

# Doing Museum

## A Gender Reflexive Institutional Critique

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»I have always regarded museums as embedded within society, not beside or aside it.«

*Suay Aksoy (Former President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM))*

### 1. The Personal is Always Political . . .

In this article, I would like to reflect—in a reduced sort of way—on my personal experiences as a woman working in museums and contributing to the museological discourse. This article deliberately takes a personal position. This text is not neutral. It is subjective and associative. Even so, I will frame my experience in a somewhat larger context, since the personal is always political. For two-and-a-half years—being in my late forties now—I have been the director of the three ethnographical collections in Saxony, Germany.<sup>1</sup> I have noticed that being in such a position sometimes tends to make me a sort of a role model for younger female museum professionals. This feels awkward, but at the same time it entails an obligation to try to overcome some of the systemic problems we have in the museum field. I am aware that my perspective is very much that of someone who born, raised and ›moulded‹ in the Netherlands.

The lives and museum careers of women from the former German Democratic Republic, Poland, or the former USSR were different from those of women from the former Federal Republic of Germany or the Netherlands. When I am in one of the Baltic States, I predominantly meet female museum colleagues in important positions or in positions that used to be important. In ›my‹ museums in Saxony, most women in important positions have managed to combine a career and

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<sup>1</sup> These are the ethnographical museums of Dresden (Museum für Völkerkunde), Leipzig (GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde) and Herrnhut (Völkerkundemuseum).

motherhood. Until recently, the social conditions in Western Europe were different. Many Western European women needed to make a choice between career and motherhood and as a result, women were underrepresented in leading museum positions. However, this article will not, unfortunately, reflect on the differences between women working in museums in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, which I think would be an interesting topic for further research.

When I was the program director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, I was asked to do a photoshoot for *Vogue Germany*. I must say, it was a very interesting experience, but I still remember the awkwardness attached to it. Was I putting myself in an objectified and de-politicised, harmless box? What about my struggles concerning issues of representation and inclusion whilst I posed in a fashion magazine? What about my ideas about museums as ›contact zones‹ and ›third spaces‹ and did they ›go with‹ a new autumn collection? Most importantly, are men in similar positions faced with the same kind of questions and choices?

Two years ago, the artists Janine Mackenroth and Bianca Kennedy invited me to contribute to a book on German women in the arts. The book came out in 2020 and marked the centenary of the first admission of women at German art academies. The two artists invited a hundred women from the sphere of the arts, culture, galleries, and museums in Germany to present a work by a female artist in Germany. They especially asked the contributors to contextualise the work from a more personal perspective. Bianca Kennedy wrote that

»the book *I Love Women In Art* tried not only to draw attention to the still prevailing underrepresentation of female positions, but above all tried to become an art guide to map women artists and cultural workers in Germany.«<sup>2</sup>

I feel privileged and honoured to be one of those hundred authors. The interesting thing is, however, that the book hardly received any sincere media coverage, and I did not see it on the shelves of my trusted art-related bookshops in either Leipzig, Dresden or Berlin. How can that be? Was the book really so insignificant? Looking at the list of artists and contributors, I would think not.<sup>3</sup>

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2 On the website accompanying the book, see: <https://www.100womenartists.com/>

3 To mention just three examples: collector Julia Stoschek on a mixed-media installation by Monica Bonvicini from her own collection; Anette Hüpsch, director of the Kunsthalle Kiel on a watercolour by Miriam Cahn in the museum's collection; and Miro Zahra, director of the Mecklenburgische Künstlerhaus Schloss Plüschow on a collage from 1920 by Hannah Höch.

## 2. . . . Not so Long a Time Ago

This is not the place to identify the first female museum director, let alone the first female museum professional, but it is clear that women had already found their way into the museum field in the 19th century. However, it is equally clear that there were only a very few of them. At the famous *The Museums as Places of Popular Education* (*Die Museen als Volksbildungsstätten*) conference, organised by the Centralstelle für Arbeiter-Wohlfahrtseinrichtungen (Mannheim, 1903) there were many speakers discussing many aspects of the social role of museums with special emphasis on guided tours as a form of ›oral instruction‹. Among all these specialists from a variety of museums, there was just one woman, and she was Swedish (Luise Hagberg, curator at the Nordiska Museet). Despite the dominance of learned men (most of them professors) speaking about museum education, it was precisely in the field of museum education that women gradually found their niche as practitioners.

