

A Woman's Work

Japanisches Palais, Dresden, 18 January 2019

Vol. 01

Symposium summary by Foreign Legion and Emma Lucek



Group picture with speakers and audience in the hallway of Japanese Palais

Introduction: From Symposium to Exhibition

On a cold and grey morning, a large meeting room in Dresden's Japanisches Palais started to fill up. The high-ceilinged room was airy and amply lit by a row of tall windows facing the courtyard, and a large table was set at the centre of the space, illuminated as the focal point of the event that was to unfold that day. The occasion was A Woman's Work, a symposium organised by Foreign Legion – Matylda Krzykowska and Vera Sacchetti – that brought together several national and international figures for a day of conversations around the roles, influence and visibility of female practitioners.

As guests started to arrive that morning, the air filled with enthusiastic chatter, reacquainted introductions and the smell of coffee. The symposium program, the schedule and the slides for the discussion were projected on three different walls, and could be seen from all sides of the room. Speakers started taking chairs around the large table at the centre, and around them in several concentric rows, attendants took places. The audience was diverse in discipline, age and nationality – German, Polish and English among others, arriving from various parts of Europe and including curators, academics, educators, designers, locals and enthusiasts of the theme. Despite the projected female participation, the crowd was dotted with more than a handful of men, two of them among the speakers.

Setting the Scene: Against Invisibility

To set the symposium in the right context Klara Nemeckova gave an introduction to the exhibition at its origin. "In the winter of 2016 when we initially decided to develop an exhibition about the historically important Deutsche Werkstätten in Hellerau, we discovered one particularly unknown aspect of the initiative – during the first thirty years (1898–1933) a significant number of female designers were active in the workshop." Nemeckova proceeded to point out how this was an exception not just in Germany, but also in a broader European context. In the

course of research, the curatorial team uncovered the names of approximately fifty women designers who were closely associated with the workshops. Eighteen of these are presented in the exhibition. "As the majority of the designers represented in the exhibition were almost entirely unknown," Nemeckova noted, "a major obstacle that we faced was to find objects and stories that were attributed to them." Nemeckova spoke about the many interviews conducted and the extended research process needed to find each designer's work, and fill the gaps in their biog-

raphies. Throughout the preparation of the show, Nemeckova and the team focused on the reasons for these women to be written out of history. She underlined that "there is a variety of explanations as to how these women became invisible – the patriarchal narrative of history and the role assigned to women offer one ready explanation." Others are simpler – some of these designers married once or twice, and their names and identities changed in the re-

ords around them; or their work was archived alongside their husbands or partners, with institutions not untangling the work once it was archived. Mostly, Nemeckova showed the process was still very much alive, as since the exhibition opened many of the stories told had been added to, by members of the audience who completed stories or offered new insights into the life and work of the forgotten women designers of the Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau.

Session 1: Advocates of History Detecting and Raising Awareness about the Past

If design history has been skewed from the start – given the perspective of those who wrote it in the first place – what can be done to rediscover women designers?

The first session was dedicated to discussing the measures through which practitioners, educators and institutions could revisit history in order to celebrate female practitioners and their contributions in the fields of architecture and design. The panellists for this session were: Annika Frye, designer and researcher and advocate of the system of education; Thomas Geisler, curator and incumbent director of the Kunstgewerbemuseum and an advocate of institutional content; and Libby Sellers, author of *Women Design*, a curator and consultant actively contributing to the revisionism of design history as well as an advocate of the commercial market. The discussion themes revolved around issues of representation, education, narration of history, collaboration, infrastructure, and role models.

Education was at the core of the discussion, with Libby Sellers remarking how "women really weren't allowed to enter into professional academic environments until the early 1900s." She further noted: "obviously, there were women practicing design, but it wasn't really encouraged in institutions until the 1910s or the 1920s." Sitting in the audience, director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Tulga Beyerle, noted that when she studied she "just read the canon." She added: "it took me a while to start questioning the canon of the Bauhaus, that I was taught and believed in for so long. Through working on this exhibition [Against Invisibility], my canon of modernism and German design history changed a lot." Such issues remain to this day. Speaker Annika Frye said

how even today her "reading list is primarily male." But she is trying to do something about it: "I've since moved to the English language and I'm looking for some more contemporary texts about design written by women." Frye does not hide that "it's a bit of a didactic problem: trying to find texts written by women historically to share with students, without covering up the issue that there is a lack of these texts." She pushed for the need to have more women to write design history and thus adding more women to the discipline's history.

