

*Marina Vinnik*

BAUHAUS UNIVERSITY WEIMAR, WEIMAR, GERMANY

ORCID: 0000-0001-8338-7586

## Feminist Museology Applied to the Leipzig Museum of Arts (The MdbK)

### Abstract

In this article, I explore how museums navigate the contradictions between contemporary discourses and the presence of colonial European art. Museums as sites of education and collection of items have been approached critically by various feminist artists and activists in recent decades. And in response, museums have begun to hold exhibitions that embrace feminist narratives. Therefore, I connect these peculiarities at a museum in former East Germany and its attempt to appeal to these discussions. For my case study I have chosen *das Museum der bildenden Künste* (further shortened to the MdbK) in Leipzig.

I explore how local and global agendas play out in current exhibitions, how and by whom feminist frameworks are applied to its collection, and what dynamics can be seen in its permanent and temporary exhibition projects. For the purposes of the “Connecting Eastern Europe and Latin America” project, I focus on the exhibition entitled *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism* that took place at the MdbK from 1 December 2022 to 26 March 2023. I ask the following questions: Do these temporary projects educate the museum’s team and challenge the narratives that are being told through the permanent exhibitions and publications? Do those temporary exhibitions transform the museum’s general narrative? I turn to how large exhibitions, which are curated by the core museum’s team, present gender, race, (in)justice, German nationalism, and equality.

**Keywords:** feminism, museum, East Germany, Leipzig school of painting, socialism, neoliberalism, Olga Costa, Latin America, Jewish identity, Mexican modernism, woke-washing.

## What is Feminist Museology?

At the beginning of the 20th century, British suffragettes slashed paintings in London galleries and museums, stressing the fact that female nudity and beauty were on display while real women were suffering in British prisons for their political activism.<sup>1</sup> Almost a century later, activists continued to challenge art museums. One of the most famous interventions came from the Guerilla Girls: *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met Museum?* (1989). They posed this question as relevant to all the museums of visual arts that position themselves in the Western museum discourse.<sup>2</sup> Most visual arts museums recreate art history through the names of great male artists and their “patrilineal chronological tendency” rather than “matrilineal resonance”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they demonstrate an overwhelmingly male presence in every epoch and style while, at the same time, having quite a few female bodies on display. Therefore, a museum-goer is perpetually put in the position of a voyeur encountering naked female bodies represented by male artists.

While efforts have been made by a number of museums, finding female artists in museums of visual arts is often still difficult (Fig.1). Art museums, submerged in the logic of late capitalism, encourage their visitors to structure their visit around famous masterpieces, commodify the museum experience through Instagram pictures, and later purchase (in the museum gift shop) the same masterpiece as a magnet, poster, or postcard. This logic of museums and art collections makes it especially difficult to criticise or restructure the past. After all, museums are etymologically the home of the muses (feminine creatures). And their institutionalisation began as “cabinets of curiosities” or private aristocratic picture galleries.<sup>4</sup> Today, many features of such galleries have survived, and so visual arts museums are in fact deeply embedded within a patriarchal worldview. In order to generate a meaningful educational change in times of social tension, many museums (as well as many public and private institutions these days) are attempting serious processes of self-criticism and self-restructuring. However, vestiges of the past and the underlying logic of the institution often remain.

Scholars and curators who advocate for transformation call for the theoretical reframing of what we see as “progress” or “typical representation”. Here,

1 For more: L. Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London–New York, 2002.

2 Though, it is important to stress that there are some attempts to subvert the existing power structures and at the same time to preserve a museum as an institution. Such as the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC. See: <https://nmwa.org/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

3 Terms coined by Clare Johnson. See: C. Johnson, *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

4 A.K. Levin, “Unpacking Gender: Creating Complex Models for Gender Inclusivity in Museums” in: *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, eds. R. Sandell, E. Nightingale, Taylor & Francis, 2012, p. 156.



**Fig. 1.** Elisabeth Sirani, *Cupid and Psyche*, oil on canvas (c. 1660), Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig, photo: MdbK.

feminist theory, with all of its plurality and open-ended approaches, could be seen as a tool to restructure the traditional museum.<sup>5</sup> In the opinion of Hilde Stern Hein, feminist theory is especially useful for three reasons: (1) it challenges universalising theories that usually are perpetuated by, and benefit, men, (2) feminist theory addresses the problematic binary of subject/object divide that is frequently the core of museums' collections, and (3) it confronts the Western celebration of an autonomous individual opening up the rigid systems of classification.<sup>6</sup> Feminist theory can provoke new questions, like: Is it possible for the museum to focus not on the masterpiece but instead on the "mistresspiece" or on a variation thereof?