After the Second World War the number of educators in European and American museums underwent almost explosive growth. However, initially on the periphery of the institution, conceptual, organisational, and educational staff were usually located in the attic, the cellar or in an annex. Educators were—and often still are—mostly part-time and under-paid, supposed to do nice things with young children, and not expected to contribute to exhibitions and other curatorial projects. As late as Gerhard Bott's well-known *The Museum of the Future* (*Das Museum der Zukunft*, 1970), a female perspective on the future of museum was barely heard. Among the 43 contributors to the book there is just one woman, and she was a journalist, not a museum professional.

This gradually began to change. In retrospective, we can see a paradigm shift on how museum work was perceived in the course of the 1970s, first in the international discourse, such as articles in museum journals and discussions at conferences, and later in museum practice. With my Dutch background, I am proud to say that the Netherlands were among the first countries in Europe to implement the paradigm shift, on a national policy level as well as in individual museums. The paradigm shift involved a stronger emphasis on the social role of museums and as a consequence a stronger emphasis on educational activities for a variety of target groups, not just children. However, what was actually at stake was a re-definition of professionalism. The archetypical museum professional had always been the curator as a content specialist with a university education in art history, ethnology, zoology, and so far. From a professionalization point of view, the key to the new paradigm shift was the recognition of not just education but also documentation and conservation as genuine specializations with appropriate training and an appropriate position in the organisational hierarchy. New professionals entered the museum field, most of them young, most of them female.

### 3. The New—and the Latest—Museum Professionals

Did this development change museums? Hardly. Experiences differ across different countries, but a general observation is that even though most of the new professionals were female, the »long march through the institutions« (to get power to change)<sup>4</sup> was predominantly a male, not a female thing. Ambitious male educators became curators and eventually directors, female educators much less so. The upward mobility of female registrars, conservation specialists and restorers was certainly extremely limited. I think disillusion and frustration resulting from this stagnation is the cause of a multitude of publications on women and museums in the second half of the 1980s, culminating in a special issue of *Museum International* (1991) and the book *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Glaser/Zenetou 1994). I see a connection with the founding of the Guerrilla Girls (1985), a group of activist artists, art critics, and museum professionals, fighting against gender and racial inequality in the art world in general and museums in particular. I also see a connection with the emergence of women's museums, like the ones in Bonn (1981) and Aarhus (1982).<sup>5</sup>

Now, forty years later, the »new professionals« tend to be predominantly young and female.

In fact, a new type of professionals have entered the museum field with a profile that is less museum-specific but follows the new ways museums try to cope with the challenges of contemporary socio-economic reality. The new generation of specialists have functions in the sphere of marketing, membership, public programming, fund-raising and retail.

The very moment this new generation of female professionals found its niche in the museum field, the »old new« professionals took stock of their achievements. For example, Routledge published *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace* Baldwin/Ackerson 2017). In the words of Amy Levin, the book is »a bold study that corrects erroneous impressions that, because more women than men are entering the museum workforce, inequities have been banished.« (review on the website of Routledge) Looking at some impressive numbers, Baldwin and Ackerson mention that 46.7 % of the museum workforce in the USA are women. It is expected that this proportion will continue to grow into a »solidly pink-collar profession« (ibid. 2017, 2). Nevertheless, there is still a gender gap on the level of leadership. Although according to a demographic survey on art museum staff by the Andrew W. Mellon

4 The slogan was introduced by the German student activist Rudi Dutschke (1940-1979) as a strategy for changing society by infiltrating institutions of power (Huck 2020).

5 Women's museums are museums created by and for women to provide insight into history, culture and the arts from a female perspective. In 2008, the International Association of Women's Museums was founded (<https://iawm.international/>).

Foundation (2015) 60 % of art museum staff are female,<sup>6</sup> this applies to fewer than 50 % of directors (who also earn significantly less than their male colleagues).<sup>7</sup> This is better than in Germany, where 45 % of the directors of art museums are women. In this respect, art museums are doing much better than natural history museums, where only 23 % of the directors are female. On average, 40 % of the directors of German museums are women (at least in 2002).<sup>8</sup> In the Netherlands, the figure seems even lower at only 22 %.

In this context, it is interesting that at the moment, most of the major ethnographical museums in Germany have a female director. Viola König, the former director of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, wrote a lively account of the fates and fortunes of these directors and their (female) predecessors (König 2018). Apart from some general comments on the influence of authorities on museums' policies, König claims that female museum directors have to cope with more difficulties than their male colleagues. She points to the short tenure of many and the frustrating circumstances of their departure, noting a lack of loyalty on the part of the authorities or even downright hostility.<sup>9</sup>

I am not sure whether I share Viola König's observation, but in general, the question is relevant: is it worth the trouble? Why should we try to overcome the specific problems of being a female museum director? What contribution could—and should—female directors (and other staff) make? What are our responsibilities, and how to prioritize them?

