

CURATORS IN CONVERSATION

Susanne Wernsing talks with Rainer Fuchs (mumok), Stella Rollig (Belvedere) and Angela Stief (Albertina Modern) about critical curating¹

The conversation transcribed and published here is an excerpt from the panel "Critical Curating" which took place in the framework of the symposium Art Reception – Strategies for Future Exhibiting of the FWF PEEK project PPC [AR 568] on the critical reappraisal of the history of the commune at Friedrichshof from July 2–7, 2021 at the Volkskunde Museum Wien and was organized by the editors of this volume. We would like to thank all debaters for their willingness to provide the transcript of this conversation for the present volume.

SUSANNE WERNSING: At the beginning we heard two positions on the necessity of exhibiting Otto Mühl, namely that of Rainer Fuchs, the chief curator of mumok — Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, and that of Angela Stief, the director of *Albertina Modern* Vienna. Both emphasize the importance of exhibiting the art movement of Actionism and especially Mühl's works. Stella Rollig, perhaps you could explain your position as general director of the *Belvedere* Vienna on this?

ROLLIG: I wouldn't know how to argue that it is necessary to exhibit Mühl. I don't know at all why it should be absolutely necessary to claim in principle that this or that must always and necessarily be exhibited. Why should we make such statements? The history of art and art history are so tremendously diverse and diversified, and now especially we live in times of art history being rewritten in rapid strides. We live in a time where so incredibly many new things are being discovered, where art is expanding in different directions.

My suggestion, or my appeal, would therefore rather be to leave the well-trodden path of Austrian art history. And that also means to suspend

¹ The conversation was transcribed by Ida Clay and Elisabeth Schäfer. The transcription retains the respective language habits of the discussants with regard to gender sensitive spelling in the spoken language, and does not intervene in a unifying manner. The conversation was held in German and translated into English by David Ender and Elisabeth Schäfer.

the superlatives, to leave superlatives in the narratives of art history. After all, we usually talk about Actionism as the “most radical” movement in Austrian art history. This is a very affirmative speaking and retelling that reinforces something that everyone seems to know anyway, and as a curator, from this moment of constant affirmation, it ceases to interest me. I don’t mean this as egocentrically as it sounds. I am first and foremost a mediator, and at the moment I think it is quite important to tear up old narratives and develop completely different approaches to exhibiting and curating. At mumok, for example, I find it exciting that Actionism is precisely not exhibited again in the gesture of an epoch narrative, a narrative that is basically the narrative of an -ism. Actionism was an attack on patriarchal society, in which, however, all the patriarchs were at work. Actionism was an attack on the authorities, but by authorities. As an exhibitor today, I can no longer tell and reproduce this in good conscience without having to expose this contradiction. Moreover, we have to recognize that every showing means an affirmation. This is where it gets particularly difficult with the paintings by Otto Mühl, with which the art market is currently being fed. In the context of the art market, there are no relativizing, no contextualizing texts. In museums there are. So how can I describe works from a problematic context in a museum and comment on the gesture of exhibiting them? Is it enough then, for example, to make a comment like, “I’m sorry I have to show this now ...” No, that’s not enough. My conviction is that I do not show these works then. Of course, I owe it to my authority and position that I can decide no longer to affirm this or that artist personality and their significance as inscribed in art history up to now.

FUCHS: I have to respond to that. I think it is a fatal, wrong decision not to show Viennese Actionism anymore.

ROLLIG: I did not say that I would not show Viennese Actionism.

FUCHS: It’s not a question of no longer showing the works of the Viennese Actionists, but of showing them in such a way that they take on a new meaning, that new light can fall on them. That is the task of museums: to shed new light on the past through the window of the present and to legitimize the new with the authority of the past. That’s the game we play as museum curators.

CURATORS IN CONVERSATION

ROLLIG: When it comes to showing how artistic positions critically illuminate authority and destroy the heroic image of the artist, I think that there are many, many artists internationally whom we should show, whose works have done or are doing just that — but in a completely different way. Let's look beyond Austria ...