Darlene E. Clover and Kathy Sanford repeat Griselda Pollock's question from 1988: "Are feminism and the museum, as we know them, compatible at any level?"<sup>7</sup> Australian feminists offer a set of guidelines to examine any

5 H.S. Hein, "Redressing the Museum in Feminist Theory", *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2007, 22, no. 1, p. 29.

6 Ibid., p. 32.

7 D.E. Clover, S. Williamson, "The Feminist Museum Hack as an Aesthetic Practice of Possibility", *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 2019, 10, no. 2, pp. 143–159, p. 64.

given museum and see the structures defining it. Clover and Sanford see museums mainly as educational spaces and “pedagogical contact zones”<sup>8</sup> and aim to redefine the narrative in order to create change within the museum’s logic. As the centrepiece of a feminist intervention at a museum, researchers focus on visual, textual, and spatial analysis, analysis of permanence and temporality, critical visual literacy disruption, and agency.

For my own case study, I decided to build upon these guidelines in order to poke and prod the exhibitions at the MdbK. In 2022, I taught a seminar titled “An Attempt of Feminist Museology” at the University of Leipzig. During the seminar, my students and I engaged in a critical feminist analysis of the MdbK’s collection and exhibitions. The questions that we wanted to explore were:

- Are there any specific masterpieces central to the collection?
- What is the ratio of male/female artists?
- Is there any diversity among the curators at the museum?
- What is at the centre of the permanent collections and what is discussed in the temporary exhibitions?
- Whose works are stored in the archive?
- From whose collections do the museum objects come?

These questions then focused on many of the points that Clover and Sanford raised, but also on the historical and structural framework of the MdbK itself. Thanks to the students,<sup>9</sup> we were able to count all the works made by women artists and move forward with a critical analysis. In a report written by Janine Büttner and Genia Gröne, we can see that simply by counting the number of female artists in the museum, a fairly astounding discrepancy emerges. The museum has three floors and the numbers look as follows:

First floor (15th–18th century art):

Female artists	Female representations	Artworks made by men
4	73	162

Second floor (19th century art):

Female artists	Female representations	Artworks made by men
2	42	145

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to all the participants of the seminar: Adam Salome Lisa, Buchmann Lara, Büttner Janine, Carr Smilla, Gröne Genia, Hauswaldt Ricarda, Heilmann Emma Charlotte, Hellwinkel Arne, Herzog Miriam, Hoffmann Linda Carolin, Janicke Vanessa, Klawitter Malvine, Raum Franz Valentin, Rauser Anna, Reiter Claudia, Schulze Paulina, Ullrich Lena, Weise Marie, and Wolff Selma.

Third floor (20th–21st century art):

Female artists	Female representations	Artworks made by men
11	36	142

Indeed, despite the fact that many museums have made efforts to ameliorate this discrepancy, that ratio is still quite typical in visual arts museums and especially among old collections. In the MdbK, visitors are also offered a selection of outstanding male figures (e.g., Lukas Cranach, Max Klinger, and Werner Tübke, among others) and masterpieces (e.g., *Lebensstufen* (1834) by Caspar David Friedrich). These figures and masterpieces become the centrepiece of the museum experience. Of course, the museum makes exclusions not just based on gender, but race, disability, and class as well. Nevertheless, feminist scholars and curators invite us to rethink this heritage and the museum structure itself in the light of recent feminist and post-colonial theories.

## Museum of Painting from the East German context

As a city museum of visual arts, the MdbK is a public institution in Leipzig and is funded mostly by the city budget.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, its collection comes from various sources. Part stems from the original museum founded in Leipzig by the local *Kunstverein* (Artists' Union) in 1848 (the first exhibition took place eleven years earlier in 1837). The artists who initiated this process were a part of the Dresden Artists' Union, but they decided to create a separate Leipzig-based exhibition and collection. The History of the MdbK from a 1987 publication made by Dieter Gleisberg<sup>11</sup> stresses the connection of the *Kunstverein* with the industrial and financial structures in Leipzig in the 19th century. In other words, the connection relied on the railroad industry that was mainly building a railway between Leipzig and Dresden, the important trade industry in Leipzig, but also prominent publishing houses such as a publishing house of Philipp Reclam and Otto Wigand (where the first copy of Marx's *Kapital* was published).<sup>12</sup> Publishing houses in Leipzig in the middle of the 19th century were engines for the swift industrialisation of the city.

One of the key publishing houses was established by Friedrich Arnold Brockhaus, and later inherited by his sons Friedrich and Heinrich Brockhaus. The Brockhaus family played a crucial role in the history of Leipzig. Their publishing house survived two wars and in the 1940s it was split between

10 See: <https://MdbK.de/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

11 D. Gleisberg, *150 Jahre Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, 1837–1987: 150 Jahre Sammeln zeitgenössischer Kunst; Ausstellung zum Jubiläum d. Museums d. bildenden Künste Leipzig*, Leipzig, 1987, p. 4.

