

**Museum Queeries:
Two-Spirit,
Indigiqueer,
and LGBTTQ*
Interventions
into Museums,
Archives,
and Curating**

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CARA TIERNEY • MONICA EILEEN PATTERSON

DISCRIMINANT DISJUNCTIONS: MUSEOLOGICAL PRACTICE, TRANS BELONGING, AND THE INSIGHT OF CHILDREN

OVERVIEW

Grounded in a dialogue between scholar and curator Monica Eileen Patterson with artist, scholar, curator, activist, and educator Cara Tierney, this contribution explores what it might mean to queer museums, particularly vis-à-vis intersectional issues of belonging and (the inadequacies of) “inclusion” within museological spaces. These include issues of everyday discrimination against trans and nonbinary folks, the knowledge and capacities of children, ethnocentrism and racism, institutional change, and more.

Monica Eileen Patterson (MEP): On a recent visit to one of Canada’s national museums with my four-year-old, we needed to use the restroom. As we approached the shared entryway, my daughter led me toward the men’s room. After redirecting her to the women’s side, she bombarded me with questions that challenged me in terms of how my politics and subject positionalities play out in routine, daily experiences. “Why can’t we go to the bathroom where we want? I wanted to go on the other side!” I told her that there was a side for boys and men and another side for girls and women. This flew in the face

of many other conversations we have had, books we have read together, and people that we know who are neither men nor women, and she did not abide the arbitrary nonsense that was being imposed on her by the museum and especially by me. “If there is a bathroom for ‘hes’ and a bathroom for ‘shes,’” my child asked, “where do ‘theys’ go to the bathroom?” I told her it was a very good and a very important question, perhaps for the director of the museum. And I made plans to take her to visit the Ottawa Art Gallery’s (OAG) recently acquired artwork, titled *they*, by Cara Tierney (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *They* (2019), aluminum and LED lighting, 18 × 8 feet, construction by Ornova Studios.

Boldly challenging the exclusionary norms of museum spaces, *they* is a monumental work. Constructed of diamond-plated aluminum and backlit by changeable, pink-tinged LED lights, this large-scale sculpture hangs high on the two-storey wall flanking the gallery’s restaurant and can be seen from four floors within the building and by passers-by outside.

Cara, I’d like to begin our conversation by expressing my profound gratitude to you for creating this work. My daughter has experienced some push back at times from classmates at school who have tried to impose binary understandings of gender on her by dictating what toys she should play with, telling her

what colors she should like, and arguing with her assertions that there are not only boys and girls in the world, or “hes” and “shes,” but also people who go by “they” or other pronouns. To be able to take her to this public, authoritative place, where you are not only proudly declaring your existence for all to see but also welcoming and asserting the legitimacy of all of those who go by “they,” was a deeply moving experience for me.

One of the concepts I’ve been exploring over the past few years in relation to museology is “difficult knowledge.” Often, things to do with gender and sexuality have been deemed “inappropriate” for children, and queer and non-binary people have often been excluded from what is collected, displayed, and discussed in museums. I see this as (among others) a human rights issue—an erasure of certain people, families, and communities from representation. It means museums remain places where only some people can go to see themselves reflected in exhibition spaces.

Cara Tierney (CT): *I think about this a lot—and not just from a queer or trans perspective, but through the lens of race and class and how our personal and collective histories inform the affective experience of something as simple as walking through the doors of a building, let alone the ways identities are regulated, celebrated, tokenized, criminalized, etc. Museums have been a powerful actor in those histories and are structures that contribute to the way identities are experienced, and even accessed. Museums and galleries in the global northwest occupy a complex space in this history and contemporary reality—they emerge as actors in the colonial capitalist project of expansion and cultural dispossession and are complicit in justifying great historic injuries. Any gallery/museum that is not invested in exploring its histories and is not actively questioning its contemporary responsibility to those histories is inevitably going to sustain the elitism that surrounds museum and gallery culture. They are also incredible sites of creative and pedagogical potential, which, if deployed in a good way, can contribute to powerful social transformations.*

I’m also always curious about the depths and extent of institutional action when they undertake the labor of addressing systemic inequity. As organizations that thrive on their communication and outreach strategies, cultural institutions often celebrate (tokenize) a small handful of marginalized artists without doing the necessary deep dive to make their spaces porous and accessible to marginalized populations. And so much of the resistance to, and choices involved in, making concrete changes, particularly when it comes to gender identity, is based in fear. I’m thinking particularly of the way genderqueer bodies are increasingly populating

gallery walls in institutions that neglect to provide gender neutral bathroom spaces—beyond the frequently hard-to-find, single-stall room down a dark hallway. The spectacularization of trans/queer bodies to appear edgy or politically progressive falls short when the institution neglects to address the practices that sustain the marginalization from which they ultimately profit. From this perspective, the institution not only benefits from the display of marginalized work but also has a vested interest in maintaining that marginalization.