STIEF: I would like to say that Viennese Actionism is about self-injury. We see painful images. Just by looking at them, you realize what it's all about. These images affect you, they expose themselves, and they do so in a really radical way. That's what you'll find in any expert text on Viennese Actionism. It's not about an -ism if we want to do a historical reappraisal of this movement, but rather about the meaning of this movement, which existed until the 1980s, which shaped Austria, and which we are also rewriting. But I have a completely different question with regard to the argument that art is a tourist magnet. For example, many international tourists come to Vienna to look at Klimt. However, the moral integrity is highly questionable in Klimt's case. When it comes to such sensitive topics, I would want to be very careful not to slip into hypocrisy. For me — to be honest — it would look like this with regard to Mühl. How do you justify Klimt — and not Viennese Actionism?

ROLLIG: I never said: not Viennese Actionism. I have always kept with Mühl. I would exhibit Schwarzkogler and Brus, too. The fact that Mühl is always portrayed in a holistic manner, maintaining that he went against the authorities, against Catholic ossified Austria, and that it is also kind of a traditional opinion that he went against National Socialist post-war Austria, is a problem from my point of view.

WERNISING: I find the question of self-harm and the question of assault interesting. What do you see in the works if you don't go in with the narrative that it's about creative destruction leading to emancipation? After you said earlier, Mr. Fuchs, that the work is always attributed with new narratives or questions, don't we also have to note that in the majority of Mühl's presentations one sees to this day, the first sentence almost universally contains the words "emancipatory," "autonomy," "liberation," etc. Is this already the "new light" that falls through the window of the present and recontextualizes the works? Isn't there still something

overlooked in such reproductive contextualization? And wouldn't it be interesting to learn something about the history of violence in the context of Mühl's works — or about the question of Mühl's long affirmed, anti-fascist attitude, his repeatedly asserted critical overcoming of National Socialism. Wouldn't it then be a matter of once again expanding the range of topics with which one interrogates his works?

FUCHS: Viennese Actionism is indeed one of the emancipative art movements. It was important at a time of massive historical repression after the Second World War. In Austria's narrow Catholic milieu of thought, this art was provocative and pointed to contradictions within society. That is a fact. For this reason alone, it would make no sense not to show Viennese Actionism. And Mühl cannot be separated from Viennese Actionism. Mühl is Viennese Actionism. I can't put him out of this context. At the same time, it's important to keep seeing things in a new way, and what we see here in the research installation of the FWF PEEK project in collaboration with the group MATHILDA is an important contribution that triggers new processes of reflection.² One cannot go back behind the insights that are conveyed here in this research installation by MATHILDA. Here the window of the present is revealed. Here we are asked to ask: How do we look back at Mühl after this experience? And with the perspective of the group MATHILDA, a contradiction between aspects of Otto Mühl's work and its previous reception history becomes apparent. This contradiction must now be endured. Mühl is an important, a significant artist. His works are artistic works across the media — from painting to installations, actions, etc. — that endure because they had a quality in their time that was not achieved by others. And at the same time, with these works we also have the criminal as an artist. That is a contradiction that we cannot and do not have to resolve. We can't say:

2 MATHILDA is a group of former children of the commune at Friedrichshof. The group demands a critical re-visioning of Otto Mühl's work and a multi-perspective foundation for future exhibition concepts. In cooperation with the FWF PEEK research project (AR 568) for a critical reappraisal of the history of the Mühl commune and the Volkskunde Museum Wien, a space for critical discussion was created within the framework of a two-day symposium, as well as around points of the application of re-contextualizations of some of Otto Mühl's works, such as *Back to Fucking Cambridge* (1987), *Manopsychotisches Ballett* and *Oh Sensibility* (both 1970), and *Kardinal* (1967), among others. Pictures of this research installation can be found in the image section of this volume. Sources online: <https://aboutmathilda.com/> and <https://fh-timelines.goldblo.cc/peek>, last accessed 07.19.2023.

now we're going to focus on the criminal and thus "kill" his art and declare it irrelevant. That makes no sense. Coming to terms with the past also means addressing the unpleasant aspects of history. But when I do that, I have to address the whole story — and not just lock it away. That's the basic principle of any reappraisal.

