

In Search of the Feminist (in the) Institution

Stella Rollig in conversation with Juliane Saupe

Juliane Saupe: For twelve years now you have been the director of the LENTOS Kunstmuseum Linz as successor to Peter Baum, who held that office for thirty years. How would you describe the changes due to a feminist being in this position?

Stella Rollig: I was influenced by the politicization, the New Institutional Critique, and the Context Art of the late 1980s/1990s. I am not an art historian, but originally a critic. For many years of my career I worked outside of institutions. This may indicate something of my background. The changes when I took over as director were major ones, perhaps also because museum work on the whole and the art business have changed massively and continue to change.

JS: Your first collection presentation in 2004 was a strong feminist statement: for *Paula's Home* you chose exclusively female artists from the holdings. Women only—was that your motivation?

SR: After six months at LENTOS, I had grasped that the structures are marked by patriarchy. The concept for *Paula's Home* was developed quickly and reactively. The new LENTOS building opened in 2003, accompanied by an advertising campaign that referred exclusively to male artists in the collection. The slogans for LENTOS were “Andy’s Home” (Warhol), “Egon’s Home” (Schiele), “Gustav’s Home” (Klimt). The city’s art collection was represented as being wholly without women. Activists from *fiftitu%*, a network association for women artists and cultural producers, carried out a funny anti- or commentary campaign then—a survey of passers-by in front of LENTOS: “Name three women artists”. The deplorable results of this survey were published as a video. I took up the activist protest by *fiftitu%* as an impulse in the institutional work and asked the two museum curators, both of them women, to do a collection exhibition solely with women artists. This became an

extensive show, which we called *Paula's Home* as an homage to Paula Modersohn-Becker. This was also the first exhibition by the two curators, Elisabeth Nowak-Thaller and Angelika Gillmayr, where they were credited by name. That was not usually the case before I became director.

JS: Would you do that exhibition again today?

SR: No. It was a statement at a certain historical moment. As you probably know, the Centre Pompidou realized the same concept with *elles@centre-pompidou* in 2011, seven years later, but with a far greater public resonance...

JS: That was also an exhibition showing exclusively female artists from the collection. Could that be a concept of feminist curating: women-only exhibitions?

SR: I was asked about the concept of feminist curating primarily because of three exhibitions: because of my first exhibition in a museum, *hers. Video als weibliches Terrain / Video as a Female Terrain* in Graz in 2000, then *Paula's Home*, and finally the most recent LENTOS exhibition *Rabenmütter / Mother of the Year* in Fall 2015. The latter contrasted the manipulation of mothers through discrimination, political, social, and economic interests with a free, self-determined understanding of motherhood, to put it briefly. In my curatorial work those are certainly important projects, but I would prefer to discuss a broader approach to feminist curating.

JS: So not just women only, but rather...?

SR: I am interested in gender politics as an essential part of social politics, and I am interested in artistic positions that engage with issues of gender and society. The focus often stems from the artists being personally affected—although a queer sexual



identity is not a precondition for making queer art. In any case, we have worked together with many artists who represent feminist and/or gay positions, such as VALIE EXPORT, Mathilde ter Heijne, Ursula Mayer, Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová, Gilbert & George, Gil & Moti, EVA & ADELE. I would like to claim that feminist curating is distinguished by showing marginalized, resistive, deviating, other positions.

Following from this, what currently occupies me is the question of “showing”. I am aware that the act of showing constitutes a subject-object position. This is usually the blind spot of curating, and I admit I have not yet thoroughly investigated it.

JS: Would you say that an intersectional concept of feminism enters into your practice, that museum-critical theories, queer theory, or post-colonial theory also influence your work?

SR: Looking at my past, also in connection with the Depot in Vienna, I can agree with that. Today I would say that the way I proceed is very intuitive. I cannot read and mentally process theoretical and philosophical writings to the same extent as in the past. I regret that, but after long days with lots of administration and communication, in the evenings I prefer to read literature rather than an academic book. My decisions and my practice come from a political stance. I know, without having to provide copious footnotes, how I would like our society to be—and the way it appears today does not correspond with my ideal.

The artists I work with and whose work, world views, and aesthetic language I would like to give a platform and an audience, stand for openness, diversity, and self-determination, which I wish for all of us, for myself, and for our society. Freedom from fear, too, and courage—fear is constantly overused today to legitimize exclusion and hostility. I often see freedom from fear in the artistic positions of gay artists, women artists, artist-couples. In other words, in the work of people whose self-understanding is different from that of the male master artist. For example, EVA & ADELE, who are often falsely perceived as flamboyant, as apolitical, or as an event. The way they thwart all expectations regarding gender identity, even queer identities—which of course have their own stereotypes—is wonderful, and courageous, too, since they are no longer young. They risk something, just like Gil & Moti, gay Jewish artists, who go into Palestinian territories and offer

cooperation. I am also interested in these artists, because their work additionally includes style, an extreme styling of their external appearance, with which they expose themselves to unpredictable reactions.