Session 2: Enablers of Visibility Identifying and Learning from the Present

How can we dismantle old and still existing patterns in order to develop systems of visibility, and ensure that the histories of contemporary practicing female designers are transported into generations to come?

The symposium's second session focused on female practitioners in the field today, how they claimed their positions, what they're doing to highlight their peers and what the responsibility of sometimes being the only woman at the table can feel like. A nuanced element of the discussion was how we should even talk about the participation and representation of women in order to avoid the topic becoming affirmative action or a fad. Speakers included: Katrin Greiling, designer, photographer and professor at HBK-Saar, Saarbrücken, Germany; Alice Rawsthorn, design critic and author, and a vocal long-standing feminist; and Antje Stahl, journalist at NZZ, Zurich. Themes addressed included use of language, collaboration, representation, forging one's own path and responsibility.

The discussion was prompted by a series of articles about women designers, one of which featured speaker Katrin Greiling and was titled "Design Wird Weiblich" ["Design Becomes Female"]. Another article featured one of Greiling's works, an adaptation of a chair originally designed by Walter Gropius, with the remark "Der Neue Gropius" ["The New Gropius"]. "The title is of course not ac-

ceptable," said Greiling. "In English you are very fortunate because you don't have to address the verbs using a gender. In German, it's directly addressed. The vocabulary that is used to describe our male colleagues is, for example, 'expert'. The articles should have been called 'The New Experts' and 'The New Greiling'." While stereotypical portrayals of female practitioners are frequent, speaker Alice Rawsthorn noted how "as a lifelong feminist, when I write on the topic of gender politics and design, I feel very confident. I know all the issues, I know the language, I've wrestled with new and old ideas and analysed my thinking, so I tend to write, whilst I hope I'll continue to question my thinking, from quite an assured perspective." She further added how "it is an absolute pleasure to discover people whose work and missions you believe in passionately that have been overlooked."

Speaker Antje Stahl wrote the awarded review "No more Frauenghetto, bitte" ["No more Women's ghettos, please"] in which she fundamentally expressed her hesitations towards exhibitions, events and publications that feature women only. She argues: "There are many historical examples of how this gender grouping within institutions equals their exclusion from the male standard – in Bauhaus for instance women were granted access to the school however

noted, "and now it's changing." The panel also pointed out that when women were present in the history of design, mostly in collaboration with their partners or husbands, they often took a step back when it came to owning the spotlight – such as the chronically shy Ray Eames. Speaker Thomas Geisler pointed out how "there have been many successful designer couples, like Charles and Ray Eames, but there are also many female designers who have led creative lives in the shadows of their husbands."

The panel rounded up on the lack of role models. Libby Sellers pointed out that "it's not just the patriarchy of the industry, but also the patrons of design. They are still primarily male." Nevertheless, the discussion concluded in a hopeful tone. "It's fantastic to think that there will be more and more exhibitions like Against Invisibility," Alice Rawsthorn said, "and that the institutions will respond by completing the research, acquiring the pieces and taking those arguments forward."

However, systemic infrastructures have more often than not failed women in design. Audience member Dr. Bettina Möllring, Professor and Vice President of the Muthesius Kunsthochschule, noted how "sometimes navigating this world as a woman is like when left handed people have to go through life in a system [designed] for right handed people." But how to continue adding the voices of women to the canon, when the design discipline itself keeps fighting for funding and credibility? Design critic Alice Rawsthorn noted: "In many countries, particularly in ones like Britain, where there has been a prolonged reduction of public funding of culture, the resources are very scarce." "The fact that it's design," she added, "which is still struggling for cultural and intellectual credibility, will make it much more difficult to secure the funds that are needed to establish those collections and continue the research."

