

CURATING BETWEEN AFFIRMATION AND ACTIVISM

Reflections on the Panel *Curators in Conversation*

— by Susanne Wernsing and Susan Kamel

For the panel discussion at the Volkskundemuseum Wien, prominent museum and collection directors were invited to take a position on the question of whether or how Otto Mühl's works should be exhibited today, in view of the activist demands of the second generation of the "commune" at the Friedrichshof. Stella Rollig, the general director of the Belvedere Museum Vienna, Rainer Fuchs, the chief curator of the mumok Vienna, and Angela Stief, the chief curator of the Albertina modern, were represented. In view of recent exhibition projects at the mumok and the Künstlerhaus,¹ current exhibition practice with regard to Mühl was implicitly up for discussion.

The different positions of the discussants, which are reprinted in the present volume², will be counter-read in the following via museum studies discourses³ that both historically contextualize curatorial concepts and update them for dealing with problematic collections. These include questions of canon, authorities, and dissenting voices, of scholarly narratives and the knowledge of contemporary witnesses, and of artistic works and the politics of knowledge production. The current demands for multiperspectivity, participation and activism in the museum ultimately aim at a discourse on museum ethics and put the socio-political function of museums to the test. By broadening museum scholarly perspectives of predominantly white, patriarchally dominated

1 See also some of the more recent exhibitions in Vienna in which Mühl was also featured: Enjoy – The mumok Collection in Transition (<https://www.mumok.at/en/enjoy-die-mumok-sammlung-im-wandel>, accessed 10.08.2023); The Beginning. Kunst in Österreich 1945-1980 at Albertina Modern, shown until November 2020, see online: <https://www.albertina.at/albertina-modern/ausstellungen/the-beginning-kunst-in-oesterreich-1945-bis-1980/>, accessed 10.08.2023.

2 See p. 67 in the present volume.

3 Cf. relevant approaches here: Janes, Robert A./Sandell, Richard (Hg.) (2019): *Museum Activism*. New York: Routledge; Crawshay-Hall, Jayne (2021): »Collaborative Curating: Democratizing Inclusion«, in: *de arte Journal*. 56 (2-3), S. 4-28; Bayer, Nathalie/Kazeem-Kaminski, Belinda/Sternfeld, Nora (2017): *Wo ist hier die Contact-Zone?! Eine Konversation*, in: Bayer et. al (Hg.): *Kuratieren als antirassistische Praxis*. Berlin: de Gruyter, S. 23-47; Bystron/Daniela/Fäser, Anne (Hg.) (2022): *Das Museum dekolonisieren? Kolonialität und museale Praxis in Berlin*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

collections of the 'global North,' they critically engage the traditional canon, hegemonic narratives, authorship, and contexts of injustice in which works and collections were produced or acquired.⁴ In turn, this discourse⁵ demands that marginalized knowledge and actors be made visible, that contexts of violence, contradictions, and ambivalences be reflected, that histories of entanglement be addressed, and that curatorial voids be marked. In the meantime, curatorial strategies have been established on the initiative of activists that withdraw 'sensitive' images, objects, and works from public view in order to counteract the reification of persons and the display and reproduction of experiences of violence. In numerous international museums, trigger warnings have been established that point out potentially (re-)traumatizing exhibits and texts, thus enabling visitors to avoid the respective exhibition spaces and to refuse reception. Empty showcases and frames are another way museums currently draw attention to research desiderata, looted collections, and a lack of multiperspectivity and diversity.

Our reflections aim at making statements of the panel discussion productive for future exhibition concepts, in order to shift existing narratives on Mühl in the context of Viennese Actionism and to expand them by perspectives of actors:inside, who have been marginalized by the art market and museums so far.⁶ For a re-visioning of the work's interpretation,

4 A controversially debated example is the recent documenta15 in Kassel, which focuses on the history of colonial entanglements. See: Ruangrupa (ed.) (2022): *documenta15. Ein Handbuch*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag. This volume brings together approaches to critical museum and exhibition practices with a long historical lineage. In the field of art museums, these range from feminist critiques of art museums (Nochlin, Linda/Reilly, Maura (eds.) (2015): *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*. New York: Thames & Hudson) to the decolonization of art history. See: Grant, Catherine/Price, Dorothy (2020): "Decolonizing Art History," in: *Art History Journal*, 43 (1), pp. 8-66, online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-8365.12490>, accessed 10.08.2023.