STIEF: Now we've reached a point where things get tricky. First of all, it is a modernist project to strive for the marriage of art and everyday life, or art and life. There have always been close relationships between these areas in the 20th century. What Mühl did exactly as an agent in this project is that he took it radically further and declared the commune project to be an art project. Thus, life has actually merged into art, or art into life. Now we have arrived at the central theme, although we took shelter so strongly in Viennese Actionism, because for understandable reasons it cannot be eliminated from the history books. But how do we deal with someone like Otto Mühl, who expanded the concept of art to such an extent that art became life? And how do we deal with the Kommune project and the works of art that were created there? Can we show them? Are we not allowed to show these works? And how could we make a smart exhibition about this later creative phase of Otto Mühl? My position is that art which we perceive as good and that may have been made by a criminal should not be banned. At this point, I also advocate de-emotionalization. I believe that we cannot and should not ascribe moral superiority to artists. Why should artists be better people?

WERNING: For this reason, my plea at the beginning was not to talk about the artists, but about strategies for exhibiting the work. I paid explicit attention again to the words you use in your discussion of Mühl's works. Terms like, "anarchic," "radical," "autonomy," and "liberation" appear over and over again. These are all terms that have emancipatory connotations. The question I would now like to ask specifically with regard to Mühl's "Zock Exercises" (1967), a work that we see critically addressed here as part of the research installation of the FWF PEEK project in collaboration with the group MATHILDA, is: What do we really see in the films, such as the work "Kardinal" as part of the "Zock Exercises"? How is the assault on the other body represented? When we look at this work, do we really think first of autonomy and liberation?

And when we think of it, where do these concepts come from? Where does this basic, recurring, and classifying definition of Mühl's work as liberating and autonomous come from?

FUCHS: At the time, Actionism was indeed an art that was supposed to and wanted to liberate itself from certain traditions. An art that turned against conventions. I see and emphasize that this then turned into the exact opposite. For me, Mühl's art and his actions as an artist represent something similar to what we find in the Dialectic of Enlightenment described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. One starts with a goal of an anti-authoritarian mediation of a society and ends in the total terror of the authoritarian. Incidentally, we at mumok have also noted this as a commentary on the work "Zock Exercises". As a curator, however, I cannot start a differentiated discourse in the exhibition on the object. I can only point out these contradictions sharply and decisively.

ROLLIG: I must state that for me it makes a significant difference whether people who have been harmed by the work of this artist come to our exhibitions as contemporary witnesses or as visitors. These people are in turn exposed to assaults through the nature of our exhibitions. It is indeed something different when we are dealing with a historical position that no longer has any directly affected contemporary witnesses.

FUCHS: Contextualization is of course central. You understand Mühl when you understand Viennese Actionism. Viennese Actionism is an art that must be understood in its time. The period of Viennese Actionism has to do with a politicization of art, a politicization of society, which was also reflected in art. The 1960s and 1970s and their political movements make up this art, the rebellion against authority, the pointing out that one experienced a social reality that was very bigoted and very contradictory. As a museum, one tries to conceptualize this phenomenon and describe it from its time. That's what happened in the exhibitions at mumok, by showing related art movements from other areas and thus also shaping an understanding that Viennese Actionism did not testify to a unique, brilliant gesture, but that this rebellion was inherent to the time that Viennese Actionism turned against. I must say that this was seen very uncritically in the 1960s and 1970s, although it must be said that Viennese

Actionism was criticized, but not for the reasons we are discussing here today — on the contrary. For very conservative reasons, people wanted to deny the Viennese Actionists the right to make art, because it did not correspond to a traditional concept of art. Actionism was only gradually accepted and perceived as art and spread internationally. There were many ideas in the formative period of Viennese Actionism, such as free sexuality, the use of drugs to “expand consciousness,” the protest against the family as the nucleus of the Catholic social fabric, etc. These are all questions of the time. Questions to which answers were found, or to which forms of protest were found, which were also very uncritically negotiated in that period, and which were in fact also partly uncritically adopted by the institutions, it is true. Many of these assessments of how social change can be pursued have of course changed, because one has also gained a distance and had to recognize the undesirable developments and the catastrophes that these developments brought with them. It is the task of museums, firstly, to contribute to the understanding of this art by contextualizing it in contemporary discourse; and secondly, also to look at this past with a critical eye from the present. The question is how to do that. But approaching it in a way that hides the past is not a solution. That is a fact. One would then also no longer be able to understand other phenomena in their original milieu or to trace their further reception history.