The they sculpture that is currently up at the OAG speaks to the kind of social transformation and deep-dive shift that galleries can actualize. In making that work, I was capitalizing on the performative quality of language and art to bring realities into being. Trans, Two-Spirit, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming folks spend a considerable amount of our lives justifying our existence through things like language. Something as simple as a pronoun can quickly point toward how we will be received, the ease or difficulty with which we can access spaces and resources. It was also the culmination of a few other creative processes and ongoing conversations that I had been experiencing in the years leading to its construction.

During its renovations, the gallery engaged in a series of consultations. One in particular had to do with the bathrooms. They approached me and asked whether I could offer some insight. In the end, we pulled together a panel of folks with varying bathroom concerns/needs and made a series of recommendations that the gallery wholesale adopted. To be honest, it felt radical and risky at the time, and in some ways it still does, given the widespread ongoing resistance to creating gender neutral bathrooms (particularly retrofitting multi-stall spaces). There is a pernicious practice of doing community consultations for the sake of being able to say that the community has been consulted—regardless of whether any recommendations are implemented or not.¹ Our final recommendation, once we had tackled issues of design, signage, training, and communication, was to encourage the use of art to facilitate conversational access points and do the work of communicating the choices that guided the final building structure.

When I made the sculpture, my ideal audience was queer and trans children and youth, and their parents. I'm always so excited by the way young folks have more access to the language and ideas that it took me three decades to find. Having spent some time working with queer and trans children and their parents,

¹ Institutions are actually people. This period of the gallery's transformation was made possible by the work of Stephanie Nadeau, Michelle Gewurtz, Jennifer Gilliland, Alexis Boyle, Catherine Sinclair, and Director Alexandra Badzak—all of whom played a role in facilitating and welcoming all of the suggestions we made and who worked hard to mobilize answers and solutions to the questions we asked.

one of the patterns I've observed is that queer and trans children are often, by default, tasked with educating their parents—and the stakes, in terms of asserting an identity, are high. And parents/adults are often conditioned not to trust or to believe what children say about the world and about themselves, and queerness/transness is often, dangerously, dismissed as a phase. Youth/children in general are undervalued for their creativity, insight, and knowledge, and for young queer and trans people, this systematic undermining of their brilliance is painfully amplified. Building an 18-foot metal sculpture of the gender-neutral pronoun "they" was about asserting the undeniability of my existence, and consequently theirs as well. Having that work grow through a consultation process and live permanently in the OAG is a compelling endorsement of our reality, donning it with an air of legitimacy that strengthens its potential to change minds. Though I wasn't able to come out until I was an adult—so many of my desires and impulses (which I now recognize as trans/queer) as a youth were dismissed, stifled, delegitimated. I definitely had an image of an angsty teen (myself perhaps) visiting the gallery with a parent and that relationship being strengthened or a power struggle leveling out a little through the support that work offers.

The choice to use diamond-plated aluminum was also deliberate in that it is a design with dual functional purpose. In our early meetings to discuss the project, installation tech Dan Austin suggested diamond-plated aluminum, and upon further research, its physical usefulness offered a poetic metaphor for the performative nature of language in conversation with the pronoun's reality as social emancipatory catalyst. On the one hand, the raised diamonds create a space for resistance—converting the smooth, slippery, metal sheet to a surface where feet can find traction. For me, diamond-plated metal recalls the play structures of my youth—the steps that lead up to the landing before the slide down. Conversely, a diamond-plated metal surface is also one over which large objects (like crates) can more easily glide. The dual-purpose nature of the diamonds—ease of movement and its seeming opposite of traction—echoes the way this word is creating moments from which to launch identity on an individual basis while effectively contributing to the monumental shift in trans realities that this moment brings. And language and art are malleable structures within which we can play.

Like your daughter, I've spent a lot of time asking, "Where do 'theys' go to the bathroom?" and I love this anecdote because it brings a number of issues to light with regard to "difficult knowledge." Having had the opportunity to ask directors/presidents/managers this very question, I'm struck by the fact that this knowledge is not inherently difficult, but that it is made difficult as a result of inadequate institutional responses, personal conditioned biases, and, dare I say,

general ignorance—and I don't mean ignorance in a disparaging way. I have just found that our society is structured in such a way as to shuffle us down life's path without giving certain ideas space to be explored. Gender is one of these ideas, as a cisgender agenda supports a power structure that doesn't want to be challenged. While I have spent a lot of time educating people on trans history, the history of sex/gender, activism, and queer politics, I think the biggest contribution any of my trainings/consultations make is giving individuals a space, even just for an hour, to stop and think deeply about their gender and their relationship to gender and power.

