

Book Review

Joshua G. Adair and Amy K. Levin (ed), *Museums, Sexuality and Gender Activism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020, paperback £32.99, pp. 324

Museums, Sexuality and Gender Activism is a timely continuation of Amy Levin's 2010 reader *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. As the first expansive collection of essays on the confluence of gender, sexuality and museums, the earlier volume was intended as a reference work for gender and sexuality scholars, activists and museum professionals, and as a textbook for university courses on these topics. Large sections are devoted to historical material, including a discussion of exclusionary institutional structures and practices that limited the ability of women working in the field to become effective actors, as a background for analysis and activism.

The new volume explores more recent exhibitions and campaigns, in museums and other sites, that aim to offer museum visitors, and the broader public new ways of engaging with LGBTQ+ communities, non-binary individuals, and cisgender women's histories and lives, and elaborating their contemporary implications for equality and rights. Recognizing the powerful exhibitionary role of museums in creating politically-aware and activist approaches to representation, the volume also foregrounds the ways in which museums can make more meaningful connections with these communities. Individual essays address the articulation of LGBTQ+, non-binary and cisgender women's exhibition projects with decolonization, memorialization and immigration, as well as the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ+ community. They also explore strategies for increasing queer visibility and inclusion: several essays focus on showcasing gender fluidity, sometimes by developing new displays, and, in some cases, by writing new interpretive texts that reveal embedded queer stories in existing museum collections.

The earlier volume was informed by an effort to increase the visibility and inclusion of women and LGBTQ+ communities in museum collections and displays. Adair and Levin's new book, however, articulates a larger ambition of rethinking and dis-assembling museums as they exist today, in order to integrate museum work into a more comprehensive programme of queering contemporary culture. Adair and Levin draw on Audre Lorde's call to 'dismantle the master's house' (1984: 110) and Kylie Message's (2017) vision of a 'disobedient museum' to introduce and promote their idea of an 'unruly museum'; a museum that protests and challenges the written and unwritten rules which have constricted museum work to date (7).

The twenty-four essays in this collection address many facets of museum and exhibition work in the US, UK, Canada, Norway, Turkey, the Netherlands, Sweden and India. The volume opens with Amanda K. Figueroa's contribution on Chicana art in the US, which refracts class and immigration. She introduces the concept 'domesticana' to reference how artistic practices and an aesthetic sensibility can emerge from the daily activities of Chicana domestic workers. The next section of the book presents exhibitions that brought explicit representation of sexual activity and queer perspectives into major museums. Identifying openings in a system that is largely exclusionary, Zorian Clayton and Dawn Hoskin, Co-Chairs of the LGBTQ Working Group at the Victoria and Albert Museum, point to the potential of activist groups within museums. Artist Matt Smith describes the LGBTQ+ themed exhibitions that resulted from his artist-in-residence, also at the Victoria and Albert Museum. These are stories of successful interventions in a major museum that was open to new ideas and new constituencies. Four contributions explore opportunities and also limitations of alternative exhibition sites that lack the long history, extensive experience, and profile of the Victoria and Albert Museum. They

include a pop-up museum in California, a memorial exhibition in a former prison in Ankara and an HIV exhibition targeting sex workers, their clients and students in a clinic in Mumbai. Here too, the emphasis is on opening up spaces to attract new visitors.

The section on bodies in museums contains two particularly interesting pieces about recent Indigenous exhibitions in Canada, a country now in the process of decolonizing its core institutions, including universities and museums. Ann Cvetkovich introduces the work of Kent Monkman, a Cree artist who showcases the unruliness of Canada's history through queering colonial and traditional modes of presentation, such as dioramas. Monkman was commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2019 to create the diptych *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Welcoming the Newcomers*; the work was acquired by the museum in October 2020. Camille Georgeson-Usher discusses an exhibition by Arctic women about the challenges of recovering the relationship between their bodies and the natural landscape. Both exhibitions show that, where minority groups campaign to become more visible and to have their perspectives and knowledge integrated into museums, today, Indigenous peoples are simultaneously involved in the more basic work of reconstituting their selves, bringing Indigenous peoples 'back to life' (141).

Two essays explore queering and straightening in museums through media not usually considered. Natasha Bissonauth presents an exhibition that uses the genre of science fiction to musealize social scenarios around sexual ambiguity. Asa Johannesson and Clair Le Couteur reveal how museum photography can obscure sexual ambiguity in display objects. This piece adds the museum photographer to the cast of agents that shape museum exhibitions.

The section on resistance in museums focuses on women's labour and engagement. Jana Sverdjuk's essay demonstrates the potential of digital exhibits to inexpensively disseminate images representing the experiences of migrant women and women from Norway's small communities to reach viewers located far from bricks and mortar museums. Brenda Malone's article on collecting material to show the struggle for abortion rights in Ireland is part of what has become a commitment of many social history museums to collect objects from popular movements, activist protests, and historical events. These include the occupation of Paris' immigration museum in 2010 and, more recently, Black Lives Matter and the storming of the US Capitol in 2021.

The section on problematic narratives reflects on some stories and histories that are considered 'uncomfortable', and discusses strategies for extending exhibition content and messages beyond the exhibition space and the time visitors spend in the museum. Hayden Hunt's article on successive exhibitions featuring Gertrude Stein shows how museum catalogues (perhaps read by the visitors who are most interested in the nuances of the exhibition topic), can be used to include and further explore material deemed too risky to display in the exhibition. Catherine O'Donnell's documentation of the LGBTQ+ community's involvement in displaying its campaign for recognition and rights at Manchester's People's History Museum points to opportunities and challenges posed by the co-creation process. This discussion is useful for activists and practitioners considering working with, and presenting exhibitions reflecting a wide range of communities and their interests. By contrast, Joshua Adair describes how plantation museums in the southern US feature historical fiction in their bookshops to extend the museums' engagement with their constituencies beyond their visit. He reminds us that many right-wing non-progressive groups are also concerned with gender and sexuality, and use museums as sites which affirm their pseudo-historical world views, grounded in Lost Cause ideology.

Museums, Sexuality and Gender Activism ends with three articles in which multiple artists and activists voice their thoughts about queering museums and engaging the trans community. These contributions, too, present strategies that can be utilized to effectively and meaningfully include groups that are still under-represented in museums. Although the case studies and the main messages revolve around queering, the book also addresses larger questions, opportunities and challenges for museums setting out to attract and represent new constituencies, in person, in publications, and online. It goes beyond analyzing the roles of curators, administrators, and boards of directors, to include the input of museum photographers, the authors of exhibition and museum catalogues, and the co-productive role

of visitors in exhibition work. Alongside this, it addresses the potential of new sites, including health clinics, former prisons and shopping districts, for presenting exhibitions to historically underserved constituencies.

This important book offers nuanced, exciting and timely insight into a broad range of concerns around museums, sexuality and gender activism and suggests questions and topics for future research. These include plans and strategies for representing complex debates and fault lines within the LGBTQ+ community, and very recent exhibitions of queer desires and engagements in sub-Saharan Africa: *John Edmunds: A Sidelong Glance* at Brooklyn Museum in 2020, and Zanele Muholi's photographs of LGBTQ+ lives in South Africa, featured in a major survey of his work at Tate Modern in 2020. Perhaps the book's most significant contribution to the field is the questions it raises for future collaboration of the museum community and the LGBTQ+ community. Among the most important projects awaiting their attention is the leveraging of queer perspectives and exhibition strategies to align with and support the articulation of museums' critical engagement with some of our most recent concerns, including Black Lives Matter, the environment, precarious work and increasing attacks on democratic processes in many parts of the world.

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