12 Ibid., p. 6.

the East German *Brockhaus* and West German *F. A. Brockhaus* publishing houses. At the same time, another key figure for the museum's collection appeared as one of the original founders Maximilian Speck von Sternburg. The GDR publication defines him as "*neureichen*" (nouveau riche).<sup>13</sup> Notably, these families still play an important role in the life of the city of Leipzig today.

For that first exhibition in 1837, the *Kunstverein* already had works by such German superstars as Caspar David Friedrich and Johann Christian Clausen Dahl. Before 1914, the collection had already had over 300 artists from the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Furthermore, entire collections from Adolph Heinrich Schletter, Christian Heinrich Demiani, Moritz Eduard Mayer, or Alexander Schmidt–Michelsen were donated to the museum at the end of the 19th century. In between the two wars, the MdbK lost a number of artworks, due to the destruction of the city, but also due in part to the infamous "Degenerative Art" confiscation process carried out by the Nazi government.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, through the Giepel Foundation, the MdbK's collection acquired some paintings that were previously in the possession of Jewish families and were unlawfully confiscated. The initial museum's building was destroyed during the Second World War in 1943 by the British air force, but most of the collection survived. In the post-war period, the MdbK became one of the highlights of the newly-founded German Democratic Republic. Without a permanent building, the museum's collection was exhibited in several locations throughout the city of Leipzig. After 1952 and until the collection's relocation to its modern building in 2004, the MdbK had been located in the building that is now the *Bundesverwaltungsgericht* (the Federal Court) in Leipzig. This location was right next to the main Leipzig Academy of Arts, the *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst* (the HGB).

As a Leipzig-based museum, the MdbK has always been keen to emphasise the local art scene. However, some scholars argue that it changed drastically after 1990 and that the museum, like other structures in the GDR, have transformed due to the swift neoliberal turn in Germany. As April Eisman points out: "The MdbK's shift in focus to artists well-known in the West was largely the result of new staff, most of whom were themselves from the West and had little knowledge of East German art".<sup>15</sup> That might be true to some extent regarding major exhibitions, but in regards to the museum's permanent exhibition politics, the collection remains deeply rooted in the local context. As in many cases, the history of the museum's works is quite complex and has many ruptures and rewritings. At the same time, however, due to its significant size, there are many opportunities for significant improvement.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> <https://MdbK.de/ausstellungen/provenienzforschung/> [accessed 01 July 2023].

<sup>15</sup> A. Eisman, "Curating Out the Socialist Alternative" in: *Curating (Post-)Socialist Environments*, eds. P. Schorch, D. Habit, Bielefeld, 2021, p. 86.

Interestingly, the fact that the MdbK once had a strong socialist agenda is almost invisible today. Although the museum is not as openly anti-communist as other museums in Leipzig, where communism and Nazism are equated, it nevertheless decontextualizes its own history in a subtler way. Once a museum-goer visits the MdbK, they are immediately bombarded by references, some of which are obvious, while others require serious investigation or in-depth knowledge. For instance, at the museum's entrance stands an enormous sculpture by the Leipzig artist Max Klinger. The statue is *Beethoven* (1902), commemorating high culture, grand times, and a noble past. Near Klinger's statue, there is a large mosaic by Stephan Huber *Stiftermosaik* (2004), produced specifically for this museum opening and displaying the gathering of people that are crucial to the history of Leipzig. In its museum rendition, this mosaic is perhaps the most telling item marking the neoliberal turn in the city's history.

The only two women that are present in the mosaic amongst 13 people (that are named) are: Charlotte Speck von Sternburg (1787–1836) and Marion Bühler–Brockhaus (born 1944). The men in the mosaic, directly at the entrance of the museum, are its significant contributors. For instance, there is a portrait of Caspar David Friedrich as well as a portrait of Heinrich Brockhaus. Interestingly, the people commemorated by this mosaic while they were still alive are Marion Bühler–Brockhaus, Hans–Peter Bühler, and Wolf–Dietrich Speck von Sternburg.<sup>16</sup> These three people are representatives of multigenerational German upper class families and the main contributors and donors to the MdbK's current collection (Fig. 2). No communists or socialists appear, despite having maintained the museum collections for over 40 years.

Passing through the first and the second floors of the museum, the viewer has no clue that this collection was once framed as social criticism. Instead, there is no critical narrative regarding the paintings from the 16th or the 18th century. Only on the third floor can one find paintings made during the GDR and most of them are attributed to the Leipzig School of Painting.