Questions like "Where do 'theys' go to pee?" have a way of making people in positions of power squirm in their seats, because they reveal human rights infringements and can, rightfully, lead to human rights complaints.

I'm also struck by the way your child is guided by desire and inquisitiveness, the way you, in that moment, had to negotiate your accountability to that space/knowledge, and the way the presence of children has the potential to make inequity visible to us. Had you been alone in looking for a washroom, you may have just rolled your eyes at the museum's binary gender washrooms. But in the presence of your child, who mirrors your values back at you, you are called to justify your choices in a way that contradicts the expectation from society that you should simply comply with an oppressive regime, do your business, and move on. And the answer you provided her pointed towards necessary future activism.

I'm curious how often your exchanges with your child leave you oriented towards that need for activism—particularly in the context of navigating institutions. I'll admit that I don't spend as much time with children as I would like, but I'm always delighted by the differences in attitudes and responses that I am met with when working with young folks. They offer a different barometric read of the cultural climate, and there is a particular ease around encountering knowledge.

MEP: One of the things I love most about my child is that she is deeply attuned to issues of justice. She boldly calls out anyone or anything that is unjust, and she regularly leads us in small moments of activism. This aspect of her character is something that both inspires and challenges her father and me, and it was certainly at play in her ongoing working-through of our experience with the gendered bathrooms at the museum and beyond. As is so often the case with my child, she refused to be brushed off with a superficial, illogical, and inequitable explanation of why we needed to use a particular bathroom.

The conversation went something like this:

"But why is one side for girls, and one side for boys? How do you know?"

"The symbols are different," I said, pointing to the gender icons marking the separate entrances. "This one is for boys, and this one is for girls."

"Well, what is the triangle?"

"It represents a skirt."

"But girls don't wear only skirts—and boys can wear skirts too, right?"

"Right!"

"And what about the boys who wear kilts in Scotland? And the Buddhist monks we saw in Singapore? Aren't those like skirts?"

"Yes."

"So why is the museum saying girls wear skirts?"

"Because in some places, especially in the past, women and girls had to wear skirts."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Yes, that is ridiculous."

"But not today, right? Anyone can wear what they want."

"That's right," I told her, not voicing my follow up thought of, "but it's complicated..."

"So why can't everyone just go to the bathroom where they want?"

In the days that followed, the question she kept returning to was, "Where do 'theys' go to the bathroom?" My further investigation found that there is a gender-inclusive restroom at the back of the building we visited, but—as you might have guessed—this was not a satisfactory solution for my child, who was very preoccupied by the inherent injustice and hurtfulness of the exclusion of the main bathrooms.

There were (at least) four things that my daughter taught me in this encounter and the subsequent discussions it spawned. The first was a tough lesson about my own complicity in maintaining the deeply entrenched systems of exclusion of trans and genderqueer people—in this case built into the very structures of the building itself. That complicity is borne of my own privilege as a cisgender person—privilege that allows me to go to a museum and use the restroom without having to search for it or feel invisible, uncomfortable, or unsafe.

The second lesson was about how forms of privilege and exclusion are often embedded in multiple forms of oppression. The imposition and policing of a rigid gender binary is not only exclusionary and hurtful toward genderqueer and trans folks but also, as my daughter pointed out, ethnocentric. And it surveils and delimits a whole range of people who don't fit into the dominant norms in a variety of ways and for a wide range of reasons, including those of class, race, ethnicity, culture, appearance, and many other factors. One

of the things I keep rediscovering over and over, as an anthropologist, a parent, and a global traveler, is that our world has this incredibly rich diversity in it, which museums in particular have (often problematically) sought to collect, exhibit, and interpret. Yet most of them have been way too slow to decolonize and democratize their institutions in ways that share power with and meet the needs of all of their constituents. When we think intersectionally about how forms of oppression are compounded in particular ways for different people and groups, we can better understand the changes that are needed in museums today.

The third thing I learned is a lesson I keep regularly relearning, and that is the importance of praxis. There is a tendency among academics to intellectualize things and lose sight of the uneven stakes and experiential impact of issues of justice (or so-called 'ideological debates') on people's lives, particularly if we are not directly implicated in them. Rather than just shuffling my child into the women's restroom, as she made clear to me, I need to be sure that I am living with integrity and staying true to my own understandings of justice *especially* when it is easier to simply look away and move on. An important part of that work is continuing to educate myself on the many areas of my own ignorance. I also need to work harder to identify and address my own privilege and to contribute to the dismantling of the systems of oppression that undergird daily life as well as so many museum spaces.

