

A CRITICAL-CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF
HOW GENDER IS PERFORMED IN

Barbie EXPO

A MAGICAL EXHIBITION OF HAUTE COUTURE



WHITE PASSIVITY, ENFORCED
FEMININITY, AND EXOTIC OTHERNESS
TIED UP IN A PRETTY FASHIONISTA
BOW AND LINED UP FOR THE RUNWAY.

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Content

Text drawn from *Performing Gender in a Barbie Expo: White passivity, exotic otherness and tradition all wrapped up in a pretty fashionista bow.*

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OUR STUDY EXPLORED HOW THE BARBIE EXPO, LOCATED IN A MALL IN CENTRAL MONTREAL PROBLEMATICALLY PERFORMED GENDER, RACE AND CLASS AND THE LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STAGECRAFTING NARRATIVE.

WE INVITE YOU TO READ AND REFLECT ON WHAT WE HAVE FOUND AND ILLUSTRATED HERE, AND TO THINK ABOUT HOW YOU MIGHT USE PUBLIC EXHIBITIONS AS SPACES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR GENDER JUSTICE AND CHANGE.

A BIT ON BARBIE & BARBIE EXPO

Barbie was created by a woman, Ruth Handler, the co-founder of Mattel. The first Barbie doll was released in 1959. Over the 60 years since then Barbie has come to exist with contradictions (Mattel 2009-2016b, Lord 2014).

She's been called "MATERIALISTIC DUMBBELL" for her unrealistic, idealized, feminized body



as well as a "FEMINIST PIONEER" because she has been marketed as an independent woman with choice

(Lord, 2004, p.10).

The Barbie Expo was created for the Make-a-Wish Foundation to fund the wonderful work that they do for children. The expo is located in Les Cours Mont-Royal a high end shopping mall in central Montreal.

THIS IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE

THE WAYS THAT WOMEN ARE REPRESENTED

EVEN AS BARBIE DOLLS HAS AN IMPACT.

SIGHT MORE THAN ANY OTHER SENSES INFLUENCES OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF WOMEN'S ROLES AND PLACE IN SOCIETY.

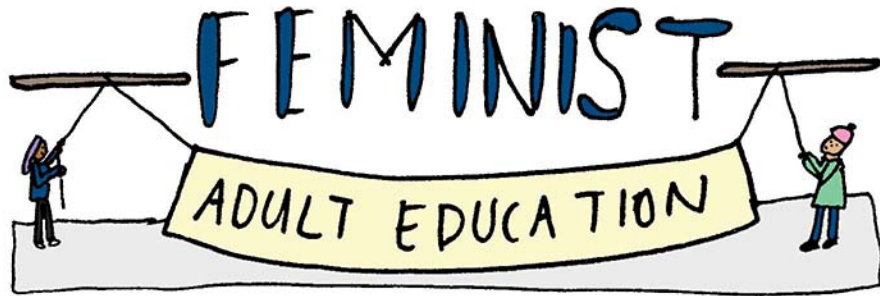
EXHIBITIONS ARE ALSO IMPORTANT BECAUSE THEY ARE DESIGNED TO BE SEEN AND THEY ARE PUBLIC.

THESE EXHIBITIONS SHAPE, MOULD, AND MOBILIZE IDENTITY- WHO WE WERE, ARE AND EVEN, SHOULD BE.