#### 4. An Institutional Approach

One of the things I think about—perhaps because I am a female director—is how I can change the institutional framework of my museums. How can I change the system so that it evolves into an institution where staff, and especially female staff, feel valued and have opportunities to develop their potential? I feel it is not a coincidence that I work in an institution (that is the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, SKD) whose general director, Marion Ackermann, is a woman. With its fifteen museums, including the three museums of the State Ethnographical Collections,

6 Less than 1 % identify as neither male nor female. References to LGBTQI-status were not included in the survey.

7 But only 25 % of the directors of the largest art museums are female.

8 See: *Statistische Gesamterhebung an den Museen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland für das Jahr 2002*. This is one of the few reports that includes data about museum staff.

9 König mentions for example the early departure as director of Anette Rein and Clementine Deliss at the Weltkulturenmuseum (Frankfurt) and Annegret Nippa at the Museum für Völkerkunde (Dresden) (König 2018, 50).

the SKD is one of the major cultural institutions in Germany. I hope I can contribute to the SKD's evolution—or perhaps its return—to an institution where being a woman and having children is not an obstacle to making a career. For example, we talk a lot about the possibility of creating a better balance between work and private life. I hope we can bring new thinking to the institution, and I feel I am not alone with these wishes. Of course, this is not and should not only be relevant for women.

But there is not only the question of gendered leadership concerning the staffing policy—especially in an ethnological museums context. There is also the question of representation. One important task for institutions like museums is that they change and become politicized in such a way that they can face the challenges of tomorrow, especially in a post-pandemic (Covid 19) and Black Lives Matter context. Fundamental questions of who talks about whom need to be at the top of the institutional agenda. The goal should be diversification in gender, cultural identity, social background, education, and religious orientation. In this process, we as a museum are supported by the local office of the Mobile Counselling Team.<sup>10</sup> Since 2001, these offices have provided counselling to institutions that want to deal with right-wing extremism, racism, anti-Semitism, and other ideas of inequality and support the strengthening of a democratic everyday culture. As a professional structure, the counselling is aimed at all those who want to or have to deal with the aforementioned phenomena and wish to become active in strengthening a democratic culture, a kind of culture that I also want to reinforce as a director. In short, my staff and I want our museums to become more socially purposeful.

## 5. Woman to Go

»Socially purposeful« means that we reflect on issues of representation in our exhibitions and educational programmes. Allow me to share one example of how we work with artists »to engender vibrant, inclusive and more just societies« at the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See: <https://kulturbuero-sachsen.de/arbeitbereiche/mobile-beratung/>

<sup>11</sup> The quoted sentence is borrowed from the definition of the socially purposeful museum as developed at the Leicester School of Museum Studies: »A Socially Purposeful Museum is a dynamic, vital institution that has rich relationships with diverse audiences, that nurtures participatory and co-creative practice and is part of people's everyday lives, that seeks to foster progressive social values and, at the same time, is widely recognised as a site for dialogue and debate, that works collaboratively with a range of institutions within and beyond the cultural sector to engender vibrant, inclusive and more just societies« (Meijer-van Mensch 2017, 26–27).

It was a special privilege to host Mathilde ter Heijne's installation *Woman to Go* (GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, 17 May–11 August 2019). Mathilde ter Heijne (born in 1969) is a Dutch artist born in France and living in Germany (Berlin). As an artist she is primarily concerned with issues of identity and gender relations. The installation *Woman to Go* consists of postcard stands with postcards that can be taken away free of charge. Each postcard shows a historical photo portrait of a well-known or unknown woman (or a person born as a woman) on the front and a short biography of another woman on the back. By collecting the postcards, the visitor can make her/his own narrative.

The photographs were taken between 1839 (the beginning of photography with daguerreotypes) and 1930. The collection has grown since 2005. In her 2019 selection, Ter Heijne included photographs from the collections of the ethnographical museums in Leipzig and Dresden. The portraits remind us of people »who all fought for their individual goals in a world dominated by patriarchal society structures—a world in which women had no right to choose or own property, and being remembered was an exclusively white, male privilege,« as Ter Heijne states on her website.<sup>12</sup> Not by coincidence, we staged the exhibition 100 years after German women had obtained the right to vote (and to be elected) for the first time (19 January 1919). The portraits of unknown women remind us of the lack of interest of on the part of 19th-century ethnological photographers in the names and personal biographies of the persons portrayed, because »they were a means of typifying and classifying population groups through physiognomic characteristics, clothing, or jewellery« (as exhibition curator Stefanie Bach explains).<sup>13</sup> Thus the photographs of the unidentified refer to »the empty spaces in the archives and consequently to a one-sided historiography« (*ibid.*).