5 Cf. Griesser-Sternschegg, Martina/ Sternfeld, Nora/ Ziaja, Luisa (eds.) (2020): *Sich mit Sammlungen anlegen: Gemeinsame Dinge und alternative Archive*. Berlin: de Gruyter. This work questions the "Western, white, and patriarchal interpretative authority" of museums (pp. 131–139, here p. 131) and explores ways to collaborate with communities or marginalized actors in shaping the museum canon and counter-collections. As the editors explain, this discussion builds on a long-standing critique of violent discursive structures in collections and archives, particularly concerning educational approaches and modes of presentation in museum theory. Cf. a publication from the same series 15 years earlier: Jaschke, Beatrice/ Martinz-Turek, Charlotte/ Sternfeld, Nora (eds.) (2005): *Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen*.

6 Pia (Hg.): *Das Museum im kolonialen Kontext. Annäherungen aus Österreich*. Wien: Czernin Verlag. Cf. on the question of hegemonic narratives: Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi: *The*

we pursue in particular postcolonial and institutional-critical discourses that reflect sexist, racist, and classist structures of violence in museums and develop from them approaches of critical, transformative curating.⁷

In the first part of the text, we discuss, in engagement with the panel discussion, the extent to which the refusal of the established canon and a strategic deprivation of images would enable us to make voids visible and develop alternative narratives. The authorship or authority of the museum as an institution is put up for debate in this section. In the second part, activist formats of the PEEK project are presented that respond to previous exhibition practices. In view of current demands for democratization and museum work critical of discrimination, these are among the necessary negotiation processes of cultural knowledge production⁸ in exhibitions. Finally, we summarize demands on museums that the PEEK research project, from our point of view, has elaborated.

Danger of a Single Story. TED Talk. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>, accessed 31.07.2023. And: Procter, Alice (2020): *The Whole Picture: The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums and Why We Need to Talk About It*. London: Cassell.

While Adichie illustrates through the literary canon how selective narratives distribute agency and victimhood, thereby reinforcing societal power structures, Procter exposes a European collection and representation regime within the museum canon that continues to obscure or relativize colonial contexts of violence.

Cf. a concrete example of an exhibition project: Wernsing, Susanne (2021): "Traps of Affirmation: Curating Colonial Collections and Racist Archives," in: Schölnberger, Pia (ed.): *The Museum in the Colonial Context: Approaches from Austria*. Vienna: Czernin Verlag.

7 Approaches to diversity-oriented organizational development focus on the three Ps—personnel, audiences, and programs—which Carmen Mörsch conceptualizes as canon, methods, and structures. For more on Carmen Mörsch's work, see footnote 8 of this text.

See also: Aikins, Joshua Kwesi/Gyamerah, Daniel (2016): *Options for Action to Diversify Berlin's Cultural Sector*. Online: <https://diversity-arts-culture.berlin/sites/default/files/2023-03/studiediversifizierungberlinerkultursektor.pdf>, accessed 31.07.2023.

A #MeToo debate on museum programs, personnel, and audiences has yet to take place. The only existing reference is a podcast, where the show notes document that museums are also shaped by people who have experienced sexual violence—sometimes in their workplaces: <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/02/13/museopunks-episode-42-a-museummetoo-moment/>, accessed 31.07.2023.

8 Particularly noteworthy is Carmen Mörsch's website, which offers a glossary, a collection of resources, and numerous examples of discrimination-critical museum work in the field of art: <https://diskrit-kubi.net>, accessed 08.08.2023.

These practices are applied in collaborative, anti-racist curating. They are part of an activist and decolonial museum practice that frames the museum as a political actor—one that not only exhibits societies, their arts, and cultures but also seeks to transform them (Crawshay-Hall 2021: 56:2-3, 4-28). These approaches are based on the fundamental assumption that the museum has never been neutral, cannot be apolitical, and has never been so.

