Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

What to Make of the New Museum

Aoife Rosenmeyer

The Engadin village of Susch has a new museum. No, Gra?yna Kulczyk has a new museum. Or do female artists have a new museum? Or Polish artists? The Muzeum Susch was launched to ring out 2018; by the 2nd of January 2019 it was open to the public. To what public? The Muzeum Susch poses a dilemma for would-be critics as it draws the issues of private museums into sharp focus, while at the same time demonstrating the freedoms such institutions enjoy.





Muzeum Susch, photo: Studio Stefano Graziani, courtesy Muzeum Susch, Art Stations Foundation CH

Gra?yna Kulczyk made the Muzeum Susch possible. She was born in Pozna? in 1950 and is described in the museum's guide as a «Polish entrepreneur and long-term supporter of contemporary art.» Divorced in the 2000s, her ex-husband was Poland's wealthiest man when he died in 2015. The Kulczyks made their fortune as Poland emerged from communism and opened up to capitalism, starting out by dealing in Western cars; Gra?yna Kulczyk is reported to have supported contemporary and collected modern artists since the 1970s and even have staged exhibitions for Polish artists in car salesrooms. In the early 2000s she invested heavily in the Stary Browar ‹Old Brewery› shopping centre in Pozna? which operated for several years as a combined commercial and cultural site, with both an admission-free art gallery that operated until the middle of 2016, and a performance program that continues to this day as Stary Browar Nowy Taniec ‹Old Brewery, New Dance.› The Polish website of her Art Stations Foundation describes her ‹50:50› principle of combining business with culture.[1] [/b-n-l/what-to-make/pdf#A1]

In recent years, Kulczyk has been the subject of articles in high-profile publications including the New York Times that highlight her private collection (with an estimated value of more than €100 million) and museum ambitions.[2] [/b-n-l/what-to-make/pdf#A2] Promoting an exhibition of works from her collection at the Santander Group's gallery near Madrid in 2014, she spoke to the Financial Times about a thwarted plan to build a Tadao Ando gallery, complete with Turrell room, to house her collection next to Stary Browar, which local authorities were not willing to operate.[3] [[sitetree_link,id=]#A3] A later proposal involved creating a public institution for her collection comprising works by Polish and Western artists in Warsaw, but here too no agreement on operational costs could be reached. Fast forward a year or two and, in the narrative now told in reporting on the Muzeum Susch, Kulczyk stopped in Susch when waiting to cross the Vereina Tunnel (she has a home in Tschlin, ca. 40 km northeast of Susch), climbed up to the castle ruins above the village and spotted the

derelict former brewery – and its potential as an exhibition site – as she descended.



Muzeum Susch, photo Claudio Von Planta, courtesy Muzeum Susch, Art Stations Foundation CH

Visiting the Muzeum Susch mid-week in January (the museum will be open from Thursday-Sunday all year round), I'm one of a handful of cultural pilgrims getting off the train connecting from Zürich. On the other side of a village that was best-known until recently for its clinic for burnt-out executives, a low entrance tucked down beside the cobbled lane takes us into a first, solid building. This is the doorway to a labyrinth of spaces. Almost immediately, short corridors lead downwards towards site-specific installations: *Inn Reverse* (2018) by Sara Masüger, a white, womb-like space with a long, thin view out through the building to the river Inn; *Flock I* (1990), a room filled with Magdalena Abakanowicz's stiffened burlap sack figures; From the Series *The Theater of Disappearance XXXI* (2018), a massive column by Adrián Villar Rojas that just about fits into its cell. A longer tunnel leads under the cobbled lane into the building opposite, where site-specific installations continue and temporary exhibitions will be housed.