This leftover of the socialist past is the most prominent part of the third floor in the MdbK, since this movement has functioned as the figurehead of the Leipzig art scene since the 1990s. The Leipzig School of Painting is usually separated into three main periods: the First Leipzig School of Painting, the Second (or the “New”) Leipzig School of Painting, and the Third (the *Newest*) Leipzig School of Painting.<sup>17</sup> All the formations of the Leipzig school are usually known through male names, sometimes later in the connection between master and student. Thus, the First Leipzig School of Painting is firmly associated with Werner Tübke or Wolfgang Mattheuer, and later

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16 See: <http://www.sternburg-stiftung.de/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

17 K–S. Rehberg, *60, 40, 20-Kunst in Leipzig seit 1949: Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig*, Leipzig, 2009.



**Fig. 2.** Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Why Born Enslaved* (1868), Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig, Donation Bühler-Brockhaus, photo: MdbK.

Arno Rink.<sup>18</sup> The Second with Neo Rauch as the biggest and most significant painter. Finally, the Third with artists such as Titus Schade or Tilo Baumgärtel. Women painters who worked in this movement are usually underrepresented and under-researched.

## The MdbK and its attempt to align with a feminist discourse

One can notice that since 2021, the MdbK has made regular attempts to include feminist discourse in its exhibitions. Nevertheless, this engagement is mostly limited to temporary exhibitions. In 2022, for instance, the exhibition *Underestimated* took place in the museum. In this project, an assistant curator, Marian Reisinger, and students from the above-mentioned Leipzig art academy, the HGB, attempted to promote female artists whose works were archived and never received the attention they deserved. *Underestimated* took place

<sup>18</sup> Though there were also women artists such as Elisabeth Voigt, Rosa Loy and others.



in the museum's basement floor — a typical, though quite telling location for a museum's temporary projects — and highlighted several female artists from the beginning of the late 19th and early 20th century, e.g., Marianne Fielder (1864–1904), Emilie Mediz–Pelikan (1861–1908), and Philippine Wolf–Arndt (1849–1940). The point of connection for these artists was their participation in the *Sächsisch–Thüringische Industrie- und Gewerbeausstellung* (STIGA).

The curatorial text implied that they faced obvious obstacles in developing their professional career, without going into too much detail. In the publication, there is a brief mention that thanks to Philippine Wolf–Arndt, who was not just an artist, but also a part of the *Frauenbewegung* (the Women's Movement),<sup>19</sup> women students started to be welcomed by the HGB as early as in 1905. The brochure for the exhibition only mentions this very briefly. The lives and work of each artist in this short text is described in no more than four sentences. Additionally, this exhibition was not accompanied by any catalogue, except the publication mentioned above: a two-page inquiry in *125 Jahre Sächsisch–Thüringische Industrie- und Gewerbeausstellung* and a little advertising brochure published by the Hochschule für Technik, Wirtschaft und Kultur Leipzig (HTWK).<sup>20</sup> Thus, even with this exhibition, these artists were effectively left underestimated.

Another temporary project that regularly takes place in the MdbK is *Next;raum*. The idea behind this is to offer some critical commentary on the museum's collection. The stated aim is also to open up the museum to the intervention of artists who currently live and work in Leipzig.<sup>21</sup> The project is presented through the museum's art mediation team and creates temporary installations in the museum's collection. Functionally, it creates critical inquiries that bridge the contemporary feminist (mostly white and liberal) discourses in Leipzig and the art that is exhibited in the museum. For instance, one of the artists sets up a display with sex toys in front of the reclining nude painting *The Water Nymph at the Fountain* (1518) by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Another artist sets up a chair with a cloth and commentary about nakedness and discomfort near the painting *Group Portrait of Leipzig's Artists* (1961) by Harry Blume, where all the artists are male and fully clothed, while the female model is naked.

Yet another temporary initiative that takes place at the MdbK is the *360 degrees* project that aims to address the problematic sides of the traditional museum and fulfils the aim of diversifying the museum's team. In the frame of this project, the exhibition *Re-Connect: Kunst und Kampf im Bruderland* was

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19 More about her life: P. Wolff-Arndt, "Leipziger Frauenporträts", *Stadt Leipzig*, (nd), <https://www.leipzig.de/jugend-familie-und-soziales/frauen/1000-jahre-leipzig-100-frauenportraets/detailseite-frauenportraets/projekt/wolff-arndt-philippine> [accessed 01 July 2023].

20 *125 Jahre Sächsisch–Thüringische Industrie- und Gewerbeausstellung*, Hochschule für Technik, Wirtschaft und Kultur Leipzig (HTWK), 2022.