I. COUNTER:CANON AND AUTHOR:ITY

Different positions were taken on the panel, both with regard to Mühl's art historical classification and current exhibition practice. The discussion can be contextualized in the museum studies debate of canon-counter-canon, authorship-authority, and reflects current demands on museums to differentiate again between historical work contexts, reception history, and current exhibition contexts.⁹ Framing Viennese Actionism as an "attack on authorities, by authorities," Stella Rollig highlighted its immanent contradictoriness and also called for an unconditional differentiation according to actors. Rainer Fuchs, on the other hand, counted Actionism "actually among the emancipative art movements" that represented rebellion and liberation from conventions, and thus the politicization of art and society in the 1960s/70s. Angela Stief characterized Actionism as a project of postwar modernism aimed at dissolving the boundaries between life and art, and highlighted the artists' self-injury and radical self-exposure. While Rollig identifies the contradictoriness of emancipation and authority as a constitutive moment of actionism and calls for it to be uncovered or deconstructed, Fuchs and Stief focus on it in Mühl's case primarily in the relationship of the criminal to the artist, thus separating work from author or life.¹⁰ This defense of Mühl's work argues with the artistic autonomy of the work, but significantly it refers to the early reception history of the 1960s, in which the Viennese Actionists found themselves exposed to attacks by a reactionary society that refused to come to terms with National Socialism. Accordingly, the defensive attitude still underlies the dominant narrative of liberation and resistance in exhibitions today.¹¹ On the other hand, it blocks the view of

9 Griesser-Stermscheg, Martina/Sternfeld, Nora/Ziaja, Luisa (Hg.) (2020): *Sich mit Sammlungen anlegen: Gemeinsame Dinge und alternative Archive*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

10 Cf. on the "commune" as a work: Gingeras, Alison / Webster, Jamieson (2018): "Portrait Otto Muehl. Communal Fantasy," in: *Spike Art Magazine*, Vol. 56, online: <https://www.spikeart-magazine.com/articles/portrait-otto-muehl?page=52>, accessed 10.08.2023.

Rainer Fuchs acknowledged in the panel discussion that Muehl "also actively encouraged this identification"

11 Accordingly, the 2021 exhibition at the Albertina modern stated in its wall text about Viennese Actionism: "[...] yet the diversity and subtlety of the artistic expressions deserve more nuanced attention than mere denunciation and rejection as perverse and pathological provocation. [...] Since the 1980s, Actionism—still relevant today—has been widely received internationally [...]"

constitutive and visible elements of contradictoriness¹², of authoritarian structures, acts of violence, and encroachment in Mühl's works, to which alternative perspectives of contemporary witnesses point.¹³

Including 'alternative' perspectives, on the other hand, is a decided concern of current emancipatory discourses in museum studies.¹⁴ In the panel discussion, Stella Rollig referred to the power of museums to act in view of the canonization of Mühl. With her authority and responsibility as an art mediator and museum director, Rollig addressed the possibility of expanding the historical canon of Austrian art history and "previous superlatives" with current, international positions: "[...] that I can say that I do not affirm this artist personality and its significance as it is written into art history." She thus refers to possible counter-collections.

For the controversial discussion of whether in this position a censorship or self-censorship of public institutions¹⁵ can be discerned, or whether the withdrawal of images would promote positions that refer to repressive power and violence in Mühl's work, there would be lessons to be learned from the institutional critique since the 1990s. By describing the museum here as a disciplinary institution, exclusionary procedures belong to the substance of knowledge production and hegemonic collection practice: "[...] every canonization produces exclusion, every knowledge

12 The analogy to the Dialectic of Enlightenment mentioned in the panel discussion – "One starts with the goal of an anti-authoritarian mediation of society and ends in the total terror of authoritarianism" (Fuchs) – implies a tipping point that ultimately denies the simultaneity of emancipatory intent and repressive domination – and thus the constitutive element itself.

