

## Review Article

### Too Much of a Good Thing? Inclusion, Editorial Roles, and the Future of Museum Studies Publishing

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**Ashton, Jenna C. *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: Museums Etc, 2017 (vol. 1), 2018 (vol.2), hardback £100 per volume, paperback £75 per volume, pp. 1344. Available in digital format by subscription.**

In the Foreword to *Feminism and Museums*, which is included in both volumes, Maura Reilly, founding curator of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, asserts, 'My ambitions for the launch of the Center's site were ambitious' (36). The same might be said for MuseumEtc's approach to this 1344 page, two volume behemoth, which is without question ambitious but also characterized by redundancy. The publication of this text is exciting and welcome to those of us passionate about its subject, and the inclusion of case studies from a wide array of institutions is a strong point. In its very presence, Ashton's book demonstrates that feminists continue to strive for inclusion in the world of museums, often in innovative and unusual ways. The emphasis on case studies will be particularly interesting for practitioners seeking models. Moreover, the book is democratic and inclusive in the way it has drawn in scholars, professionals, artists, and academics, regardless of their theoretical background or rank, the length of their chapter, or its approach. Most of the authors' names were previously unknown to me.

Other books on gender and museums have not dealt with museum representations of motherhood; a strength of this collection are the chapters in the first volume discussing the taboos surrounding this topic and the Birth Rites Collection displays. Parry and van Houten's chapter in volume 2 offers insights into the lost histories of females in Dutch institutions and the national canon imposed on schoolchildren. Other chapters, such as the one on the WASP exhibition at the American Airpower Museum, recount lost histories or draw attention to forgotten women. The global scope of the collection, covering museums from Ecuador to the Ukraine, from Denmark to Canada, allows for comparison, although Manchester institutions appear throughout. Many chapters are about interventions bringing women's art and history into institutions, but these projects are not necessarily feminist, and they do not consistently contain feminist analysis of gender roles, sexuality, or gender identities. Rachael Lennon's short chapter in volume 2 about controversies surrounding National Trust queering projects is one that explicitly addresses these issues. In contrast, the chapter on the Gender Museum in the Ukraine in volume 1 describes an institution where the word *gender* in its name often stands in for cisgender straight women and femininity, not sexuality or gender identity.

As a result, I found myself wanting more. Not that the books should have been longer; instead, I wish their contents had been more analytical, based less on reportage. Many of the articles are written by those involved in the projects described in the case studies, resulting in a lack of critical distance. For example, the chapter on the Association of Women's Museums in the first volume incorporates summaries about the institutions in the association, often based on web descriptions cut and pasted into the text. In the long run, additional details on fewer institutions might have been more helpful (the purchaser of a £75 paperback might feel entitled to more than what is freely available on line). Other features related to the book's production and publication process also inhibit its usefulness. A 1344 page print book without an index is almost impossible to search. One chapter has incorrect headers, which are misleading; several chapters use an endnote reference system, while the majority use parenthetical citations and a reference list, an inconsistency which makes it difficult to locate sources; and almost every chapter is repetitive. Errors such as *acetic* for *ascetic*, *tenant* for *tenet*, and *per say* for *per se*

appear often, and authors for whom English is a second language might be better served by more intensive editorial interventions, though the extent to which this is appropriate presents ethical dilemmas. Last, but not least, heavier press involvement might have caught such contradictions as the description of a 'peaceful suffrage protest in Manchester, which resulted in the deaths of fifteen people' (vol.2, 320), for the Peterloo Massacre.

On a broader level, this collection provokes reflection on the politics of inclusion in museum studies publishing. Routledge, the best-known British publisher of books on museums, is promoting the brevity of books in its new series, *Museums in Focus*, which allows for a quick turnaround in publishing up-to-the-minute research. The series also offers a remedy for those who are pressed for time and exhausted by the burgeoning discourse on museums, inclusion, and activism. Part of the aim is to keep the cost of books down for students and others who may not be able to afford hefty tomes.<sup>1</sup> MuseumsEtc, publisher of *Feminism and Museums*, appears to be adopting the opposite strategy – less rigor at the press and the inclusion of a wider variety of contributors. This opposition cannot be reduced to one of quality versus quantity but instead takes us to the heart of debates about community, diversity, and divergent discourses in the museums sector and in museum studies, which is its academic manifestation. In the first volume of the *Museums in Focus* series, *The Disobedient Museum* (Routledge 2017), Kylie Message argues that our field, having grown out of multiple disciplines, lacks its own methodologies, which is both an asset and a problem (as we see in parts of Ashton's collection). Message further insists on the importance of critique and review rather than celebration of museum endeavours. At the same time, in an era of digital text production, features such as indexes, which are essential in print volumes, become less critical. Length, too, has less of an impact on the cost of electronic books. These circumstances suggest that we should be asking for whom our books are intended and how we deal with conflicting desires for inclusion and affordability, distanced reflection and immediate availability, portability and permanence. Is the future of our discipline to be in books like scrappy pop-up museums or generously crowdsourced community exhibitions, where most comers are welcomed, and, if not, how do editors avoid accusations of elitism and detachment?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the interest of transparency, I acknowledge that I publish with Routledge, and that I am co-editing a new collection on gender and museums. However, its primary emphasis is not on feminism and museums.