21 See: <https://MdbK.de/MdbK-next-raum/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

created. It marked an impressive precedent in terms of addressing the questions of race and racism and brought up non-German artists who worked in Leipzig. As immigrants, these artists were never included in the canonical Leipzig School of Painting. At the same time, it is important to notice, that *360 degrees* is funded not by the city of Leipzig (as happens with the more permanent museum employees), but through grants for multiple years from the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes*, a central project-based stipend from the federal government of Germany.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the workers that are employed in the museum as part of the *360 degrees* program are not called curators or even researchers, but “diversity agents”. This precariousness inevitably creates a certain dynamic within the museum. For the public, it becomes clear that the feminist or anti-racist agenda only lurks at the museum’s surface, with such temporary exhibitions open only until the new funding year or until a blockbuster exhibition comes around.<sup>23</sup>

## Case study: Olga Costa at the MdbK

Partially as a result of ongoing interest in feminist agendas, in 2022–2023, the MdbK (among other projects targeting women artists) launched an exhibition that is especially interesting in terms of its attempts to connect Eastern Europe and Latin America. The exhibition was entitled *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*.<sup>24</sup> Being a local museum that expands to global contexts and frameworks, the MdbK chose to positively emphasise Olga Costa’s connection to Leipzig. This connection was stressed multiple times in the curatorial texts and in the exhibition catalogue.

It is worth presenting a brief overview of Olga Costa’s life. Her family, like many Jewish families in Europe at the time, left Europe for North America. The artist was born in Leipzig and lived in Germany for a long time, but later moved to Mexico and gained recognition as a famous Mexican painter. As the MdbK’s director Stefan Weppelmann narrates this in the opening article of the exhibition catalogue:

“In 1913 her parents Anna Fabrikant and Jacob Kostakowsky leave the Ukrainian city of Odessa, which at that time was under the rule of the Russian tsar [...]. Leipzig, a city of music, is not a random destination for the Kostakowskys family ... the First World War breaks out, and the family moves to try to establish itself in the capital city of Berlin... During the crises of the Weimar Republic the Kostakowskys decide, probably

22 See: <https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/de> accessed [accessed 1 July 2023].

23 It is also important to mention that the museum employs a provenance researcher, whose aim is to re-examine the museum’s collections and determine the history of the objects.

24 S. Weppelmann, S. Hoffmann, eds., *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*, Hirmer, 2022.

mainly for economic reasons, to board a ship in the port of Saint-Nazaire in France and head to Veracruz in post-revolutionary Mexico, where they arrive in September 1925".<sup>25</sup>

The same sentiment of the search for better opportunities and changing countries on a quest to find a "true home" was brought up by one of the museum's curators Sabine Hoffman in her inquiry "From Leipzig to Guanajuato: Stages of Life". In these texts, Leipzig is called "her native city" and the city Guanajuato "her true home". One can notice a slight change of tone from previous scholarship on Olga Costa, which took into account her Jewish identity. As Magdeleno writes, "Also for political and economic reasons – and perhaps also ethnic reasons, for they were Jewish – the Kostakovski family decided to move to Mexico when Olga was 12 years old".<sup>26</sup>

It is unsurprising that as a local museum in the 2020s, the MdbK attempts to create a positive and preferably non-problematic picture for its local audiences. Undeniably, it must be a tremendously difficult task, while narrating the migration of a Jewish family at the beginning of the 20th century. The Kostakovskys were running from pogroms in Odessa and unfortunately chose to come to Germany. This Jewish part of the narrative was almost completely invisible in the exhibition and the catalogue. The only case where any open resentment and the absence of any *Heimatliebe* for Germany in Olga Costa's perception appears in some direct quotes from the interviews in which she remembered her German childhood.<sup>27</sup>

It was clearly complicated for a museum that is building on positive (or even just neutral) local German identities to frame the travels of Olga Costa and her family, all while addressing German history. On top of that was the fact that it was not exactly a coincidence she was not called a *German* artist – even though Olga Costa had made such a great addition to the artistic community from the city of Leipzig (Fig. 3). In the end, the exhibition, launched by a modern German museum about a Jewish woman artist, told a surprisingly unproblematic story, with a convenient "feminist" element, stressing that Leipzig was, in fact, this female artist's "native town".

The exhibition centred around Olga Costa's work *La vendedora de frutas* [The Fruit Seller] (1951) (Fig. 4). This large oil-on-canvas painting was presented as a centrepiece and appeared as a poster for the exhibition. And the wide range of other works, which took up smaller space, were arranged by topic. Right at the entrance, near to the curatorial text, was a timeline of Costa's life. The public was offered a detailed chronicle of events that started by emphasising her birth in Leipzig. The structure of the exhibition narrative guided the visitor through a historical narration of Costa's career. Interestingly, the

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25 Ibid., p. 10.

26 C. Magdaleno, "Olga Costa: a Brief Look at a Serene Life", *Voices of Mexico*, 2001, 56, p. 37.

27 Weppelmann, Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 163: "I left nothing [in Germany]... that is nothing that is worth missing... I was happy to leave that place...".