Finally, this encounter with my daughter demonstrates the profound—if often ignored—knowledge and capacity of children. I am really struck by the fact that the injustice, historical obsolescence, ethnocentrism, hurtfulness, and arbitrary illogic of gendered bathrooms is clear to a four-year-old, and yet it has met so much resistance among adults. I may be biased, but I think her probing questions provide a really useful exercise in making the familiar strange and the "strange" familiar, as we say in anthropology, and highlight the need for continued activism and institutional change in museum spaces.

Speaking of historical obsolescence, this is a theme that you have explored in your *Decommissioned Project*. I love this project, which brilliantly employs traditional museological practices of collecting and exhibiting historical artifacts such as trophies, but in radical and transformative ways by inviting businesses and organizations to donate their gendered bathroom signs in exchange for training on how to foster greater trans inclusivity within their organizations. I'm struck by how much this project accomplishes in terms of transformation and change. I am also taken by the multiplicity of the work itself, which is simultaneously a form of decommissioning, collecting, documenting, displaying, training, and

activism—all with underlying humor and trenchant critique. I see this work remaking the world in a very practical, radical, playful, and profound way that galvanizes organizations to take responsibility and to take action.

CT: Thank you for sharing this exchange with your daughter. Reading about her ability to quickly see the inequity of gendering space in this way and her simple questions pertaining to power and access is both refreshing and affirming. I regularly find myself wading through the weeds of unfounded and learned fears that adults cling to, issues that your daughter quickly dismantles and challenges in such a clear-sighted way! She offers compelling and indisputable arguments—and has me thinking that, in my own approach to this work, I may be overcomplicating something that is fairly obvious. That said, as an adult who is visibly gender nonconforming, I often need to take a different tack to try and get to where I want a conversation to go. I think that, for the people in power to whom I appeal with these questions, I can easily be dismissed or not taken seriously or be perceived as a radical trans activist with a fringe request.

Children are all-too-often used to argue positions, and trans rights offer us some very polarized examples of how children, for better and worse, are instrumentalized in this way. All of the anti-trans legislation we are seeing in the United States at the moment, and the discourse of “parental rights” that has crept north, is built around capitalizing on fear and exploiting paternalistic concepts of protecting children (and cis women). And more recently, here in Canada, the federal protections for gender identity and gender expression that were just enshrined into law were largely won by including trans children and their cisgender parents in a conversation that trans activists had not succeeded in debating in the past. While trans activists had argued and lobbied for these protections for decades, it was the inclusion of children and “respectable” cisgender parents that ultimately helped to push the bill through. So while the bill was passed, it happened under a particular set of conditions that still point towards the limits of the politics of trans inclusion.

To shift gears and speak of the Decommissioned Project (Figure 2), bringing a request for actionable and material changes based on human rights into the fold of a creative process addresses a number of concerns I'd been tooling around within my practice and collaborations for years: namely, how can we instrumentalize the creative process to address systemic inequity, how can we harness the perceived existing openness in art spaces concerning queerness and transness, and how can we deploy art to foster more nuanced and complex conversations on gender. The project grew out of a bathroom degendering process I'd undertaken

with my collaborator fin-xuan. Together, with my intern Chloë MacLeod-Boucher, we launched the project in November 2022. Inspired by the work of Syrus Marcus Ware and his recent amplification of Toni Cade Bambara's quote "As a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible," the Decommissioned Project makes social change an engaging creative process.

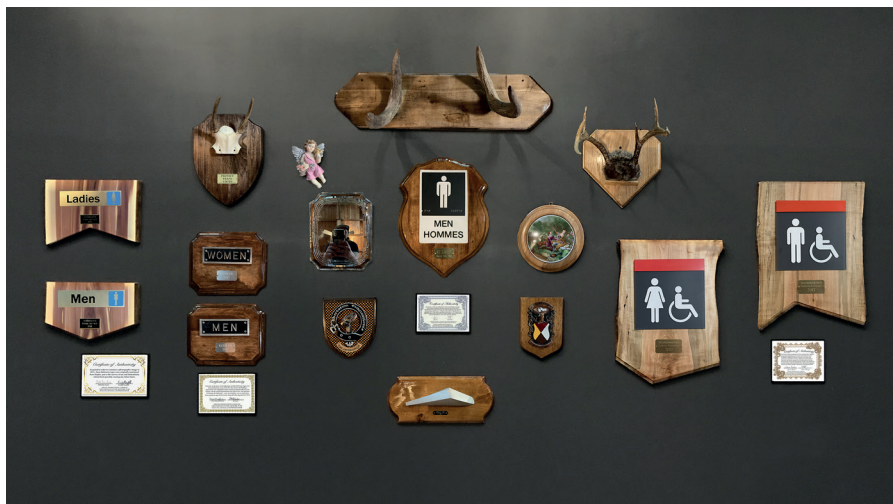


Figure 2. *Decommissioned Pique Edition* (2022), mixed media, approximately 16 × 8 feet.