In the exhibition space we combined the installation *Woman to Go* with Ter Heijne's video *Assembling Past and Future* (2018). The work is a collaborative project with cultural workers and peace activists. In Ter Heijne's own words, the work

»...blends historical images and text (including those from the First International Congress of Women at The Hague, 1915) with statements and portraits captured a full century later, effectively blurring the usual boundaries between protagonists, places and periods of time.«<sup>14</sup>

In the words of Stefanie Bach:

»[T]he narrators are united by the desire and willingness to transform society through non-violent commitment. They are actively involved in processes of

12 See: [www.terheijne.net/works/woman-to-go](http://www.terheijne.net/works/woman-to-go)

13 Brochure of the exhibition *Woman to Go*, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, 17 May–11 August 2019.

14 See: [www.terheijne.net/works/assembling-past-and-future/](http://www.terheijne.net/works/assembling-past-and-future/)

social awareness and change and thus stand up against structural discrimination and categorization within society.«<sup>15</sup>

As such, the video work is an interesting complement to the postcard installation, being a more explicit evocation of »different ways of grasping history while exploring new opportunities and possibilities for peaceful coexistence between various communities«.<sup>16</sup>

In her work, Mathilde ter Heijne not only addresses problems of equality and social justice, but also points to the issue of representation in museum collections. All the persons portrayed on the postcard look right into the camera. Face to face with the person on the postcard, we are almost forced to ask ourselves: who is she, what is her name, what is her story? And, by extension, what were the creator of the portrait and the collector aiming at? What information was important to them and in what context were the portraits arranged? Ter Heijne not only hints at the museological biases, but also offers »an alternative approach and use of historical archive material«.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. (Re)Inventing GRASSI 2023

How do the reflexions and experiences mentioned before and the collaboration with artists such as Mathilde ter Heijne inform my role as a director in developing the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig?

With the project, (Re)Inventing GRASSI 2023, the museum seeks to reposition itself with innovative formats that hopefully guide us to a sustainable future as a museum. The focus lies on the concept of a Network Museum, connecting people, places, and time, and activating our diverse audiences. By 2023, the current permanent exhibition will be new in terms of concept, content and design. I hope that by that time we will not only have new galleries but will also have succeeded in re-inventing the institution as a whole.

Being a female director does not automatically mean that in our exhibitions the position of women in society—as in Ter Heijne's installation—is highlighted all the time. For me, the focus is much more on making people sensitive to »human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.«<sup>18</sup> Is this because I am

<sup>15</sup> Brochure of the exhibition *Woman to Go*, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, 17 May–11 August 2019.

<sup>16</sup> See: [www.terheijne.net/works/assembling-past-and-future/](http://www.terheijne.net/works/assembling-past-and-future/)

<sup>17</sup> Brochure of the exhibition *Woman to Go*, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, 17 May–11 August 2019.

<sup>18</sup> These are aims as expressed in the proposal for a new definition of the museum discussed during the General Assembly of the International Council of Museums at Kyoto September 2019:

a woman, or is this because I am inspired by the women that contributed to the museum revolution of the 1970s?

An example is part of the new exhibition titled *Just Listen! Our Stories in Your World!* This part will be about forgotten and unheard stories and narratives of an increasingly vocal, yet at the same time it will also focus on the unheard world population: children, adolescents and young adults. What can a museum like ours contribute to global protests such as *Fridays for Future*, education initiatives and children's rights, and how does all this relate to the collections? In this part of the museum, adults should simply start listening and start perceiving the world from unfamiliar perspectives and narratives. We want to present the content in this area in an inclusive, playful, gender-equal, but also, just as importantly, easily understandable way. Anti-racist curating and text writing will be a fundamental cornerstone. Children and young people are perceived as experts and a diversity of young voices are included.

In all our (Re)Inventing projects, the focus is on today's more than obligatory cooperation with diverse communities and with experts and actors beyond a classical museum context.<sup>19</sup> In this way, the GRASSI Museum seeks to open itself to a transdisciplinary way of working that deals more flexibly, quickly and innovatively with the major issues of a globalised world. New artistic perspectives will be represented, but also a clear positioning of our museum's more than ambivalent history in a global context of power.

The history of museums has been predominantly a history of men. Let the future be one of more women in positions of power, in positions of change.

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»Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing« (on the proposal; see also Thiemeyer 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Part of this process is also queering the narrative and adopting intersectional perspectives.

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