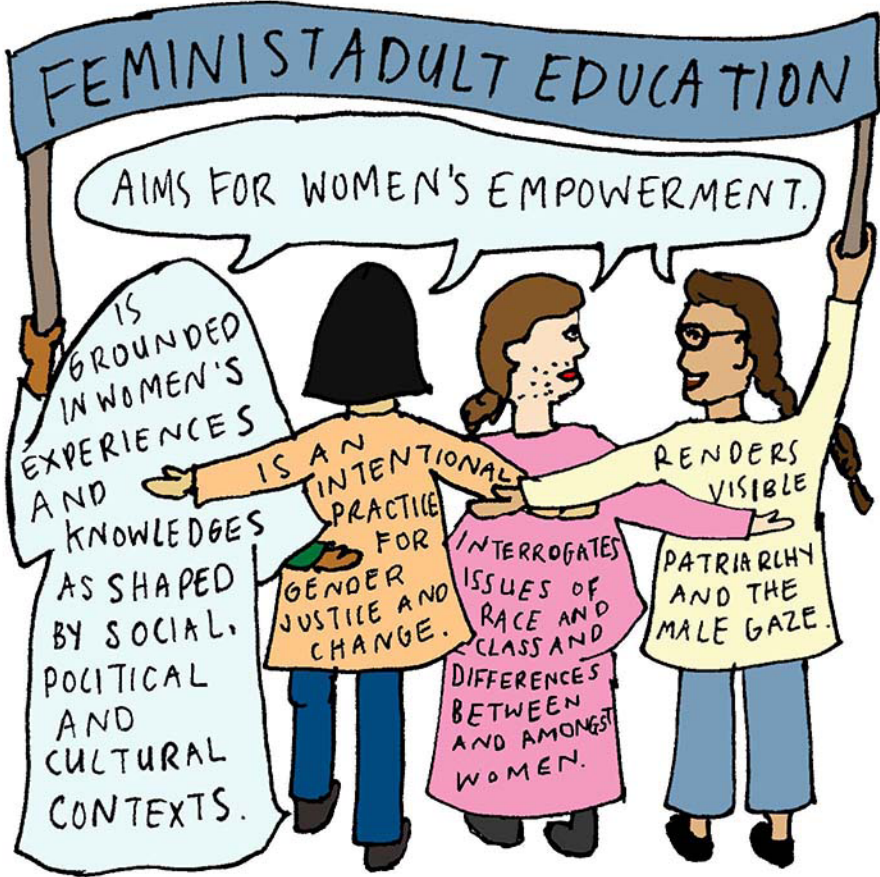
WHAT DAMAGE DO IMAGES OF FEMININITY AS INFERIOR TO IMAGES OF MASCULINITY DO TO GIRLS AND WOMEN'S SENSE OF SELF?

IS IT RIGHT TO CURATE A PUBLIC EXPO THAT SHOWS WOMEN AS FODDER OF CORPORATIZATION AND THE FASHION INDUSTRY?

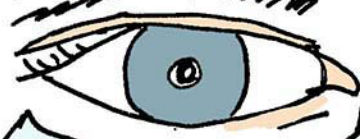
WHO SHALL BE SEEN AS 'EXOTIC'? HOW MIGHT WE CHALLENGE AND DISMANTLE HARMFUL IMAGININGS OF WOMEN?



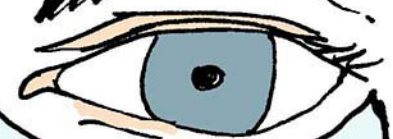
"RESISTANCE LIES IN SELF-CONSCIOUS ENGAGEMENT WITH DOMINANT, NORMATIVE DISCOURSES AND REPRESENTATIONS AND IN THE ACTIVE CREATION OF OPPOSITIONAL ANALYTIC AND CULTURAL SPACES" (Mohanthy, 1989, p. 208).



WHAT IS THE MALE GAZE?



THE ACT OF DEPICTING WOMEN AND THE WORLD FROM A NORMALIZED MASCULINE, HETEROSEXUAL PERSPECTIVE. THROUGH THIS "WOMEN COME TO UNDERSTAND THAT THEIR VALUE IS IN HOW THEIR BODIES OR BODY PARTS ARE USED AND CONSUMED BY OTHERS." (Criley, Evans & Mackiewicz, 2016, p. 95)



WOMEN ARE OFTEN LOOKED AT AS SEXUALIZED OBJECTS OF DESIRE OR VEHICLES FOR TITILLATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION. WOMEN BECOME THE 'IMAGE' AND MEN THE BEARERS OF THE LOOK.



HOW WE LOOK AT THE BARBIE EXPO

WITH THE FEMINIST MUSEUM HACK!