13 This interpretation is also reflected in the 2021 exhibition at the Albertina modern, which implicitly assigns contradictory elements in Mühl's work to different creative phases. By exclusively presenting works created up until 1970 – that is, until Mühl's declared end of Viennese Actionism and before the founding of the "commune" at Friedrichshof – the curatorial concept represents less the ambivalence of the work itself than an unwillingness to make that ambivalence a thematic focus. In doing so, it avoids engaging with the work's inherent narrative of violence. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak, one could describe this strategy as "rewarded ignorance" – an ignorance that "does not disgrace but, on the contrary, stabilizes one's own position of power" (quoted in Castro Varela/María do Mar (2007): »Verlernen und die Strategie des unsichtbaren Ausbesserns. Bildung und Postkoloniale Kritik«, in: Bildpunkt. Zeitschrift der IG Bildende Kunst, Vienna, 4–7).

14 Kamel, Susan/Edenheiser, Iris/Sternfeld, Nora (2020): »Gegen die Wand? Was es heißt, sich mit Sammlungen anzulegen«, in: Griesser-Stermschegg, Martina/Sternfeld, Nora/Ziaja, Luisa (Hg.): Sich mit Sammlungen anlegen. Gemeinsame Dinge und alternative Archive. Berlin: de Gruyter, p. 131-139.

15 Rainer Fuchs simultaneously emphasizes that a critical stance toward currents of Actionism is necessary, but has so far been rarely represented in museums.

ignorance, every memory forgetting.”¹⁶ Activist scholars and artists have long and forcefully pointed out that degrading and triggering representations of violence from colonial racist contexts reproduce this violence in the exhibition space.¹⁷ Based on this, counter-images and narratives have been established and formats developed that strategically deprive images. Reflexively, institutions continue to reject the refusal of images today with the argument of censorship and prohibition of representation, demonstrating that curatorial selection processes are still considered scientific objectification, while perspectives critical of institutions and activists are devalued as ideological, subjectivized, ‘affected,’ or moral. In this context, pleas for the scientificity of museum work not infrequently advocate a de-emotionalization of the debate to which they themselves do not correspond. The charge of censorship, however, goes beyond this. In order to justify censorship, the real power relations between activist positions and collecting institutions or the art market must not only be ignored, but turned upside down. By connoting the critical, partial, and temporary withdrawal of images as “striking out” and “banishing,” “locking away” and “eliminating,” a potential for violence is attributed to the activist position to which the actors themselves were and are at the mercy. Implicitly, the assumed position of power denies the marginalization of a perspective that was only given voice and publicity within the framework of the PEEK project. And ultimately, it scandalizes and undermines a concern that not only aims to protect the victims, but can also provide impulses for museum practice and a scholarly re-visioning of Mühl's work. Accordingly, Stella Rollig countered the censorship argument in the discussion with the concept of institutional unlearning, which postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses to describe processes that deconstruct structural exclusion mechanisms in order to consciously *unlearn* privileges and power relations.¹⁸ “Giving up even the

16 Marchart, Oliver (2005): »Die Institution spricht. Kunstvermittlung als Herrschafts- und Emanzipationstechnologie«, in: Jaschke, Beatrice/Martinz-Turek, Charlotte/ Sternfeld, Nora (Hg.): Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen. Wien: Turia+Kant, p. 34-58, here p. 40.

17 Mörsch, Carmen/Piesche, Peggy: »Warum Diskriminierungskritik im Museum?«, Online: <https://www.lab-bode-pool.de/de/t/museum-bewegen/diskriminierungskritisch-arbeiten/warum-diskriminierungskritik-im-museum/?material=aufsatz-carmen-moersch-peggy-piesche>, last accessed on 08.08.2023.

18 Cf. Landkammer, Nora (2021): Das Museum Verlernen? Kolonialität und Vermittlung im Ethnologischen Museum. Band 1. Eine Analyse gegenwärtiger Diskurse in einem konfliktrei-

gesture of authority of the knowing voice,” for Rollig, requires making selection criteria and decisions transparent, marking curatorial questions, doubts, and voids, and thereby irritating dominant narratives.