WERNING: But if we have a certain knowledge on the level of reception — as, for example, with the film “Back to Fucking Cambridge” (1987), in which children were forced to play victims of abuse, some of whom had themselves been victims of abuse in the commune — what justifies the fact that this film was shown at the Leopold Museum in 2019, that this film was and is shown at the Berlin Volksbühne, on ORF, etc.? The situation is similar with Mühl’s “Aschebilder” (“ash pictures”) — those pictures that he produced from the ashes of confiscated diary records of Kommunar:innen, records that he apparently had destroyed for fear that compromising material might emerge from them in the course of the court case. What is the point of exhibiting these works without their context, when you know that either violence is depicted in them or the work definitely emerged from a violent context?

FUCHS: It makes a difference whether I say it in addition to what the context looked like or not. But it's not a solution to stop showing the film because of that. There are efforts to eliminate Mühl and take the art out of the exhibitions. But I wouldn't do that, because then the problem would also be taken out of the story.

WERNISING: Eliminating Mühl from actionism is not the point. It's about a shift in perspective and about narratives that are still missing.

FUCHS: But the direction of thought ultimately aims at this: to single out Mühl, even if you don't say so.

WERNISING: So, we show the violent, brutal assault on victims of sexualized violence and say: But that was art, that's why we have to show it. Is that it?

FUCHS: I'm not saying I have to show it, but it is art. It makes a difference whether it is a cultural-historical document or whether it is a work of art.

WERNISING: It would be interesting to ask who defines that?

ZARAH GUTSCH (MATHILDA): Where is the line there? With "Back to Fucking Cambridge" it is — as you call it — art. But on the other hand, as we want to show here, the work has documentary potential, and that can't be stripped out of the film. Abuse victims from the community play abuse victims in the film. That can't be cut out. And on the basis of this problem, the question arises: Which claim comes before which? The artistic before the documentary or vice versa? In my opinion, when actual victims are portrayed, the documentary material absolutely takes precedence over the artistic.

FUCHS: That is one possible interpretation. Another, however, is that precisely these two parts are treated equally. That is the task of museums and of art historians.

ROLLIG: As museums, we have to be much more courageous and also give up the authoritative gesture of the knowing voice ourselves. We always find ourselves in a trap when we say: So, this is what we are going

CURATORS IN CONVERSATION

to show you now, because it is important, but we will tell you that there is also a problem with this work. Out of a search movement, which we as museums would have to actually expose ourselves to first and foremost, we would have to radically confront our own not-knowing or not-yet-knowing and hang up the empty frame and say: Here would hang a work of art by Otto Mühl, because we have given him a place in the canon of art history for half a century now, yet we believe it is not right to show him. Leave it blank, leave it black and put a question mark on it. Perhaps this involves more our counterparts, all those to whom we want to convey something. Maybe we need to share more and not just negotiate behind the scenes what our questions, decisions and our selection criteria are.

FUCHS: I rather think the opposite. I don't think it's more courageous. I think that's self-censorship. I strictly disagree at this point.

STIEF: I think that on the one hand, the idea of the frame left empty is beautiful, but on the other hand equivalent to not showing something. And also equivalent to a ban on showing and to censorship. It's the same line of argumentation as, for example, Adorno, who said that you can't write a poem after Auschwitz. Behind that, of course, is the shock of the trauma that leads to not being able to write anymore and not being able to show. I think it probably also needs distance and detachment. The direct emotions are understandable, but I'm not a psychologist and the question of trauma is a difficult matter we're not equipped to deal with. It's about injuries, about violence and trauma, and we really don't know anything about that ...

WERNISING: It's about ethics.

STIEF: Yes, but we are not ethicists either, we are art historians.