▶ WE ANALYSE EXHIBITIONS

▶ WE LEAVE POST-IT NOTES FOR OTHERS TO READ

▶ WE CAN INTERROGATE, INTERVENE, OR REINVENT EXHIBITIONS

▶ WE DECONSTRUCT GENDER REPRESENTATIONS

▶ WE INVITE STUDENTS AND OTHERS TO EXHIBITS WITH HACK QUESTIONS

FEMINIST DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Feminist discourse analysis is how we read 'text' as political, as a system of meaning caught up in cultural formations linked to socially defined practices that can carry privilege, assign values, and produce subjects (Lazar, 2005).

Visual analysis encourages visual literacy - a deep reading of what visual images 'actually' show and tell and their implications. (Rose, 2001).

HACK QUESTIONS for BARBIE EXPO

HOW DOES THE BARBIE EXPO PERFORM MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES?

HOW IS WOMEN'S CULTURE SHAPED AND BY WHOM IN THE EXHIBITION?

HOW DO LANGUAGE AND VISUALS INTERACT INTERTEXTUALLY?

WHO TELLS THE STORY OF THIS EXHIBITION? WHOSE EYES ARE WE LOOKING THROUGH?

HOW IS THE PRACTICE OF "OTHERING" PERFORMED?

WHAT ROLE DOES STAGE CRAFTING PLAY TO ENHANCE THE PARTICULAR NARRATIVE OF THE EXPO?

WHAT DID WE FIND?

BARBIE EXPO REINFORCES MANY DOMINANT NARRATIVES INCLUDING:

WOMEN SHOULD DESIRE BEAUTY, WHITENESS AND WEALTH.

MEN HOLD POWER, DOMINANCE AND SUPERIORITY.

PREVALENT NORMATIVE CONSTRICTED CONCEPTIONS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WOMAN.

This is not what I look like! Am I supposed to look like a Barbie? That is all I see... well I feel inadequate.



WHAT ELSE DID WE FIND?

WE IDENTIFIED FOUR THEMES OF PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE.

1. WHITE PASSIVITY

The majority of the Barbies are Caucasian and they stare blandly out from their display cases. They are positioned and clothed in ways that privilege wealthy white femininity.

2. EXOTIC OTHERNESS

Barbies representing Black women, Indigenous women and women of colour appear almost exclusively in cultural dress (and often inaccurate cultural dress).

3. TRADITIONAL FEMALE ROLES

Most of the career Barbies are presented in traditional roles. The career Barbies in nontraditional roles are very feminized.

4. HOMOGENIZATION & COMMODIFICATION

Almost all of the Barbies represent "American culture" and many Barbies are selling corporate products.

STAGECRAFTING

ONE VISUAL STRATEGY THAT EXHIBITIONS USE IS WHAT WE CALL STAGECRAFTING (Bergsdottir, 2016).

Stagecrafting is the setting and positioning of objects.

The way the exhibition is constructed informs the message.

Barbie Expo features thousands of Barbies staring blankly out from glass display cases.

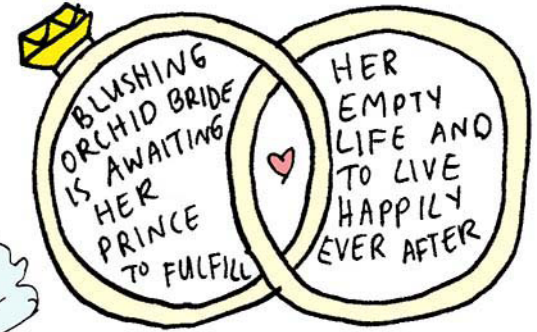
It also has a scaled down fashion show, completely with flashing cameras and models 'dressing' for the runway.



All the models who are dressing are thin and white.

BLUSHING ORCHID BRIDE

Blushing Orchid Bride is one of the PASSIVE WHITE on display



BLUSHING ORCHID BRIDE REINFORCES A PARTICULAR VISION OF THE WORLD. BOTH THROUGH THE MALE GAZE, AND BY REPRESENTING THE FASHION AND PERSCRIBED DESIRES OF A WEALTHY WHITE WOMAN. This erases those [almost everyone!] who do not fit this mould.