II. MULTIPERSPECTIVITY, PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

With the research team of the PEEK project, a group of second-generation scholars and communicators has been constituted, who are established in the artistic-cultural field as filmmakers, authors, performers, and museum mediators. With their knowledge as contemporary witnesses and research in alternative archives of the municipality, whose accessibility has so far been personalized (and thus limited), they pursue research approaches for the re-visioning of Mühl’s work. These include negotiation processes with museums and gallery owners, discussion formats and dialogue offerings to the generation of Kommunengründer:innen, and scholarly conferences. Standing outside of public institutions and marginalized by actors in the art market, they thus represent an activist position. This is especially true for the group MATHILDA, established within the project, which emerged in 2019 with interventions in the exhibition spaces at Friedrichshof and was responsible for a research installation at the Volkskundemuseum Wien 2021. The events of the PEEK project hosted by the Volkskundemuseum Wien would thus be read as open spaces of unlearning and alternative knowledge production, which are still not established in curatorial methods of art museums. The PEEK project thus exemplifies how discourses of order in museums can be critically questioned and how museums can work together with communities and marginalized actors on museum canons, narratives and exhibition formats.

The effects of controversial negotiation processes can be traced in the panel discussion, in the course of which institutional positions opened up. For beyond the controversy over censorship, the research installation and the symposium of the PEEK project 2021 that framed it were evaluated as knowledge production in its own right-with relevance for both specialized scholarship and museums. With the exhibition, the

chen Praxisfeld. Wien: Zaglossus Verlag. See in particular p. 158ff for the concept of unlearning.

group not only demonstrated a scenographically and image-politically sensitive approach to Mühl's work, but also developed research-based film or audio formats and exhibition narratives that focused on elements of violence in Mühl's work. The fact that the required strategies of image withdrawal are not only about not showing Mühl's works in exhibitions, but also about reflecting on their potentially violent effect on visitors and protecting the personal rights of those involved, was demonstrated in particular by scenography and film installations. By concealing spatial elements and monitor positions from direct view of the corresponding videos and installing trigger warnings, visitors could choose to refuse or view the violent depictions without being at their mercy. The method of processing Mühl's films as contemporary documents and citing them in an aesthetic research installation demonstrates how irritating viewing regimes can open up work analysis to alternative readings. These include, on the one hand, scene selection and montages and, on the other, blur effects with which the victims of sexualized violence — as in the editing of Mühl's "Back to fucking Cambridge" — are anonymized and thus protected. While earlier indications by the activists concerning numerous other works¹⁹ have so far been ignored by museums and especially by gallery owners, the discussion panel conceded that the research installations provide new insights that cannot be circumvented. Future research could be oriented on the sharpened view of repression, assault, and humiliation. Previous exhibition narratives, which describe Viennese Actionism as a "transgression of content-related, material, and aesthetic boundaries,"²⁰ would thus be placed in the perspective of boundary violations that continue to have an effect on the actors involved today. With their knowledge, the thesis of radical self-exposure and self-injury in Viennese Actionism, which also claims validity for Mühl's actions before 1970, could be critically examined.

The controversial panel discussion and the exhibition thus demonstrate the potential of activist, transdisciplinary projects that not only

19 Already the legal conviction of Mühl in 1991 was followed by a controversial discussion about the problematic contexts of his artistic production. At the latest with Paul Robert's film *Meine keine Familie* (2013), it also became known to a wider public.

20 Exhibition text for the exhibition "The Beginning: Kunst in Österreich 1945-1980" at the Albertina modern, on view until November 2020, see online: <https://www.albertina.at/albertina-modern/ausstellungen/the-beginning-kunst-in-oesterreich-1945-bis-1980/>, viewed August 10, 2023.

bring perspectives critical of science and museum ethics to institutions, but also expertise in which future museum personnel have only been trained for a few years.²¹ Beyond established, expert discourses in museum work, these projects expand the museum canon with counter-collections and prove that the activist position is not primarily fed by protest, violation and refusal, but by the knowledge of alternative archives and marginalized contemporary witnesses. The refusal of Mühl's works in exhibitions and the established professional discourse currently aims at making these voices heard and filling voids until the institutionalized knowledge or "not-yet-knowledge" (Rollig) is expanded and manifested in concrete exhibition concepts. In this respect, the project discussed here can be located in the context of collaborative exhibition projects, artist collectives, and artistic positions that emerged from activist resistance. In these works, the exchange of established gaze regimes and new speaker positions enable the self-empowerment of actors who have experienced violence and discrimination. These include Natasha A. Kelly's film documentary "Milli's Erwachen" (2018), which confronted Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's eroticizing and exoticizing depictions of women through eight film portraits of Black women, as well as the exhibition "Whose Expression" (2022) at the Brücke Museum in Berlin, which invited activists to critically comment on the works of the Brücke artists and counter them with their own artistic positions.²² Ultimately, the curatorial method is based on nothing less than the new ICOM definition, which for the first time calls for "research" before "collecting" as the task of museums and explicitly states: museums „operate and **communicate ethically**, professionally and with the **participation of communities**“.²³