Having delivered so many consultations and workshops around trans inclusion—processes from which I rarely hear of concretely applied changes/recommendations—I designed this project to provide free consultation/training in exchange for decommissioned binary bathroom signs. In this way, we've effectively flipped the order of business. Rather than having everyone undergo consultation and training, which they then use as a barometer to see whether they can make change, this process demands the change outright.

The packaging and approach we take is also something we deeply considered in the development of the Decommissioned Project, and it is an element of this ongoing work that will invariably change over time as we learn what works and what doesn't work. My friend Behc Jax-Lynx and I have often joked about building and training a stable of white, cisgender men to deliver trans competency training as a response to the way we feel our subject positions and appearances come into play and affect our ability to be effective. In building the Decommissioned Project, we intentionally pulled in a collective of trans and cisgender artists of varying ages

to appeal to a wide range of sensitivities and bathroom needs. Our membership remains open, and we hope to get to work with all manner of people.²

The Decommissioned Project, in many ways, is a conceptual framework that emerged in direct response to my own insecurities about generating ideas/knowledge/conversations that don't travel far enough or enact the kinds of changes I am so desperate to see take hold. That it emerged while I began writing a PhD dissertation is no accident—it became an antidote to the limits I experience regarding academic scholarship. Art's effects are often "unmetricable"—we don't have easy access to measuring a work's social impact. The Decommissioned Project installation of retired binary bathroom signs is itself a metric, a visual manifestation of changes made. In the event that our interaction with a business is successful, we mount the bathroom signs on commemorative (hunting) plaques. While on the one hand it is playful and a celebratory memorializing of a process, on the other hand there is a darker undertone to the act of using a hunting metaphor within this project; but this undertone is not misplaced as the policing and surveillance of gender produces bodies that experience public space under threat of violence.

The Decommissioned Project Collective had their first major creative exhibition and intervention this past June through an independent festival, Pique, that was held in a City of Ottawa building. And though we were not (yet) successful in permanently degendering the bathroom spaces there, our contribution to the event ignited an otherwise dormant conversation. We used the one-day event to stage an immersive intervention and performance that produced a series of temporary subversions, engaged a massive public in dialogue, directed that public to a city survey on service gaps, and problematized the conversations being had at the level of city policy. The city's current policy is to keep all multi-stall bathrooms binary gendered and convert all single-use spaces (previously designated as spaces for folks with mobility devices and accessibility needs not being met in the multi-stall rooms) to gender neutral. Rather than label the doors of those spaces as "Gender Neutral" (which they already were), they've labelled them with signs that read "Inclusive." During our temporary residency in the building, we made a number of adjustments to signage and performed as "Commode Officials." We added question marks to every sign and converted them from "Inclusive" to "Inclusive?" As we were not allowed even temporarily to degender the multi-stall spaces, in our role as Commode Officials, we stood outside

² As of the writing of this conversation the collective consists of fin xuan, Behc Jax-Lynx, Chloë MacLeod-Boucher, Ayesha Kanani, Emily Neufeld, and Bill Staubi.

the doors with paddles that had gender neutral signage painted on them, offering to instantly degender a room by holding a sign over the binary gender signage on the doors (Figure 3). This performance consisted of a number of games we would play with bathroom users, and though the performance was hugely successful at allowing folks to ask questions, explore barriers, and demystify difference, our occupancy of the space was hostilely policed by the security and maintenance staffs of the building, who had not been informed of our activities. While the breakdown in communication made our intervention all the more challenging to carry out, the presence of that friction and tension made material the policing, surveillance, and power that is always just simmering beneath the surface—ready to regulate, constrain, and deny access.