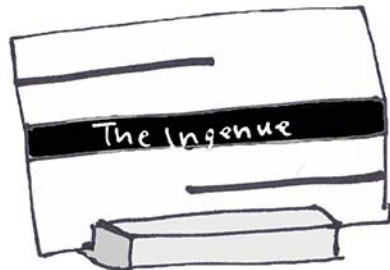
The Ingenue

(Another passive white Barbie)



Hi! Here I am, similar to most of the Barbies in the Expo with my unrealistically proportioned body, my feet permanently high heel ready. I am a white skinned, blond haired construction ready for consumption by males.

IN OTHER WORDS, WITH THE INGENUE WE SEE WOMEN REPRESENTED AS A SEXUALIZED, PASSIVE, NAIVE AND INNOCENT OBJECTS AS DESIGNED BY A MALE! *



* Robert Bestas indicated on Barbie.Mattel.com

Barbie Expo

HMM... SHOULD WE COUNTER STEREOTYPES OR PERPETUATE THEM? HOW SHOULD WE DO IT?

LET'S PERPETUATE WITH

Cultural inaccuracy

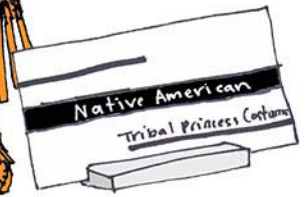
- beauty over function
- exotic costumes

generalization and stereotypes

- gives a singular representation without alternative representation

misrepresentation

- westernized features



Q: WHY IS IT PROBLEMATIC FOR A WHITE MALE DESIGNER TO TELL US WHO A FANTASY GODDESS OF AFRICA IS?



Representing people of colour almost exclusively in cultural costumes as Barbie Expo does, gives a narrow and singular (and inaccurate) view of diverse groups of people.

A:

- IT'S EXOTICIZING
- IT RENDERS WOMEN AS PASSIVE OBJECTS TO BE CONSUMED
- IT IS A REFLECTION OF MALE DESIRES



WONDER WOMAN

WONDER WOMAN IS ON DISPLAY IN A CASE WITH OTHER SUPERHEROES. THIS IS THE ONE SECTION OF BARBIE EXPO WHERE THERE ARE MORE MALE FIGURES THAN FEMALE. BARBIE EXPO REMINDS US THAT SUPERHEROES ARE USUALLY MALE.



FEMALE SUPERHEROES NEED TO

BE SCANTILY CLAD

BE FEMINIZED

HAVE LONG FLOWING HAIR

WEAR MAKEUP

So don't forget for women fashion is (as demonstrated by the rest of Barbie Expo) and superhero culture involves men.

ACCEPTABLE PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN (According to Barbie Expo)



- SECRETARY
- TEACHER
- FASHION EDITOR
- MODEL
- SEXY RCMP
- FASHION DESIGNER
- SHOPGIRL
- ... AND THE LIKES

LADIES DON'T FORGET WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE THE EXPECTATION IS THAT YOU ARE FASHIONABLY DRESSED, HAVE LONG SILKY HAIR AND ALWAYS WEAR LAYERS OF MAKEUP.

Mattel, elsewhere has a broader range of professions for Barbie. We ask why are only traditional roles on display at Barbie Expo?

(Mattel, 2009-2016a)

Canadian Mounted Police Uniform



IT MIGHT APPEAR PROGRESSIVE THAT I AM A FEMALE POLICE BARBIE. BUT ANY PROGRESSIVE ASPECT IS MITIGATED BY THE FACT THAT I AM FEMINIZED. SO AS A WOMAN I MAY DO 'MEN'S' WORK BUT I MUST EXPRESS TRADITIONAL FEMININITY.

REALISTICALLY AS AN RCMP OFFICER IT WOULD BE REQUIRED FOR MY HAIR TO BE TIED BACK OR CUT SHORT.



The Coca-Cola Majorette

SO WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE?