JS: So your policy for inviting artists is one of your feminist strategies. You also invite artists, couples, or collectives to intervene in the collection exhibition. Are there any other measures you take to proceed against the white, male genius idea that still predominates in museums and in the art market?

SR: On the whole, this view is simply not strengthened. That doesn't mean that no male, white, heterosexual artists can be exhibited in LENTOS. We also make use of self-controlling, by the way: gender-budgeting is an important instrument, gender reports—as far as purchases are concerned we are doing quite well with gender equality, not only in terms of the number of female artists, but also the amount of money, which is the more difficult part, as we all know. Yet despite all this, we are conscious of the fact that we have shown more major solo exhibitions of male artists than of female artists in the last twelve years.

JS: What is the reason for that?

SR: The reason is the game rules and compulsions imposed on the institution from the outside. These involve a set of interests on the part of politics and the public, which are expressed in a (literally) “horrorifying” number: visitor statistics. This is an instrument that is tremendously powerful in its destructiveness, and it can be used to make people small and discouraged—think about attacks in the media. Now male “master artists” are still privileged in the market and in the whole art business, and it is mostly men who are famous. Of course, this has an impact on the visitor statistics and conversely on programming decisions.

The institution has an inherent strength of its own. You push against it, you want to pull it to your own utopias, and you can even move it a bit. But at the base of its essence, the institution is conservative and far more resistant to change than you initially thought.

JS: That brings us to the problems of the everyday practice of a feminist museum directorship that I want to ask you about.





SR: There are problems. One of them is that, in my understanding, feminism and representation are opposed to one another. I am not really interested in providing a stage in the art museum, upon which the class, educational, and economic differences of a hierarchical understanding of society are celebrated, and where a so-called elite affirms itself. I am not interested in promoting that for the museum, nor for myself personally. And that is not easy, because I am not the director of an off-space or a project group; LENTOS is a large institution. It was built as a flagship for the city of Linz and arouses very specific expectations of glamour, representation, and affirmation. The rulebook of representation is anti-feminist. For me, feminism means using a minoritarian standpoint to be able to act more freely.

JS: Something I wonder about again and again is whether there can even be an institution that operates in a feminist way. Can there be a museum with a feminist agenda that is not the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, also not an off-space, but rather a museum, such as LENTOS, for example?

SR: I wonder about that, too—and tend to think that institutional action and feminist thinking have to be in friction and learn from one another in

an ongoing process, but that a reconciliation will not take place until some point in eternity. The bad news is: there is no feminist institution. And the good news: but there are feminists in the institutions.

*The conversation was conducted in January 2016.
Translation: Aileen Derieg*

Captions

1 <hers> *Video as a Female Terrain*, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, 2000. Photograph: private.

2, 3 *Paula's Home*, LENTOS, 2004. Photo:

4 VALIE EXPORT, *Time and Countertime*, LENTOS, 2010. Photo: LENTOS/MaschekS

5 Gil & Moti, *Totally Devoted To You*, LENTOS, 2012. Photo: LENTOS/MaschekS

6, 7 Mathilde ter Heijne, *Any Day Now*, LENTOS, 2011. Photo: LENTOS/MaschekS

8 EVA & ADELE, *Their room in the collection*, LENTOS, 2013. Photo: LENTOS/MaschekS

9 Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkáčová, *Their room in the collection*, LENTOS, 2013. Photo: LENTOS/MaschekS

10, 11, 12 *Rabenmütter / Mother of the Year*, LENTOS, 2015. Photo: LENTOS/Reinhard Haider

Stella Rollig has been the director of LENTOS Kunstmuseum Linz since 2004, and since 2011 of NORD-ICO Stadtmuseum as well. She studied German literature and art history at the University of Vienna. She is a writer and curator who has taken teaching assignments in Graz, Linz, Munich and Banff/Canada. As Federal Curator for Visual Arts, in 1994 she founded Depot. Art and Discussion in Vienna. She is the author of numerous publications. She lives in Linz and in Vienna.

Juliane Saupe is a cultural producer, cultural scientist, and writer. In 2016, she will complete the Master's program Critical Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. She is a co-founder of Open Studio Days Istanbul, and co-curator of Prosperous Poison. On the Feminist Appropriation of the Austrian Unconscious (2015/16) at mumok, Vienna, as well as co-editor of the accompanying publication (2016).