21 For example, some degree programs include training in anti-discrimination museum work, as well as imparting knowledge of museum ethics and legal discourses and practicing collaborative and activist museum work. See: <https://mmk.htw-berlin.de/studium/studium-auf-einen-blick/>, accessed August 10, 2023.

22 Byroum-Wand, Pegah/Bystron, Daniela (2022): »Brücke-Museum: Zwei Rückblicke – zwei Perspektiven. Das Pilotprojekt Reflexionen. Koloniales Erbe im Brücke-Museum«, in: Daniela Bystron, Anne Fäser (Hg.): Das Museum dekolonisieren? Kolonialität und museale Praxis in Berlin. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 199-214.

23 Emphasis by the authors, see online: <https://icom-deutschland.de/?s=Museumsdefinitionen>, viewed 12.03.2026.

III. DEMANDS ON MUSEUMS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the cited museum theoretical discourses and the projects of the PEEK project outlined in excerpts, we would like to summarize our reflections on the panel discussion in three demands:

First, the recognition of the perspectives of the second “commune” generation and the proactive involvement of its actors in the interpretation of works — not only as a source of subjective experiential history, but also as witnesses to the context of the production of works, which cannot be ignored. The knowledge of the so-called “commune” children is — far beyond their consternation — an expertise of activists who possess autonomous methods and formats of scientific-artistic expression and at the same time techniques of self-awareness, empowerment, and the reflected communication of controversial positions. Exhibitions about Mühl would thus have to be developed in collaborations.

Second, a critical re-visioning of the work and the testing of strategies that make visible or innovatively foreground the missing perspective. This includes methods such as the conversation processes and discussion forums established in the PEEK project as well as temporary interventions in existing exhibitions. The artistic-documentary research installations presented by the group MATHILDA at the Volkskundemuseum Wien in Vienna impressively demonstrate the impact of activist positions on both academically established hegemonic narratives and those represented by museums. We understand the invitation of the group by the mumok 2023 to the exhibition “ON STAGE — Art as Stage” as a sustainable result of the project and opening of the museums for the new discourses.

Third: The opening of the estate archives and an open discussion about the legal and economic rights to Mühl’s works, which includes the “Commune” founders, galleries and international collecting institutions as well as activists of the second generation. On the one hand, the protection of victims requires curatorially supported and publicly visible recognition of their experience of violence. On the other hand, a responsible handling of the estate required the disclosure of the income generated by Mühl’s works and the discussion of a charitable use among the actors.

One contribution to the panel discussion in the online chat has remained in our memory in particular. It was the question of whether Mühl's work remains relevant and attractive for collections and, in particular, for the exploitation logics of the art market, not despite but because of the visible violence and the assault on others. If museums today are once again called upon, as institutions under public law, to stand "not for profit" but "in the service of society," the responsibility would lie here to adopt a critical distance and counter-position to the art market. For with regard to power structures, not only Viennese Actionism was contradictory-an "attack on authority, by authority" (Rollig). The same is true for museums when they are framed as disciplinary institutions whose educational potential oscillates between "technologies of domination and emancipation." With the authority of the museum, the dominant liberation and protest narratives of Viennese Actionism could be opened up to current discourses and actors. In other words, if Viennese Actionism and the "commune" project at Friedrichshof ever had an emancipatory potential, what would be closer today to granting the second generation this potential for the critical re-visioning of the work? For exhibition practice and museums, this would mean replacing a hegemonic position that reproduces power and the effects of violence with (re)learning attitudes of solidarity that empower victims of repressive violence.

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