Muzeum Susch, photo Studio Stefano Graziani, courtesy Muzeum Susch, Art Stations Foundation CH

Let there be no mistake: the restoration and conversion of the two principal exhibition buildings, the smaller Bieraria Veglia (old brewery) and the Bieraria (brewery) across the lane, is beautifully, sensitively and skillfully realized. The new architecture by Chasper Schmidlin and Lukas Voellmy, initially working together as Voellmy Schmidlin, imposes no rigidity or regularity on the rooms inside. Function indeed follows form in idiosyncratic ways: lockers are buried inside the institution, rather than by the entrance, and galleries are reached up and down short flights of steps, for example. The buildings work in dialogue with found

elements of the site: next to the gallery housing Heidi Bucher's *Herrenzimmer* (1977–79) is an astonishing dark space with one side an open rock face down which water trickles, gathering in a pool at the base before being spirited away. Elsewhere, white walls are interrupted by ancient stonework that emerges overhead. Materials are solid, of high quality and not gaudy. Signage – by Teo Shifferli – is pale trompe-l'oeil with a wink at Engadin building inscriptions. One entrance is via an ornately, loosely honeycomb-patterned carved double door by Mirko Baselgia; across the lane a glazed door opening allows passers-by to see into the opposite building. The bistro is housed in restored wood-paneled living spaces; a former inhabitant of the Bieraria Veglia who had sold the building to Kulczyk – who happened to be visiting when I was – asserted they were close recreations of the previous form. The largest space, the auditorium, is glazed on one side to allow a view over the Inn and north up the valley. And the architecture works in tandem with the permanent installations. too, as Monika Sosnowska's *Stairs* (2016–17), a massive ribbon of painted steel dangling from on high, was lowered in from above before the Bieraria's new roof could be installed.

That day I came by train a crowd, mostly of retirement age, was gathered around the front desk. On a Saturday a few weeks later, coinciding with the Nomad art and design fair in Samedan and White Turf in St. Moritz, the demographic in the car park was of approximately the same age, though more fur and dermal injections were in evidence. On Instagram, the museum announced it had 5,000 visitors in its first eight weeks. The venue's novelty and recent press coverage will boost these numbers, but it looks impressive in comparison with the Kirchner Museum in Davos, whose 2017 annual report cited 17,578 visitors. The more easily accessible, and larger, Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur reported 47,053 visitors in 2017, with Not Vital's major exhibition being a particular draw that year. By the Muzeum's own statement, this is an ‹institution in formation,› so what visitors come to see is not necessarily obvious. From anecdotal evidence the building is a key attraction, as is the buzz around the diminutive Polish millionaire and her immense investment in the institution, cultivated by their publicity campaign.



Muzeum Susch, photo Studio Stefano Graziani, courtesy Muzeum Susch, Art Stations Foundation CH

The Muzeum's stated aims follow several strands: an exhibition program centering around temporary exhibitions by invited curators and solo exhibitions; a small-scale annual conference, *Disputaziuns*, that has already taken place twice; a choreography program titled *Acziun Susch* and building on *Stary Browar Nowy Taniec* that aims between art and dance; *Temporars Susch*, a residency program; and *Instituto Susch*, or *The Women's Centre for Excellence*, a joint venture with Chus Martinez at the Art Institute at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design in Basel which has resulted in one symposium in 2018, with the next one scheduled for April 4–5 of this year. Thus, the Muzeum is not the kind of institution housing

Kulczyk's collection that had been proposed for the Polish sites. The site-specific installations are large-scale but make up the Muzeum's only collection; temporary exhibitions are likely to draw on its backer's private collection, but need not, and only approximately 40% of the current exhibition is from that collection. Nor has the Muzeum Susch benefitted from any outside funding thus far; while no figures have been released about expenditure or running costs, Kulczyk's Art Stations Foundation CH is a not-for-profit foundation. Its stated goals are: to open the first publicly accessible center for contemporary art in the Engadin, to promote dialogue between Western and Eastern art production, to combine the concept of a museum with that of artists' studios, thus combining the display and the production of art, to serve as a center for the production of knowledge about art and the production of art, and to operate a residency program.[4] The foundation has a board of five individuals, and the small staff at the museum, including Mareike Dittmer, formerly of Frieze, who is Director of Art Stations Foundation CH, and Krzysztof Ko?ciuczuk, recently of documenta 14 and now Managing Curator, are kept very busy. Gra?yna Kulczyk is also, I am told, particularly hands-on in the Muzeum Susch's operation, present on site nearly every day in the initial stages.