Commercialization & Commodification

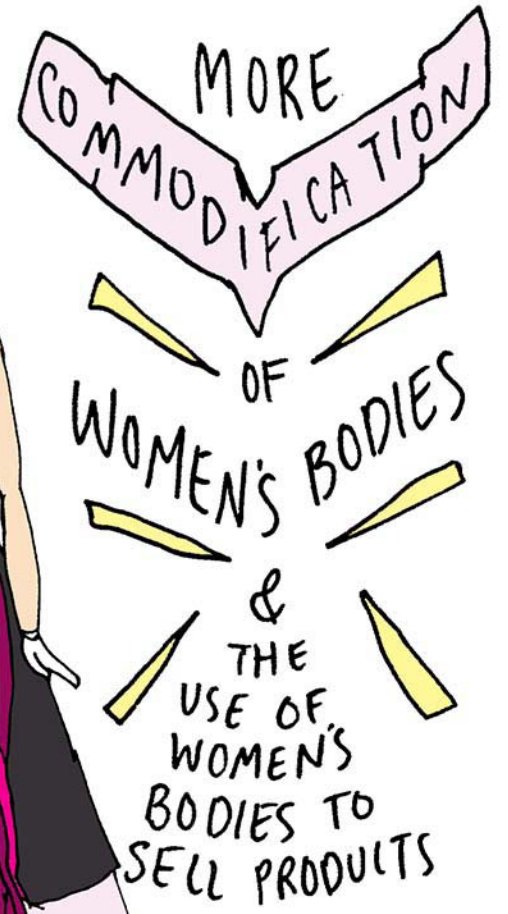
OF WOMEN'S BODIES?
YES.

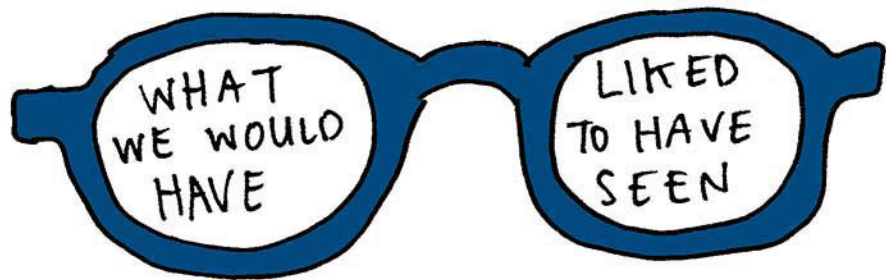
as well as AMERICAN CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION: The global pursuit to normalize contemporary American culture and make it appear universal. This, like colonialism and imperialism is a practice of power aimed at control through the destruction of different ways of being.

CORVETTE Barbie



Corvette Barbie stands on the sidelines to cheer on the men as they participate in their masculine pursuits.





A CRITICAL VIEW OF THESE TRADITIONAL PATRIARCHAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN.

BARBIE EXPO ASSISTING VISITORS TO EXPLORE THE WAYS IN WHICH BARBIE IS CULTURALLY CONNECTED TO THE LIVES OF WOMEN, GIRLS AND VISITORS.

THE EVOLUTION OF BARBIE AS IT RELATES TO SOCIAL CHANGE WHICH COULD INCLUDE DISPLAYING BARBIE IN MORE NON-TRADITIONAL ROLES.

COMMENTARY AND QUESTIONS THAT WOULD COMPLICATE BARBIE, DECONSTRUCT HER, AND PROBLEMATIZE THE OVERWHELMING FOCUS ON FEMININITY AND FASHION.

SO, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

NOW THAT WE HAVE 'HACKED' THE BARBIE EXPO AND YOU HAVE READ OUR ZINE

Visit exhibitions in public places with a critical eye (if there is a place to comment, leave your feedback).

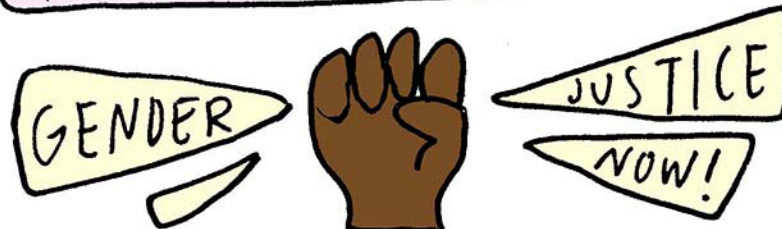
Ask what is wrong with this picture?

Think about what you think you see and what you really see.

Ask yourself what is the 'message' and in whose interest is this messaging?

Consider what effect it might have on women and girls.

Talk to women and men, friends and family about the exhibition.



Thanks for Reading

Stay up to date and share the zine!

onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/comarts



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