After the 75 min session Sacchetti and Krzykowski announced the first break by inviting everyone to come together outside for a group picture taken by David Pinzer. Afterwards, the group converged back at the symposium room to grab a quick lunch and a hot beverage and continued to speak about the morning themes. The exchange is vivid, and goes on for some time before the program continues.



Set-Up of A Woman's Work: speakers around a large table, surrounded by the audience

Add to the Cake — Exhibition
5 July — 3 November 2019
Curated by Foreign Legion,
Vera Sacchetti & Matylda Krzykowska
Arts & Crafts Museum Dresden

Add to the Cake — Preview
26 April — 21 June 2019
Curated by Foreign Legion,
Vera Sacchetti & Matylda Krzykowska
Arts & Crafts Museum Dresden

A Woman's Work
Organised by Foreign Legion,
Vera Sacchetti & Matylda Krzykowska
19 January 2019
Japanisches Palais Dresden

Against Invisibility
Curated by Klara Němečková
15 May — 15 August 2019
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg

Against Invisibility
Curated by Klara Němečková
3 November 2015 — 1 March 2019
Japanisches Palais Dresden

Thank you to Tuлга Beyerle, former director of the Arts & Crafts Museum Dresden, for inviting Vera Sacchetti and Matylda Krzykowska of Foreign Legion to organise the symposium, thus starting a relevant conversation about gender politics.

Why were women written out of this historical frame?

- *Incorrect attributions due to the changing of surnames after various marriages;*
- *Ofentimes attributions were cited using only a last name, and in the case of a couple, attribution was assumed to the male partner;*
- *Institutional failings in regards to maintaining, exhibiting, acquiring and restoring practitioners' estates;*
- *Lack of writing by women themselves about their own activities, or by others who would tell their stories, including their work and place in history.*

What can institutions do about it?

- *Engage in diligent research;*
- *Revise false attributions;*
- *Purchase pieces by female practitioners.*

to no other class besides the weaving 'women' class." So you need to look very closely on how everything is set up: "In the worst case," Stahl said, "it is a nice marketing tool to show how engaged an institution is in promoting women but when you look closer it is yet a different form of discrimination — women are told to share space or money, men aren't."

As an editor, Stahl always advised writers to never work for free: "the market sets the same roles for writers than it does for any other profession — salary is a form of value and your work is of great value."

Alice Rawsthorn pointed out that labelling things "women/female/feminine" can also be marginalizing, especially when the discussion at present moves towards a post-gender or gender-fluid direction — something that was pointed out several times during the symposium. But, she added, "given that we are coming from such a bleak history of female invisibility, these tactics aren't particularly useless." She further noted how the imagery used in the media can be particularly powerful. "Because I had worked in journalism for so long," Rawsthorn said, "I knew that when I negotiated my package I had to ask also for total control over the headlines and visual imagery — this really influences the memory of people of what they've read and the mood in which they read it."

Katrin Greiling expanded on the need to create one's own path. She recognised how her strategic choice to study in Sweden had given her a complete different head start in design. "I wanted to learn carpentry before studying design because I thought that would elementary for understanding the discipline," Greiling pointed out. "But I couldn't find an education that satisfied me in Germany because I would always fall into that trap of 'she's a woman in carpentry'. I was very lucky to have an education where I, very early on, left gender tags behind." She further pushed for wom-

Breakout Session: Ritual of Self-Empowerment

In a personal presentation, Pinar Demirdag discussed her process of self-growth in recent years, sharing her journey towards self-belief and breaking out of conventions and expectations. She shares what she has learned from her consciousness guide — Derya Turk — who has helped her along her journey. "There are only two feelings: love and fear," Demirdag says. "Our planet is a planet of duality. Meaning, we have opposite concepts, like good and bad. That's why love and fear can exist here." She outlines the concept of "the power of attraction" and notes: "There is no such a thing as an outside world. Things don't hap-

How can we create frameworks for the visibility of women designers without replicating the same Eurocentric stereotypes, and without overlooking different perspectives and geographies?

The third and final session of the symposium focused on attempting to recognise our own bias and ingrained behaviours. The discussion addressed strategies to shift our own bias, to make

en to take control over the tools of their profession. "It's so important that women get in the workshops," she advocated, "and that they learn the tools and that they get access and support in those structure as well."