**Fig. 3.** Opening of the exhibition *Olga Costa. Dialogues with the Mexican Modernism* at the MdbK (2022), photo: Alexander Schmidt/Punctum.

show did not limit itself to only her work. As a matter of fact, the exhibition also highlighted other Latin American artists in order to strengthen Costa's *Mexican* identity and firmly ground her in the context of Mexican art.

The exhibition narrative was broken into several parts, which were represented by smaller halls. There, the emphasis was placed on Costa's gradually becoming Mexican. To stress this process, one of the parallel narratives is the story of the importance of her husband, who was a Mexican artist himself, and exhibiting his (distinctively different) works alongside her art. At the same time, her *feminine* belonging was pointed out and other female artists from Latin America were shown in the frame of this exhibition. By the end of the tour, the viewer had no clue that Olga Costa came from a Jewish background, due to the overwhelmingly Mexican visual content. Simultaneously, however, her nativeness to Leipzig was stressed in the curatorial texts. In the narrative, she was a Mexican female artist who was born in Leipzig. Uncomfortable details were glossed over.

It is worth asking why. Jewish German writer and curator Max Czollek<sup>28</sup> explores the German culture of integration and memory in an incredibly deep and personal way. His analysis clearly shows how “normalised understandings

28 M. Czollek, J. Cho-Polizzi, “Overcoming the Present”, *TRANSIT*, 2021, 0(0), pp. 80–86.



**Fig. 4.** Social Media Dance at the exhibition *Olga Costa. Dialogues with the Mexican Modernism* at the MdbK (2022), photo: MdbK.

of belonging and the return of right-wing thought are intertwined". German society, according to Czollek, did not magically rid itself of the nationalistic, xenophobic, or anti-Semitic tendencies after the end of the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, he stresses, German people desire nothing more than an assertion of a positive national identity and the reassessment of the opportunity to fly the national flag at the World Cup, for instance.

Although not an immigrant himself, Czollek is often addressed as a foreigner. In his analysis, most likely this misconception stems from the fact that 90% of Jewish people in Germany today are, in fact, immigrants (90% are

<sup>29</sup> The most recent anti-Semitic shooting in the Synagogue was in the city Halle (nearly Leipzig) as recently as on 9 October 2019.

former Soviet Jews who came to Germany in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union)<sup>30</sup> and are perceived exclusively as immigrants even if they are “the good ones”. In his analysis, Czollek stresses how badly German society desires to be hegemonic and discount foreigners as a separate non-Germanified and non-integrated body of people. He insists that there could never be any German society or Germany itself, for this matter, without Jewish people, among many others. Czollek is therefore highly critical of current German policies of “integration” to which he devoted his recent book *Desintegriert Euch* (Deintegrate Yourselves).<sup>31</sup>

In this particular framework, it becomes visible that the MdbK’s goal is to narrate Olga Costa as a woman artist who was born in Leipzig and worked in Mexico. Other markers of her identity and history are downplayed or ignored altogether. Positively stressing the connections of Olga Costa to Leipzig, the curatorial texts are clearly designed to cater to German audiences, so they can feel good about the fact that this city is birthplace to yet another artist. On top of that, Leipzig is the birthplace to a woman artist who was able to effortlessly succeed in Mexico. Most of the exhibition is devoted to the foreign Mexican context, a topic that is far easier to play positively. Olga Costa, in this case, presents a perfect opportunity to tell the story of identity transformation, because Costa’s art and career are often mentioned alongside *Mexicanidad*<sup>32</sup> – a national movement that occurred in post-revolutionary Mexico. As such, the curators even engaged in something highly unusual for the museum: a semi-positive reading of the communist project in Mexico, likely sterilised by the fact that it took place so far away.

In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, one can trace the attempt to quickly frame Olga Costa as a *feminist* artist, even though she did not position herself in such a way. Following the trend to insert every woman artist, if necessary, into feminist readings, the MdbK was happy to frame Costa’s work this way. Nevertheless, even while attempting to offer this “critical” perspective, the exhibition and catalogue constantly mentioned the important *men* that she studied from or had a relationship with. Clearly, they were happy to contextualise Costa and her work in some ways, while decontextualizing her life and art in other ways.

In an article by Dina Comisarenco Mirkin about Costa’s work,<sup>33</sup> she argues that Costa is often presented as an ambassador for feminism (or more precisely *white liberal feminism*) in Mexico. Her legacy is discussed in contrast to European/

30 Czollek, Cho–Polizzi, op. cit., p. 80.

31 M. Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!*, Veltman Distributie Import Books, 2018.

32 P.E. Martin, *Olga Costa’s Feminine Mexicanidad*, MA dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2021.

33 D. Comisarenco Mirkin, “Against the Canon—a New Interpretation of Olga Costa’s works”, in: *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*, eds. S. Weppelmann, S. Hoffmann, Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig and Hirmer Verlag, 2022, p. 78.

