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K21 Global Art Award  
<https://www.frieze.com/partner-content/sponsored/kunstsammlung-nordrhein-westfalen-susanne-gaensheimer-bets-on-diversity>

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Tadaskia



## ‘An Institution for Everybody’: Susanne Gaensheimer Bets on Diversity

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen director on bringing the museum’s collection into the 21<sup>st</sup> century



*As German cultural institutions face budget cuts and shifting audience expectations, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is responding with bold changes – from diversifying its collection to rethinking how art is presented. Ahead of ‘Rethinking the Museum II’, a symposium that gathers international voices to reflect on the evolving role of museums, director Susanne Gaensheimer speaks with frieze associate editor Chloe Stead about balancing populism with scholarship, broadening access and reshaping the museum for a new generation.*

**Chloe Stead** In their 2025 budget, the German federal government made significant cuts to culture spending. How has Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen been affected?

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**Susanne Gaensheimer** To address the shortfall, we've had to place greater emphasis on increasing our income. This involves not only attracting higher visitor numbers through popular exhibitions – such as our current show of Marc Chagall – but also generating additional income through securing sponsorships and renting out museum spaces for events.



Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen K21. Courtesy Kunstsammlung NRW Auflösung; photograph: Sebastian Drüen

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**CS** What's your attitude toward so-called blockbuster exhibitions? Earlier this year, you showed the photography of German actor Lars Eidering, which was criticized by some in the press for being too populist.

**SG** We are not some kind of small, avant-garde Kunsthalle. We are the largest museum for modern and contemporary art in North Rhine-Westphalia, so we have to be an institution for everybody. The art crowd makes up one to three percent of our audience; the rest are people who may not have any particular connection to art but want to have a nice afternoon in a museum. We can't be arrogant about that. We still do high-end, academic exhibitions, such as the Mike Kelley retrospective or 'Queer Modernism 1900 to 1950', which opens this September, but we also need to present shows that reach a large audience – like Eidering and Chagall. Lars's show was very popular with 16- to 25-year-olds, which is normally a very difficult demographic to reach.

**CS** One of the ways you have attracted new audiences is by diversifying the collection. What can you tell me about this process?



Prof. Dr. Susanne Gaensheimer. Photograph: Andreas Endermann



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**SG** When I arrived seven years ago, the collection was incredibly dated. In the entire collection at K20 - which spans early modern and post-war art – there were only two women artists. And, of course, works by artists from non-western countries were entirely lacking. In 2021, I organized the first 'Rethinking the Museum' conference, to consider how we present collections today. We invited artists and curators from whom we wanted to learn, including Doryun Chong from M+, Raqs Media Collective and Rein Wolfs from Stedelijk Museum.

## I would be very proud to be known as the person who transformed this museum

**CS** How did you ultimately decide what to purchase?

**SG** I departed from our collection. We have a focus on surrealism and minimal art, so my first exhibition was with Carmen Herrera, followed by Lygia Pape. Within the context of these surveys, it was much easier to find high-quality artworks to purchase. With Pape, we had the incredible chance to acquire a very early, beautiful painting from the early 1950s directly from the personal estate of her daughter. After we made the exhibition 'Surrealism in Egypt', we acquired works by three surrealist painters from Cairo – Hassan El-Telmisani, Fouad Kamel, Mayo – which are now hanging in the collection. Almost 50 percent of the works are now by women, with 25 percent coming from non-western artists.

**CS** In 2024, you completely rehung the collection under the title 'Your Museum! Your Collection: Masterpieces from from Etel Adnan to Andy Warhol'. How has this affected your audience?



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'Your Museum! Your Collection! Masterpieces from Etel Adnan to Andy Warhol', 2024, exhibition view.  
Courtesy: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen; photograph: Linda Inconi

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**SG** What I like most is that I now see people from different nations and cultures in our museum – it's much more reflective of Dusseldorf's diverse population. The audience is noticeably younger. But it was a whole process – we also changed the way we communicate with visitors. We revised our wall texts so that they can be understood without specialist knowledge, and we try to offer better insight into the artists by including photographs and quotes that add context. A comprehensive digital guide allows visitors to put together their own tour of the collection and learn more about internationally renowned artists through audio talks or interview videos. We even invited a DJ (Wolfram) to develop a soundtrack for the collection ('Sound of the Collection') so visitors can listen to music as they view the works.

**CS** Later this month, you will stage 'Rethinking the Museum II'. Why did you decide to hold another symposium?

**SG** The first time we did it, it was really driven by the urgency of our own research. Now, after rehanging the collection, it felt like a good time to reflect on what we had done. We are inviting people who already reimagined the presentations of their collections, or who are currently working on building one, to add context to our work. We wanted our invited speakers to represent different regions, but also to reflect on the museums we are most engaged with. I've known Joanna Mytkowska for a very long time, for instance, and I'm really curious to see what she's done at the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, which opened a new building last year.

**CS** Apart from modernizing the collection and opening it up to new audiences, what exhibitions or projects are you most proud of?

**SG** I'm very proud of starting the K21 Global Art Award, which we launched three years ago. Artists receive a significant sum – 100,000 EU – funded by the Freunde der Kunstsammlung (Friends of K20 K21) and a private donor. The inaugural prize went to Senzeni Mthwakazi Marasela from South Africa, the second to Wang Tuo from Hong Kong, and now the third goes to Tadáskia from Brazil. It reflects the museum's global ambitions.

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Tadáskia. Photograph: Adriano Machado



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**CS** What do you want your legacy to be?

**SG** I would be very proud to be known as the person who transformed this museum into a space that is relevant to many people in all their diversity.

*Main image: Prof. Dr Susanne Gaensheimer. Photograph: Andreas Endermann*