WERNISING: There is a current discourse on ethical curating, and I don't understand why it shouldn't play a role in art museums. Someone makes the suggestion to leave something empty because of an extremely demanding problematic context of a work — that this exists, everyone can agree to that — and the first reaction to such a suggestion is almost reflexively and always: that's censorship or self-censorship! And this,

although one would thereby make a blank space visible. Basically, there is currently an analogy to restitution objects, looted property from colonial contexts. Nobody knows how to exhibit the objects, how to make the empty spaces visible. These are all questions that we want to discuss here. But when you say that if we don't show the work, that's censorship, then that doesn't convince me insofar as there are many other works in your depots that you don't show. The interesting thing is that when curators show something, they are rarely asked for a reason. However, the moment they don't show something there is talk of censorship. This seems to require a more consistent justification.

FUCHS: It makes no sense at all not to show something and to say that you are not showing something. That just makes people curious. I don't understand where this is supposed to lead.

ROLLIG: For example, in the context of a larger Viennese Actionism exhibition, of which it has already been said today that Mühl occupies a special position in it, this would lead to an irritation of this narrative and perhaps to a change, if you don't show it and contextualize that you don't show it.

FUCHS: I think the problem is also that one always identifies the work with the person — and it's true: Mühl also forced this identification by wanting to make life into art and art into life. But there is still a way of looking at art history in which the work has a certain autonomy ...

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I wonder about the exhibition of these paintings: What kind of reception out of voyeuristic interest is encouraged and what is covered up? Is it a scandal to contextualize Otto Mühl as a part of the commune movement, is it about the political scandal? But is the thematization of this scandal at all aimed at showing him as the perpetrator of violence that he was? Probably not. Does this form of emphasis on the political scandal also obscure something again? Where is the momentum of liberation? Again and again on the podium today, you held up Actionism as liberation, as anarchy — very nice. But doesn't that also obscure something? Namely, that the very fascism against which this movement wanted to defend itself had re-emerged — in violence,

in authoritarian formats, and that it is therefore precisely not about liberation?! I am also very surprised that you actually try to uphold the dichotomy of work and author and autonomy. The concept of autonomy in art comes from the 18th century, why are you trying to save yourself in this search today?

FUCHS: The accusation that if one understands Viennese Actionism as an art of departure, as an art of liberation in certain aspects, one sees this art uncritically, is an accusation that I would like to reject. The discussion of the Vienna Group and the Vienna Actionists shows that the actions led to a kind of lack of reflection, not only in the case of Mühl, but also in the case of Nitsch. The fact that something orgiastic was brought to the fore by excessiveness, by the attempt to eliminate reason and to help feelings break through, that is something quite questionable, which was also — and has to be — seen critically. I am not someone who is uncritical or affirmative towards Viennese Actionism, I would like to say that. That is important to me.

STIEF: I would like to object to the fact that we do not work critically, contextually, and discursively. Perhaps it's a matter — not only with each individual work, but in principle — of how one could do justice to critical claims or demands. And I believe that this would only be possible if one were to do a thematic exhibition in which one actually takes Otto Mühl as a theme. In a solo exhibition, in which one addresses in all openness the aspects of violence, the injuries, the assaults, and exhibits them together with the artworks — or even partially without them. How can you work through trauma within an exhibition? I'm not sure, though, whether cultural-historical institutions might not be better suited to such an endeavor than art museums. If it's about an abstract painting by Otto Mühl, with a short mediation text, how is reappraisal supposed to take place? We are simply talking about the wrong medium. You rightly call for a reappraisal of this subject, a reappraisal of history. I agree with you one hundred percent. But I don't know whether works of art should be used for this purpose. Far be it from us to prescribe or use the same narratives over and over again and not work critically. Alone: Where is there a forum where these topics can be dealt with in an art context?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: After all, this discussion is about strategies of exhibiting and showing. It's about demanding that the art historical view of the works also change. What happens here all the time is a defense of the works against attacks and criticism that concern other fields, but which are nevertheless connected to the genesis of these works. There is a lot of psychologizing. It is the trauma that is always addressed. What all the contributions agree on, however, is to allow a different view of Mühl's art as well, and to make the history of violence visible in the works themselves. I realize that it is difficult for collections to devalue their own works. And it's also a lot to ask: Let's rewrite the history of art and now, 50 years later, we find out that it wasn't all that great from an art historical perspective. But one can at least make an attempt to look at the works without the paradigm of liberation and try to see the opposite in them. We still have to endure the contradiction of the artist as criminal ...