Western art and also separated from the Jewish or Mexican traditions. In her text, Comisarenco Mirkin discusses some of Costa's works, such as *Nude Man* (1937), depicting José Chaves Morado. This is a tempera-on-paper painting that presents Costa's sleeping husband leaning towards some blossoming bushes. He is covering his genitalia with an ornamental cloth. Furthermore, he is surrounded by flowers with a wild cat in the background looking at the spectator. Comisarenco Mirkin writes that "in this case, it is the male model who is depicted in a reclining position, thus exchanging the traditional roles of the male artists who creates and the female model who poses, subverting the iconographic tradition of some of the greatest masters of Western painting".<sup>34</sup> The painting is thus presented as a significant subversion of the existent visual codes—namely, for a woman artist to paint a man as a reclining nude model.

Although Comisarenco Mirkin does not address the racial undertones that are also present in the work, they also play an important role.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there are tendencies from the same Western colonial context that celebrate the depiction of non-white bodies as savages, sexual, naked, close to nature, and wild. This iconography is quite present in the works of Western artists and the German expressionists from *Die Brücke*, with whom Costa's work is compared in this text. A member of *Die Brücke*, painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), even went as far as asking his black models to have sex in front of him in order to capture their movements for a carving. Needless to say, the same request was never addressed to the white models. As Christian Weikop puts it, he "repetitively produced images of hyper-sexualized black bodies, therefore visually reinforcing the core belief of Western colonialism".<sup>36</sup> Here we can notice the tendency to code every woman artist as positively applicable to modern audiences' feminist figure: rendering discussions of race or class absolute. In the case of this text, it relies on a white American perception of feminism and art done by Linda Nochlin in the 1970s, a perception that was itself criticised in order to highlight the intersectional nature of every positionality.

Analysing Costa's legacy further and applying a positive feminist spin to it, Comisarenco Mirkin tends to look at Costa's depiction of naked feminine body as a feminist gesture, emphasising the presence of corpulent, curvy models in the iconography of the artist. Here Costa's female nudes are compared to some Western European (with the exclusion of Peter Paul Rubens) canon and accompanied with quotes from Nochlin. Thus, it is presented as

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Here I am just pointing out the gaps in this kind of non-problematic framing of any woman artist and one can see that the author is deeply informed about the racial contexts in North America and Latin America through her other texts such as: D. Comisarenco Mirkin, "Negro Woman and the Postmemory of Slavery in Elizabeth Catlett", *La Venetana. Revista de Estudios de Género*, 2021, 6, no. 54, pp. 110–142.

<sup>36</sup> See: C. Weikop, "Avatars and Atavism: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Encounters with Africa", in: *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Imaginary Travels*, ed. K. Beisiegel, Munich–London–New York, 2018, pp. 100–135.



an attempt to change the attitude – it is unclear where exactly except the West – towards full-bodied women. Sadly, this claim of a subversive resistance to some pre-existing norms is done without any inspection of Mexican, Jewish, or any non-Western canons, where full-bodied women were often presented as ideal embodiments of femininity and prosperity.

Furthermore, the erasure of Costa's Jewish identity makes her a Western European artist. She apparently challenges the vague canon that exists somewhere in the West, but at the same time aligns with the writings of Northern America-based feminist scholars like Linda Nochlin. For instance, if one takes a brief look in the other direction, for example at the works of Eleanor Antin such as *Carving: a Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and Lisa Bloom's and Carol Zemel's discussions of it the different idea of a canon for a Jewish woman emerges. "Short-legged, white-hipped, and full-breasted Antin", Bloom suggests, "represents a Jewish body in these images, if not essentialized, then at least somewhat genetically formed".<sup>37</sup>

In the same way, Costa's painting *The Bride* (1941) is discussed as a work that criticises traditional marriage and advocates for the older age of a bride, even though there is no indication either of the age of the model (again she is more corporeal than her Western counterparts) or of Costa's critical attitudes towards marriage in the 1940s in Mexico: "it questions the social convention of marriage, which in many cases does not correspond to the supposed ideal of happiness and personal fulfillment, but in real life brings inequality and sorrow".<sup>38</sup> Costa's work somehow again perfectly corresponds to American Second-Wave Feminism. While the painting itself is quite open to the interpretation and speculation on the bride's age, the role of flowers, the bride's dress, and Costa's own views on marriage, it is also important to have in mind that feminism does not have a united position on marriage and family.