Circling back to media, Alice Rawsthorn noted how "there has been a significant increase in the visibility of women in the design media and of women in design in the mainstream media in recent years." Nevertheless, the work hasn't been done. "We need to build on it with a dynamic and critical discourse surrounding it," Rawsthorn said. "While many skirmishes have been won, others await."

Speaking about the responsibility inherent to their roles, Antje Stahl revealed how she tells students and younger writers to "never ever work for free." She explained: "In that way you destroy the market, you lower the value of the work in general, for everyone." Reminiscing on how she was the first ever design critic at *The New York Times*, Alice Rawsthorn noted how this meant "I wasn't following in someone's path, which would have almost always would meant that I would follow in a male defined path." She added how "one of the most useful things you can do is just make sure that properly diverse and inclusive when you're addressing generic issues in design."

Katrin Greiling closed the panel by discussing the idea of environments of collaboration and mutual help. Speaking about her work as an educator, she pointed out how she tries to "open up the students so there is really a feeling of collaboration. I want to help build an environment where we share and learn from each other."

Sacchetti and Krzykowska concluded the panel with a short break, before introducing a 15-minute break out session by Pinar Demirdag of Pinar & Viola.

pen to you, there are no accidents or coincidences, we are all attracting them to ourselves." She advocates for the conscious choices and free will. "We live our lives as prisoners of our subconscious," Demirdag points out. "So your neocortex deciding on what to wear and what to buy is a reflection of what is happening in your subconscious." She ends with an invitation: "I welcome you to think again, next time you think you are making a choice with your freewill." Demirdag's passionate plea for stronger self-belief and for claiming space gives way to a break, which transitions to the afternoon's final panel.

Session 3: Dismantlers of Existing Conditions Changing the Future

our own bias visible and to change our perspectives. It linked strongly back to a question asked at the end of the first panel by Vitra Design Museum curator and audience member Amelie Klein — "How do we address injustice without being unjust ourselves?" The panellists were; Sarah Owens, designer and department head at Zurich University of the Arts;

Christoph Knoth, a graphic designer, visual strategist and professor at the University of Fine Arts of Hamburg and Danah Abdulla, designer and senior lecturer at Brunel University, London. Themes addressed included claiming space, rewriting narratives, responsibility, doubt, roles and, circling back to the beginning of the symposium, education.

Speaker Sarah Owens pointed out how "This idea of making invisibility visible — perhaps that's at the basis of this whole thing. It really does start a conversation — at whatever scale that is." She continued, discussing the importance of creating spaces where that discussion can happen. "If you create a space that you feel is safe," Owens said, "we can talk freely." "I'm one of the quota man today, so I sort of know how it feels now," Speaker Christoph Knoth noted. "I know how it feels for me," he continued, "not how it feels for anyone else."

Knoth discussed the issue of visibility addressing a project he started a few years ago. "I started compiling data reflecting the ratio of male and female designers at design conferences, and the amount of time that was attributed to them." Nevertheless, when the numbers came in, he was in doubt. "The numbers skewed staggeringly in favour of men," Knoth remarked, "and once I compiled enough data, it took me two months to internally process how I was going to publish this data. Was I going to step on toes? Was it going to be seen as patronizing? Will they invite me to any more conferences? Would people attack me for this?"

Today, he uses his visibility to advocate for more women in public design events. Knoth added: "As I grow in visibility, more and more people invite me to design conferences, and I can sometimes even tell from the mailing list that there are too many men. In that case, I reach out to the organizers and suggested a handful of names of female graphic designers who would be great additions to the panel. Sometimes they take that advice, sometimes they don't."

Conclusion: Concluding Remarks and Homework

The day's discussions concluded with a round up by Tulga Beyerle, who joined the table to reflect on the day's proceedings with Matylda Krzykowska and Vera Sacchetti. "The big thing that I take with me," said Beyerle, "is a sensitivity to a lot of these issues, a sensitivity that we may lose in our everyday work. The sensitivity that also comes from a sensitivity of what is dominant and what is marginalised or invisible — whatever it is."

