporeal effects of exposure to sexualized violence requires a different ethics and politics in curating. Thinking of the museum as a public institution which could actually usefully contribute to the efforts to end sexual violence committed against feminized, classed, racialized, and otherwise marginalized bodies, needs an expansion of curatorial practices and new collaborations with knowledge practices beyond the museum as they have been established in visual feminist activism, art, infrastructures of support for survivors and many legal changes. The Istanbul Convention (The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) is based on the understanding that ‘violence is used to sustain male power and control’ (Council of Europe, 2011). It states the following:

it is the obligation of the state to address it fully in all its forms and to take measures to prevent violence against women, protect its victims and prosecute the perpetrators. Failure to do so would make it the responsibility of the state. The convention leaves no doubt: there can be no real equality between women and men if women experience gender-based violence on a large-scale and state agencies and institutions turn a blind eye (ibid).

We assert that the museum is a perpetrator of visual sexual violence that is implicated in preventing real equality between women\* and men\*. The word curating—which means both care and cure—suggests an obligation to counteract such violence. Connecting to the imaginaries of healing, in turn connected to the etymological legacy of curating understood as care, is an invitation to think of curating as working against sexual violence in the museum.

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