FUCHS: Yes, but what is the alternative if they can't stand the contradiction?

AUDIENCE RESPONSE: The alternative would be to show an artist in a completely unheroic way and perhaps really deconstruct him.

FUCHS: Isn't your question aimed at not showing Mühl? Isn't that implicit in the argumentation you are developing here?

AUDIENCE RESPONSE: I wouldn't say that. I am in favor of not showing certain works. But I would like it if an exhibition were to devote itself critically to the problematic aspects of Mühl's work and look where it becomes uncomfortable. An exhibition that would also be prepared to say that at this or that point we might revise certain art-historical or art-scientific judgments from today's perspective.

WERNISING: Perhaps we can include another discipline in the discussion. There is Curatorial Studies, whose central questions are the politics and ethics of curating. What surprises me is that curating has so far been presented on the podium as the simple act of selecting a work, attaching a text to it, and exhibiting it. From the perspective of curatorial studies as

CURATORS IN CONVERSATION

we currently know it, it is precisely about contextualizing objects in the here and now. The positions of this discourse recommend that objects not be viewed solely from a narrow scholarly perspective, but that they be shown in an expanded way through other actors and perspectives. It follows that one must open this process of curating to other perspectives. An example: When museums today make an exhibition about racism, they tell the story of racism or colonialism. When actors affected by racism are involved in such an exhibition, in the process of curating, in the questions of “How to exhibit?”, then the narrative itself shifts. What these agents are telling is the story of resistance and empowerment. What I’m saying is that it’s not just that different perspectives are included, but that the very questioning of the topic shifts it due to the now diverse knowledge. If you have emphasized today that you are not ethicists, then you could nevertheless, or precisely because of that, include further expertise in the process of curating and exhibiting.

ROLLIG: I think that’s an enormously productive contribution from you. For me, it’s also very much about “Unlearning.” So, it’s about leaving out the learned gestures. We have learned how to exhibit and curate for decades, and now we reproduce — more or less consciously — what we have learned: the heroism, the rhetoric of liberation, and the rhetoric of emancipation that is often mentioned today. Just to say that Mühl was a sex offender, however, as was said earlier, allows the trap of voyeurism to snap shut. And that is tremendously problematic, because one never escapes this trap as soon as sexual violence against children, women, etc. is mentioned. One also immediately falls into the trap of the boulevard and thus supports and satisfies a certain voyeurism. So, if we leave it out — this obligatory sentence: “Mühl was a sex offender” — and really set out and look at the works once again from an art-scientific perspective, as well as one broadened by the perspective of the victims, and ask: Can I still read it like that today? Do I need to learn to read it differently? Maybe that’s how we can create an “Unlearning.” I don’t know if we could. But that would be a desideratum from my point of view, that is, something urgently needed.

— **Rainer Fuchs** is was at the time of this conversation director and exhibition director at mumok Vienna. Studied art history, history and philosophy in Graz and Vienna. Publications on modernism and contemporary art. Main fields of work: Conceptual and reception history of expressionism and classical modernism, linguistic-analytical and conceptual art movements since the 1960s.

— **Stella Rollig** is an Austrian arts and culture manager, author and journalist. Since January 2017, she has been general director and scientific director of the Belvedere Vienna. Prior to that, she was artistic director of the Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz for twelve years and additionally of the Stadtmuseum Nordico Linz since 2011.

— **Angela Stief** is an art historian, curator and cultural publicist and chief curator for contemporary art as well as director of ALBERTINA MODERN. From 2002 to 2013, Angela Stief was curator at Kunsthalle Wien. Since 2018 she has been curatorial advisor to Vienna Art Week; in 2020 she has accepted the visiting professorship for curatorial practice at the University of Linz.

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Adorno, Theodor W./Horkheimer, Max (1987): »Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente«, in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 5, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag.