

# Frieze

## What Are Museums For? This Frankfurt Institution Wants to Rethink Museums Altogether

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August 27, 2019

In curator Susanne Pfeffer's latest, 'Museum' speaks to our moment of funding scandals, museum protests and social media outrage

Following a much-lauded show of Cady Noland, Frankfurt's Museum of Moderne Kunst's 'Museum' boldly presents itself as an effort to rethink the potential of the art institution itself. MMK's director and the show's curator, Susanne Pfeffer, proposes, in a minimalist exhibition statement, that its spaces might be mobilized in tandem to help unpack 'the current liberties of art and thus of the present museum' as well as to 'aid in the endeavour to conceive of – and make perceivable the Other'. 'Museum' is not intended as a reiteration of institutional critique – but an attempt to affirmatively, if occasionally transgressively, rethink its possibilities.

'Museum' speaks to our specific historical moment – characterized as it is by the Sackler museum funding scandal, the Extinction Rebellion protesters recent 'Die in' staged at the entrance of Tate Modern and Andres Serrano's latest exhibition 'The Game: All Things Trump' (2019), a satirical museum of absurdist memorabilia and imagery relating to the US president. Although such specific politics are not referenced outright, it is clear the show is speaking to them. This is a museum reimagined on the verge of Brexit, at a time of refugee crisis and ecological disaster, a museum after social media that must speak to fake news and Trumpist racism and hate: a museum which must take art's liberties seriously.

The three vast and architecturally playful floors of MMK, as well as the ground floor of the neighbouring Zollamt space, enable Pfeffer to present something close to a biennial-style mega-show. It brings together 36 artists – mostly European and American, with a few exceptions – stretching from the old (neo-avant) guard (Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, Blinky Palermo and Sturtevant) to those of a younger generation including Ryan Gander, Anne Imhof, Oliver Laric and Cameron Rowland. Pfeffer made her name curating a trilogy of ambitious thematic group shows at Kassel's Fridericianum – engaging with art and life post-Internet and at a time when both nature and personhood could be understood as in crisis. These interests run through 'Museum' – threaded together via the questions of art's institutionalism and the museum's purposes and potentials – with an investment in activism, protest, racism and Otherness.

Skipping between large-scale video projections, assemblages and installations, 'Museum' moves back and forth between historical moments, between works that operate outside of the white cube and those that attempt to transform it from within, between quietly or playfully conceptual works and more heavy-hitting political ones. One enters 'Museum' with the gentle force of an artificial breeze – Gander's *Looking for something that has already found you* (*The Invisible Push*) (2019). More subtle than the gale-like effect of his similar piece at

DOCUMENTA 13 (2012), his intervention here provides the perfect introduction – quietly overturning our expectations of the consistent, artificial and conservative space of the museum.

In the second room the tone shifts precipitously and we're invited into the magnetic and rhythmic chanting of Victoria Santa Cruz's *Me gritaron Negra (They called me black)* (1978). This large-scale black and white video projection shows the author, Afro-Peruvian activist, composer, poet, choreographer and performer retell, in poetic form, her first experience of childhood racism, against the chanting of a collective who sing and dance with her in a courtyard. 'They yelled at me, black, black, black!' she sings as the song crescendos, and an internalised experience of racism transforms into powerful resistance.

Sound and dance-based practices emerge as para-sites where the museum might be reimaged: sounds bleed through interstitial architectural spaces and force artworks to overlap and converse. The disco tune of Sylvester's 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' takes us from Lima and decolonisation in 1978 to the same year in Margate, with Tracey Emin's *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995). Emin's confessional recount of a failed teenage dancing competition where local boys chanted 'Slag! Slag! Slag!' at her accompanies super-8 footage of the seaside town, and ends with Emin dancing triumphantly around a white cube gallery space. One can only presume the slightly clunky thematic buttressing of the Santa Cruz and Emin was not meant cynically, yet if it were, it might have suggested the spectacular and melancholic decline from powerful revolutionary female subject to confessional and individualised identity politics.

An engagement in feminism, racial politics, activism and performance provides a clear strength of the show. Alongside installations that examine what it is to be an artist by Laurie Parsons and Pamela Rosenkranz, a large wall projection of Adrian Piper's *Adrian Moves to Berlin* (2007/2017) does a much more profound job than Emin – neatly housing the somatic politics of race, sex, otherness and neo-liberalism in the autobiographical. It depicts Piper dancing on the streets surrounding Alexanderplatz to Berlin house music of the early 2000s via her inconspicuous headphones. The artist – utterly engrossed in her own improvised dance, surrounded by pedestrians, trams and building sites – made the work as a homage to her new hometown, having left the US and her academic life because of enduring decades of racism and sexism. Piper's piece is not only about Piper – but about work, reunification and the radical possibilities of dance. Typical of the rich, discursive dialogues characteristic of the show, directly below one floor down, Piper's work *The Mythic Being* (1973) presents us with clips of the artist as a very young woman talking to camera about dressing in drag, and the need for art to move to the street during the political backdrop of the '70s.

If the museum is productively 'othered' and the Other rendered visible via the inclusion of works that interrogate sexism, racism and class, then 'Museum' also continues Peffer's previous curatorial concerns, offering a deliberate decentring of the human via the animal, post- or inhuman – from both a historical perspective and a speculative, futural one. The loud meows from Broodthaers' *Entretien avec un chat* (Interview with a cat, 1970) echo around the second floor, relaying the artist's attempt to discuss the state of post-conceptual art with a feline. Humour provides the same kind of transgressive possibilities as dancing – just as the idea of a cat causing havoc in the museum plays a simple conceptual undoing of its norms and conventions. Next door, the Disney-like cartoon sketches and CGI manga figures of Laric's large-scale colour video projection, *Untitled* (2014-15) offers a disturbing take on human-animal relations in a future in which we are neither.

Other works effectively interrogate and expand both the conditions of viewing, the privilege of the visual and the intersection of art and academic culture – even providing a potential meta-critique of the exhibition’s own agenda and proposals via a focus on specific political histories and recent events. The poignant and newly controversial songs of The Smiths and Morrissey blurt out loudly on the second floor – soon revealed to be the soundtrack to Tony Cokes’s excellent video projection *Notes from Selma* (2011) – foregrounding, even before we are confronted with the work, the ambivalent and mutable spaces of aural politics and musical memories. Cokes’s projection offers his characteristic remaking of the video-essay without the visuals. Bold white font relays an essay by the collective Our Literal Speed examining the shift in activism and its visual culture, from the early days of the civil rights movement which were relatively less dependent on the visual imaginary, via the televised brutality against African-American protesters in Selma, Alabama in 1965, to the networked and image-saturated culture of the present. At the end of the piece, excerpts of Morrissey’s ‘Disappointed’ also appear on screen and lyrics and theory are montaged, just as the radical and the grotesque now find a perplexing home together in Morrissey’s *Viva Hate* (1988).

On the whole ground floor of the Zollamt, Rowland’s *D37* (undated but recently shown at Museum of Contemporary Art in LA) speaks most directly to ‘Museum’s’ themes and questions. A selection of labelled and tagged bikes lean against two walls, an abandoned buggy with an airport label, and two wind blowers dumped in the middle of the space.

Part-archive, part-post-apocalyptic scene, the installation initially gives little away, but is accompanied by a lengthy critical essay by the artist explaining the police’s abuse of asset forfeiture in the USA – which essentially involves the seizure of property from people (from mostly poorer and Black neighbourhoods) which might have been involved in a crime but for which no person has been charged – and the sale of which provide funds for the law-enforcement agencies. Here the objects displayed aren’t readymades, but evidence.

When originally exhibited in LA, the work also implicated MOCA in this racial politics – via the context of slum clearing projects and real estate: D37 is the name of the area in LA upon which MOCA was built after the mostly immigrant and lowly paid residents of the neighbourhood were forcibly removed. What does its relocation to Frankfurt – the financial capital of Europe – and presentation in a former customs office do to Cameron’s work and to Pfeffer’s ‘museum’? If it takes us back to the Nazis’ confiscation of Jewish property prior to the Holocaust, it also speaks volumes to the present of its new site, and the German far-right’s criminalisation of refugees and immigrants.

What it means to open up the freedoms and rights of an artwork – what models of radical othering, and, indeed, what Others the museum might truly be capable of rendering visible – are questions that seem unlikely to be resolved by any one exhibition. Yet in certain moments ‘Museum’ almost manages it, presenting what can only ever be promised as a work-in-progress or a glimpse of future hopes and political imaginations: a museum of the present.

*Museum runs at Museum MMK für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt until 16 February 2019.*