A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women, courtesy Art Stations Foundation CH, Muzeum Susch © B?a?ej Pindor for Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation CH

The Muzeum's feminist bent and an emphasis on works by female artists are not mentioned in the foundation's goals, but come to light in interviews with Gra?yna Kulczyk as well as in the joint venture with the art school in Basel, which is explicitly feminist in focus, and in the site-specific installations, with four male artists to eight female. Not to mention the exhibitions program: the show marking the museum's opening titled *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* has a 6:31 male-female ratio. Curated by Kasia Redzisz of the Tate Gallery, it opens with Hannah Wilke's *Through the Large Glass* (1976), a 6mm film in which she performs several versions of a striptease seen through Marcel Duchamp's eponymous work installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The reflexive title is borrowed from Siri Hustvedt's essay in response to an exhibition of Pablo Picasso, Max Beckmann, and Willem de Kooning with the rather tone-deaf title Women. Wilke's film performs a volte-face, which is more of an exception in an exhibition primarily about demonstrating or revealing. It might have been called *Women Showing Men Things they Would Rather Not See*, with squidgy

orifices, painful depictions of childbirth. and full-on reclamation of sex (and this is far from all). While it is enjoyable to see the tables turned and discomfort given to customarily untouchable (male) gallery viewers, women nonetheless remain primarily bodily and emotive beings and only secondly cerebral. Still, there are many notable works in this exhibition, which follows Wilke with the rather mournful note of Iris von Roten's flower painting, work that offered women's rights campaigner von Roten solace when she met widespread societal rejection for what, at the time (the 1950s), was a radical feminist position.



A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women, courtesy Art Stations Foundation CH, Muzeum Susch © B?a?ej Pindor for Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation CH

The choice of autodidact artist and healer Emma Kunz as the museum's second temporary exhibition, opening in July, reflects the revival of interest in Kunz's work in recent years and perhaps an intention to engage with Swiss art. (Swiss curators Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen, who were to be curators of the residency program, are no longer, and Jacqueline Burckhardt is equally no longer on the foundation's board.) While a Swiss connection is evident in the craftsmanship employed in the fabric of the museum, the greater emphasis within the art exhibited is Polish, as per Kulczyk's biography and collection. Advantageously so, for works such as the permanent installations by Magdalena Abakanowicz and Paulina O?owska, the latter blending the cultural histories of Kraków and the Engadin, are well worth seeing, as are pieces from Kulczyk's collection by Alina Szapocznikow, for example. The contemporary cultural landscape that physically surrounds Susch, meanwhile, becomes ever more cosmopolitan and only tangibly linked to its location, with programming focusing on wealthy collectors from around Europe who spend winter weeks in the Engadin. The Muzeum may be the first institution in the valley, but the Andrea Caratsch, Karsten Greve, Hauser & Wirth, Monica de Cardenas, Tschudi and von Bartha galleries all find it worthwhile having an Engadin base to sell to this clientele, not to mention Eva Presenhuber and Galleria Continua that have also dipped a toe in the local water.

The Muzeum's aims go beyond the remote valley: links are being forged through the program with Pozna?, Basel, and London, too, thanks to collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery where their Emma Kunz exhibition runs from March to May this year. Ambitions are evidently high, for while the buildings are sumptuously crafted, they are not huge, yet the