Beyerle continued listing the themes of the day, referencing a certain humility that permeated the discussion, as well as a deep focus on education. "We have a number of brilliant educators around this table, and in this room: I remember when I was studying design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, I was under the impression that I was in the most liberal place imaginable. Back then, in 1984, we were 5 women and 15-20 men, but it felt incredibly liberal. It wasn't until I started teaching there that I realised that these were the most patronising, patriarchal and arrogant men I've ever met in my life — just by switching from student to teacher. I left the university because I couldn't take the system, and I became freelance."

"I find it important to understand where the stereo-

For speaker Danah Abdulla, the element of doubt is always present in a woman's practice. "Being a woman, you always doubt yourself," she remarked, "and being a woman of colour — not that I'm particularly representative for the global south as I grew up in Canada — it constantly makes you question — Am I good enough to be here or am I adding spice to the conference?" Sarah Owens noted how "sometimes, if I am the quota — the quota woman or the quota black woman — I embrace it and say, ok, at least I'm here. I'm going to name the names of the amazing black women that I know." She added how, in her work with Bla.Sh (Network for Black Women in German-speaking Switzerland), "we're used to seeing the black, poor girl in suffering, and these are absolutely realities, but we also want to find and establish counter narratives." Danah Abdulla pointed out how "when it comes to the images that are used in the media — we aren't putting enough time into thinking about the way that people are portrayed through images."

The discussion circled back to learning spaces and education. Abdulla remarked how she has been able to "integrate a lot of what I'd like to share about diversity into my courses," prompting "a lot more of these discussions about intersectionality." Nevertheless, she also remarked how, in adding to the current canon, this effort "needs to be integrated in the whole program by other people to be more effective." Audience member Jana Scholze, head of the MA Curating Contemporary Design at Kingston University, also pointed out how "we are missing a link that starts much earlier on when it comes to learning about the gender roles of design history. It's shocking how much undoing of this system needs to happen."

The discussion closed with speaker Katrin Greiling advocating for inclusivity, remarking how "we want to have more inclusive roles rather than having exclusivity — we need to think in terms of sisterhood."

Curated by Foreign Legion, Vera Sacchetti and Matylda Krzykowska
Graphic design by Anner Perrin and Raby-Florence Fofana
Symposium pictures by David Pinzer

www.foreign-legion.global
www.skdmuseum
#AWomansWork
#FromSymposiumToExhibition
#AddToTheCake



"We shouldn't assume that the work isn't being done. It is being done, in countless events, websites, exhibitions and blogs. We can capitalise on open source networks to keep information alive, but we are in danger of losing the objects, buildings and examples that are literally disintegrating. It's important to get as many as we can while they are still available."

— Libby Sellers
Design historian, consultant and author of *Women Design*

"One of the most useful things you can do is just make sure to be properly diverse and inclusive when you're addressing generic issues in design."

— Alice Rawsthorn
Design critic and author of *Design as an Attitude*

"When I started teaching, we were primarily reading the canon. I've since moved to the English language and I'm looking for some more contemporary texts written by women. (...) It's a bit of a didactic problem — trying to find these texts without covering up the issue that there is a lack of them."

— Annika Frye
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— Sarah Owens
Professor of Visual Communication at Zurich University of the Arts

"Unfortunately, there are many historical examples of how this gender grouping within institutions equals their exclusion from the male standard — in Bauhaus for instance women were granted access to the school however to no other class other than the weaving 'women' class."

— Antje Stahl
Journalist and Art Historian, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*/ETH Zürich

"Let's talk about who writes canon — it's important to talk to my students about design as ontological; as in it shapes the way of being. To be more effective, this effort needs to be integrated in the whole [design] program by other [educators] as well."

— Danah Abdulla
Designer, researcher and educator, Brunel University London and Decolonising Design research group

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— Christoph Knoth
Graphic designer, web developer and professor HFBK Hamburg

"I very early on made strategic choices, like moving from Germany to Sweden, because the educational system is very different. I was very lucky to have an education where I, very early on, could left gender tags behind."

— Katrin Greiling
Designer and interior architect, founder of Studio Greiling

"Of course, there have been some successful designer couples. There are also many female designers who have led creative lives in the shadows of their husbands."

— Thomas Geisler
Director, Museum of Arts and Crafts Dresden