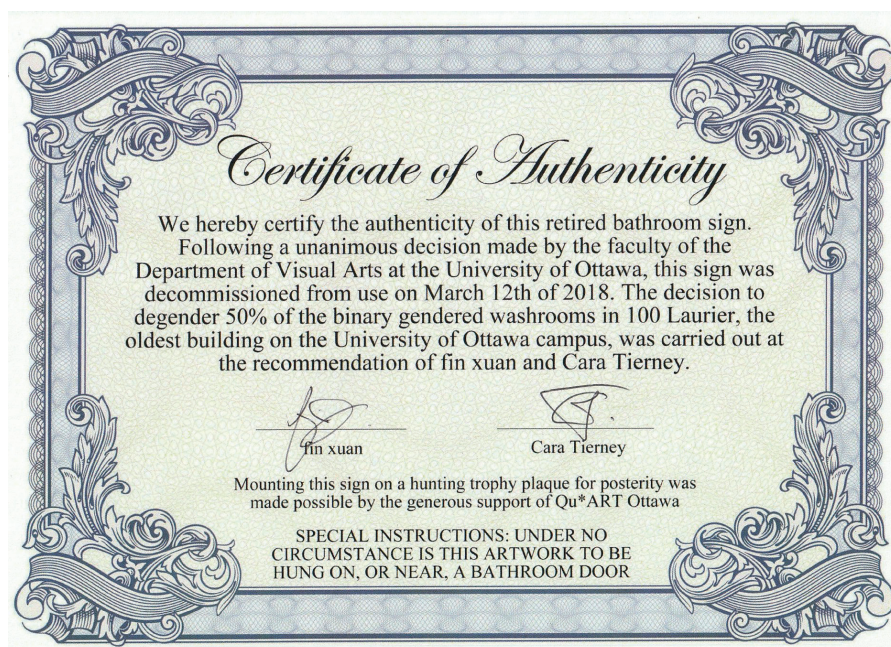


Figure 3. *Decommissioned* certificate of authenticity from the back of a plaque (2021), 5 × 3.75 inches.

Interestingly, in the days following the event, I received several notes from parents who had attended the event with their children, thanking the team for our work and for the space to explore these ideas playfully. What most strikes me from these notes are the various modes of intergenerational knowledge sharing that are taking place and the way our immediate experience of the world is such a different reality from the disciplinary and demographic organization

of education we find in institutions. One note came from a young nonbinary parent to an infant, and it shared the challenges of making choices for a human who has yet to tell us in words who they are. Another one was from the mother of an eight-year-old, sharing her thoughts on the way this gave her a joyful opportunity to critically explore the binary conditioning of early youth with her child. And yet another came from a parent seeing the world through their teenager's eyes as they reveled in the way our project exposes the binary gender system's discriminatory logic on the one hand and its utter absurdity on the other.

To come back to the question of "difficult knowledge," I'm struck by the discrepancy between lived realities that are made difficult (i.e. oppressive) as a consequence of some realities being prioritized—a process that is facilitated through the making difficult of knowledge. This also speaks of the erasure of histories and the great lengths to which dominant regimes will go to maintain a status quo.

MEP: I love your articulation of "the making difficult of knowledge," which in a way brings us full circle in this conversation. Considerable research has been done showing that children are receptive to a far wider range of human appearances and identities than some of the adults in their lives may teach them to fear and disparage. I find this idea of "the making difficult of knowledge" to be really productive, because it urges us to revisit our notions of human development, particularly by tending to the complex historical and socio-political ways that systems of oppression produce and maintain normative foundations within museological spaces and beyond. I usually cringe when "human development" is referenced because of the harmful ways it has been deployed to spuriously claim dominant norms as universal truths, but engaging with the knowledge and perspectives of children can help us to challenge and better navigate these narrow notions.

You point to the spectacularization of trans bodies in some museums and galleries, and on the other end of that continuum we see museums' tendency to open the door of "inclusion" only a tiny crack to allow in the most privileged and mainstream members within historically marginalized communities for representation. I'm thinking here of the much-critiqued³ kiosk at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights celebrating gay marriage but not the fuller range

³ See Angela Failler, "Unsettling Homocolonial Frames of Remembrance: Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Interventions at the Museum," *Memory Studies* 16, no. 1 (February 2023): 12–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221144545> and Heather Milne, "Human Rights and/or Market Logic: Neoliberalism, Difficult Knowledge, and the CMHR," *Review of Pedagogy, Education, and Cultural Studies* 37, no. 2–3 (2015): 106–24.

of queer kinship, sexualities, and experiences. In both cases, we must question the extent to which museums are actually transforming into more democratic spaces, if queer folks are relegated to the edges of either fringe spectacle or heteronormative, cisgender forms of representation.

I wanted to thank you for sharing your experiences and reflections on how you are perceived in some of the spaces that you've encountered, and your concerns about how those perceptions might limit what you are able to accomplish. Your fantasy of having a group of white, cisgender men to deliver trans competency training is one that really resonates with me and, I bet, to many of us trying to push forward the work of social justice in a wide range of areas. As one example, I'm thinking here of the plea from people of color I regularly hear in my activist engagements that white folks like myself "deal with your people," because obviously this should not be their job, especially given the personal costs, emotional toll, tremendous labor, and limited effectiveness they inherently face in this work. The question of how we reach people who do not feel directly harmed by systems and practices of inequality and bigotry—and who themselves often perpetuate these systems (unwittingly or not)—is so crucial to the kind of transformation the world needs in order to become a more equitable place.