Observing the feminist debate on kinship today, one can argue that there are, after all, "white" and "non-white" feminist movements, or "left" and "liberal" feminist movements. And these themselves contain all sorts of multiplicities. A vivid difference in the approaches to such institutions as marriage could be seen in some strands of "white feminism", which tend to emphasise the role of the individualistic, working, "liberated", and rich woman. In contrast to these ideas, some non-white thinkers, such as bell hooks, have put an emphasis on kith and kin.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in some recent feminist writings, the whole structure of family is presented as subject to immediate abolition, but not from a liberal perspective (emphasising happiness and self-fulfilment), but instead from a socialist viewpoint (highlighting the need to abolish the capital-

37 C. Zemel, *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture & Modern Diaspora*, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2015, p. 123.

38 Comisarenko Mirkin, "Against the canon...", p. 84.

39 See: R. Zakaria, "Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption", *Media & Jornalismo*, 2021, 23, no. 43, and b. hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, Perennial, 2002.



ist system). The catalogue certainly does not try to bring Costa's work in with these tendencies. There is no mention of how Costa's art relates to Soviet experiments from the 1920s.<sup>40</sup>

This instrumental approach to feminist criticism that was produced in the Northern American context between the 1970s and the 1990s leads to a presentation of any given woman artist as a feminist artist, mostly in order to create a narrative of courage and exceptional excellence. This narrative renders a historically subversive movement, a site of resistance, into a comfortable addition to any given topic. At the same time, it also avoids a proper intersectional approach, largely neglecting some structural elements such as race or class, accompanied by the strategic silencing of certain uncomfortable parts of artists' lives and aligning women artists with significant male figures of their time. It makes almost no emancipatory impact on the audience's perception of women artists and feminist criticisms. In the Olga Costa exhibition, the story of "The Jewish girl, who became a great Mexican artist"<sup>41</sup> turned into "Olga Costa comes home to Leipzig".<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

It is important to distinguish between the symbolic presence of a project that addresses the feminist agenda and the deep reconstructive work in the museum's collections, funding structures, provenance research, politics of purchasing art, and leadership. In order to start a meaningful discussion on feminist approaches to art, museums need to undergo some serious structural changes. Otherwise, as in the case of the MdbK, it will remain merely a symbolic gesture. While symbolic gestures have their place, they need to do more than address surface inequalities while leaving intact patriarchal, imperial or racist narratives. In the recent years, the term "woke-washing" has been used to describe disingenuous activism undertaken by big brands,<sup>43</sup> and it is also used in relation to museums.<sup>44</sup>

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40 S. Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, London–Brooklyn, NY, 2022.

41 P. Schwartz, "Olga Costa, the Jewish Girl who Became a Great Mexican Artist", *Forward*, 20.03.2023, <https://forward.com/yiddish/540456/olga-costa-the-jewish-girl-who-became-a-great-mexican-artist/> [accessed 01July 2023].

42 "Olga Costa Comes Home to Leipzig", *The Leipzig Goal*, 14.04.2023, <https://leipglo.com/2023/04/14/olga-costa/> [accessed 01July 2023].

43 F. Sobande, "Woke-washing: 'Intersectional' Femvertising and Branding 'Woke' bravery", *European Journal of Marketing*, 2019, 54, no. 11, pp. 2723–2745.

44 R. Tombs, "Our Cultural Institutions are Wokewashing the Past. Spiked", *CAMD*, 3.12.2020, <https://camd.org.au/our-cultural-institutions-are-wokewashing/> [accessed 01July 2023].

Stepping beyond totally neglecting critical feminist theories to today, where the curatorial team is trying to “redress” the museum with a somewhat feminist agenda, is an important move. Nevertheless, the danger for such big institutions as museums, which are part of structures that are much bigger than any singular human agency, is to end up doing only the surface symbolic attempt to implement this criticism. This can actually stifle meaningful change. The MdbK’s Instagram is quite progressive and attempts to attract young and critical audiences. However, at the same time, museum’s curatorial texts on the walls are a continuation of a rigid narrative, centring male geniuses and their masterpieces.

Inauthentic museum activism creates a tension between a “strong activist message” and the absence of “values-driven prosocial corporate practices to support such a bold message”.<sup>45</sup> The absence of deep connections and engagements with activist discourses and communities generates misunderstandings that can result in broader conflicts surrounding museums.<sup>46</sup> In order to achieve authenticity in its practice, the MdbK and museums like it need to implement serious structural changes and fully engage with their values stated on paper.

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45 J. Vredenburg, S. Kapitan, A. Spry, J.A. Kemper, “Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?”, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 2020, 39, no. 4, p. 451.

46 For instance: U. Seidler, “Rassismus: Ein Eklat in Leipzig zeigt, wie schwer es ist, über Fremdenhass zu sprechen”, *Berliner Zeitung*, 07.06.2023, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/debatte/ein-eklat-in-leipzig-im-museum-fuer-bildende-kunst-zeigt-wie-schwer-es-ist-ueber-rassismus-zu-sprechen-li.356647> [accessed 1 July 2023].

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