program is extensive and multi-faceted. Visitors are given booklets with detailed information and yet more is available through the museum's own app. Contributions to past *Disputaziuns* can be viewed online. The language on the website is unapologetically challenging, and engagements with mediation and education have started at third level, rather than with the family workshops most institutions offer. These are strategic decisions a private individual can make; there is no ‹performance agreement› with a state funder to be upheld. All the same, the fact that this is Kulczyk's private endeavor is mentioned regularly. On a table by the (as yet bare) library above the bistro, she features prominently in the recent newspaper clippings scattered alongside a copy of Polish Vogue with Kulczyk on the cover. I had been invited to participate in a press trip to Susch in January, but the invitation was retracted when I communicated (the usual quid pro quo for press trips) that I intended to write for this publication and not one of the print magazines to which I also contribute. Brand-New-Life was not, the press agency representative organizing the event told me, on the list of approved journals provided by the client. This may reflect a lack of interest in more local, i.e. national, publications or perhaps more critical voices, or the significance Muzeum Susch places on visibility in more market-oriented high-profile organs.



Muzeum Susch, photo Studio Stefano Graziani, courtesy Muzeum Susch, Art Stations Foundation CH

«The primary operation of art museums is the turning of bourgeois domestic culture into public culture,» Andrea Fraser writes.[5 [[sitetree_link,id=]#A5]] In this sense, the Muzeum Susch is more of the same. This odd private-public relationship is in the DNA of museums,

and so as a critic I could write that the new institution entirely fulfils the traditional remit. Yet Fraser also writes about how her early concern to highlight sexism in the art system was outweighed by its overwhelming classism: the easy access available to the fortunately born and privileged, the barriers to operational rather than observing functions for others, and often blinkered views of what constitutes culture. The Muzeum creates barriers to access through its geographical location, and, more importantly, seems primarily to serve an audience that is already potentially instrumental in constituting public culture. This is not novel; a contemporary private museum cannot ignore it and might try to overcome it. In this context, is feminism today low-lying fruit for the Muzeum's program, an easy target to pick in order to gain an air of edginess, while ignoring (to mix metaphors) the elephant in the room, the class stratification of the art system? The institutional hurdles for women artists that Linda Nochlin pointed out long ago have largely been lifted, the male bias in artists exhibited is already being corrected throughout the art system. Whereas Iris von Roten was so hounded by her peers, including feminists, that she withdrew from public discourse in the 1960s, the same statements made now are scarcely polemic. Classism, meanwhile, remains very much in evidence, the art market in particular being lubricated by hype, exclusivity, pedigree, and provenance – and the Muzeum Susch fosters that ambience. Of course, physical remoteness has advantages; there will, for example, be artists itching to spend residencies in snowy solitude. No museum can, or should try to be, all things to all people. The Muzeum could, nonetheless, be much more than an exercise in personal aggrandizement or a cultural power grab. I hope Grazyna Kulczyk and her team remain as radical as their language and stated ambitions suggest; for that to happen, the concern for their reputation might have to be shelved for a while.

[1] http://www.artstationsfoundation5050.com/the-foundation/grazyna-kulczyk-en-gb/, accessed 5 March 2019
[2] Joanna Berendt «Polish Philanthropist, Grazyna Kulczyk, Is Seeking to Open Museum in Warsaw,» in *The New York Times,* 30 November 2015, https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/polish-philanthropist-grazyna-kulczyk-is-seeking-to-open-museum-in-warsaw/
[3] Georgina Adam, «Grazyna Kulczyk's collection on show at Boadilla del Monte, Madrid» in *Financial Times,* 7 March 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/475032c4-9966-11e3-b3a2-00144feab7de
[4] https://www.fundraiso.ch/sponsor/art-stations-foundation-ch/ (the Art Stations Foundation CH's entry in the cantonal registry of foundations) accessed 5 March 2019
[5]Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights,* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, p. 5.

AOIFE ROSENMEYER

Belfast-born Aoife Rosenmeyer has worked at Kunsthalle Zürich since late 2019, following more than 10 years as a freelance critic and translator in Switzerland. She continues to write and think independently.

This contribution is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0 International (Creative Commons, Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives). Images and videos integrated into the contribution are not included in the CC BY-NC-ND License. For any use not permitted by legal copyright exceptions, authorization from the respective copyright holders is required.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930172