I wonder too about how then we *unmake* the difficulty of knowledge via queering the museum. For me, the kind of substantive, multi-pronged transformation that you are galvanizing through your art, your activism, your advocacy, and your educational work is the answer. And it can't be done without real institutional and societal change, with queer folks leading the way. This means moving beyond the kind of limited representations and temporary offerings that grant merely tokenistic inclusion rather than the radical transformation that is needed in museum collections, exhibitions, programming, and boardrooms.

We've not even covered the tip of the iceberg of your body of work, Cara, which could fill a volume on its own. I see you doing this work from so many different angles, wearing so many different hats. This may be a huge question, but I wonder if you might share a little with us about the different museological registers in which you work—as curator, visual artist, performance artist, scholar, graphic novelist, consultant, activist, educator (and more!). Do these different dimensions of your engagement ever feel in tension with one another? Do you have any insights about particular strategies that have been more or less effective in creating the kind of social and political change you seek? Also, how do you sustain yourself in so actively producing at such high levels in so many domains?

CT: Tip of the iceberg is right! Reading through your above response is like walking through a field of deep rabbit holes: the Canadian Museum for Human Rights debacle and the MANY examples of museums showcasing politics while subjugating their already marginalized employees, the appeal to science to debate human rights, how we “collect our people” and deal with oppressive ideologies on the basis of community affiliation, the unmaking of difficult knowledges, working in multiple registers, and holding conflict in tension.

I want to touch briefly on, and echo your unease about, the way science is often mobilized to make claims about “truth” in connection to appeals for human rights. This is a specific pattern we see frequently at play in trans discourse. While helpful in enlightening understandings of things like the development of social consciousness and the biodiversity of bodies, turning to science as a dominant form of knowledge production can detrimentally affect and undermine the importance of agency and individual choice. It simultaneously risks obscuring the reality that science is nonetheless a social construct—we make it in the social sphere and, consequently, it is always vulnerable to being co-opted by oppressive ideological regimes. While science is certainly a rich discipline to draw from, we should be critical and wary of the way its privileged status is used to delegitimize important arguments and discussions about bodily sovereignty.

Turning to the question of working in multiple modes of production, I'll start by saying that if you'd told the 15-year-old Cara who they would become their mind would have been blown, because they never knew such a person existed or could exist. Young people are given such limited outlooks and language with regard to their futures. Performance artist does not feature highly on the horizon of possibilities!

My 15-year-old self didn't know about performance art, queerness, or transness (at least not in the words through which I now experience them)... I've made some unconventional choices about the way I live my life; some of them (as I grow older) are more premeditated and strategic—for example, pursuing a PhD; others, in many ways, were survival strategies—emotional and financial. While being queer undoubtedly presented me with certain obstacles, it has also allowed me to take risks, push up against, and at times do away with, structures and traditions based on the mere fact that they are historically homo/transphobic. I'm also compelled to acknowledge the privilege with which I have moved through my life as a white and, at times, cis-passing person who continues to benefit from access to academic language and spaces.

Ultimately, I have found that holding multiple roles (educator, artist, curator, activist, consultant) and working in multiple capacities has strengthened my ability

to move through a wide variety of spaces and communities. My experience as an artist, specifically a performance artist, allows me to see the way a museological tradition built on theft and the conservation of objects fails to care for people at almost all levels of production. Museums are spaces that are built on hoarding things and creating spectacles—they are objectifying and occularcentric. They are founded on capitalist principles that place a premium on optics. Any genuine attempt to do diversity and inclusion work has to contend with the ways in which having a profit-generating ideology while being an image-conscious public actor regularly gets prioritized (often over the reality of what it actually takes to be diverse and inclusive)—anything less risks maintaining the subtle, and not-so-subtle, oppressive mechanisms that are built into most museological spaces and traditions.

My approach to the formal work of institutional change attempts to harness the self-reflexive capacity of art to lead participants toward understanding their relationships to systems of power. Art was the mechanism that allowed me to explore and question deeply internalized and conditioned ideas that had turned me against myself as a young person. Art allows us to tap into things outside of written/spoken/thought language in ways that, I believe, can productively help us appreciate complexity and build solidarity. My early practice was really about undoing the effects of “knowledge made difficult.” It was an earnest attempt to excavate what had been buried under the social sediment of trying to fit into a dominant ideological regime. Somewhere along the way I gave up trying to fit in. Queerness was the escape hatch, and performance art a survival strategy.

Holding multiple roles, jobs, and realities in tension has a way of showing you the limits of any one given position. Working across multiple modes of engagement is almost an exercise in accountability—how does one balance de facto complicity (such as working in a colonial system like a university for example) with continuing to orient oneself towards equity? For me it means being humble about my inherent fallibility, actively checking my past and present privileges, while continually learning about power structures, and finding ways of helping others in the work of individual and collective freedom.

MEP: Thank you for this conversation, Cara. I can think of no better way to end than in thinking about how to take forward the work of individual and collective freedom. As our exploration of the contributions and intersections of queer museology and children’s museology have shown, museums can be powerful players in this work despite their perduring histories of exclusion and elitism. My own recent work has focused on the possibilities of forging what I call a new “Critical Children’s Museology” grounded in the production

of museum content and programming not just *for* or *about* children but also *by* and *with* them, and in ways that engage them as valued social actors and knowledge-bearers (2020, 2021, 2022).⁴ But you have pushed me to more deeply consider the ways in which physical spaces and everyday infrastructure within museums need to be transformed as much as these institutions' collections, exhibitions, and programming. This is an area where child-centered, queering, critical race, indigenizing, and critical disability approaches have contributed a lot to museum practitioners' awareness of the multiple needs and possibilities for the physical spaces they inhabit.

CT: *I suppose that one ongoing interest that arises for me from our conversation is the need to think more profoundly about the way Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work benefits from an expanded understanding of pedagogy—one that sees knowledge acquisition happening everywhere. Cultural institutions are complex ecosystems made of individuals, resources, social and political infrastructure that emerge through colonial histories and power structures. Their makeup and ability to engage a diverse public is a reflection of that history and the extent to which they reckon with their emergence from within exploitative historical systems. Often, the way they see themselves is reflected in what they choose to show. While the avowed politics of a cultural institution may show up in the exhibition spaces and publicly professed commitments to DEI work, there is often a disjunction between political veneer and infrastructural reality. The embodied and cognitive experiences of marginalized individuals become the site where this disjunction is most harshly felt and undergone.*

MEP: Precisely! Attending to these experiences of alienation and seeking to transform the contexts and content that cause them is at the crux of what children's museology, queering museology, and many other ongoing interventions, campaigns, activism, and moments of refusal or repurposing have been doing at multiple levels from the individual to organized collectives. It is

⁴ See Monica Eileen Patterson, "Children's Museology and the COVID-19 Crisis," *American Alliance of Museums* (blog), September 18, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/09/18/childrens-museology-and-the-covid-19-crisis/>; Monica Eileen Patterson, "Toward a Critical Children's Museology: The Anything Goes Exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw," *Museum and Society* 19, no. 3 (November 1, 2021): 330–50, <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v19i3.3393>; and Monica Eileen Patterson and Sarah Gensburger, "Discovering Child Curating," *In Situ. Au regard des sciences sociales* 3 (2022): 1–19, <http://journals.openedition.org/insituarss/1582>.

in museums' and all of their visiting publics' best interests to engage in such work in order to forge new possibilities for museums of the future.

CT: How do we do the work of disarticulating structural barriers while interrupting the way inequity is systematically encoded through institutional hierarchy, infrastructure, and educational programming? I think we also need to think in a way that is more intentionally transdisciplinary—in a way that works across the boundaries of established roles within structural hierarchies. We need to recognize that learning is happening in spaces outside and beyond the purview of a gallery's education department.

As spaces of intergenerational and cross-community connectivity, museums and galleries bring us into conversation with histories, ideas, and each other in specific—and some yet-unacknowledged—ways. Consequently, they offer rich sites from which to project ourselves meaningfully into possible futures. They are spaces that elicit curiosity and productive confusion, spaces that people go to looking for entertainment, knowledge, creativity, and intellectual and emotional expansion.

Children occupy a unique position in this discursive network structure. Limited in power, and relatively unresigned, they theorize and analyze in ways that offer insights and knowledge that we currently don't prioritize. Our approach to childhood knowledge acquisition predominantly takes the form of adults designing interfaces and programs for children and youth. I appreciate the turn of your recent work and the way it echoes the importance of the mad, deaf, and disabled credo "nothing about us, without us." What insights and contributions might emerge from us seriously attending to the interests of children in a non-prescriptive way and in a way that acknowledges them as informed expert collaborators in the ongoing and relational process of individual and collective liberation? As someone who occasionally mourns the fact that I wasn't afforded a queer or trans childhood, I'm especially keen to learn from the knowledge and insights of queer and trans children. In the meantime, we have a lot of work to do if we are going to build the spaces in which they can safely be themselves.

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