

## Art Agency, Partners

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**“There are code words to push back against change”**

### A final interview with Okwui Enwezor



El Anatsui, *In the World But Do not Know the World* (2019). Installation shot of the current exhibition at Haus der Kunst, which was co-organized by Okwui Enwezor.  
Photo: Maximilian Geuter

By  Charlotte Burns

executive editor of In Other Words

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*Okwui Enwezor, the esteemed former director of the [Haus der Kunst](#), Munich, and a judge of both the [Sotheby's Prize](#) and the [Nomura Art Award](#), died aged 55 on 15 March. In his highly influential career as a curator he directed [Documenta](#) (2002) and the [Venice Biennale](#) (2015). In this interview, which took place in mid-December, he gives his trenchant views on why attendance figures are not the most important way of judging the quality of museum exhibitions. This interview took the form of a lengthy phone call during which I asked questions, typing answers while we talked. I sent the transcript to Okwui immediately after our conversation because we had been moving on and off record. He felt it “captured quite*

*succinctly what I relayed in my answers” and made a few minor corrections. This is the resulting interview.*

In my experience at Haus der Kunst, we did not fail in terms of attendance figures (in fact we experienced a rise in attendance due to some fundamental changes I made by adding non-paying exhibition programs such as the annual art commission in our main hall and creating a permanent gallery for the museum’s historical archive.) What we failed at was in the expectations of what constitutes a successful show. We need to underline the distinction between box office and attendance—and it depends on who is counting and how they are counting—then one can simply make a case for what is and is not successful.

For example, in Munich our magnificent Louise Bourgeois exhibition [[Louise Bourgeois, Structures of Existence: The Cells](#), February 2015—August 2015] attracted a shockingly low attendance of 70,000 visits, yet when the same exhibition travelled to the [Garage](#) in Moscow, [Guggenheim Bilbao](#), and the [Louisiana Museum](#) outside of Copenhagen it attracted 190,000, 620,000 and 230,000 visitors respectively in each of these venues. This leads to the question of what kind of exhibition the public in Munich wants to see, because certainly the exhibition won the popularity contest in each of these non-German cities.

I also think that attendance figures have to take into consideration the issue of regional versus metropolitan situations of museums. A museum in Munich simply can’t compete with those in London, New York or Paris. But it certainly can in terms of the quality of ideas, scholarship and seriousness. It all depends on what each museum values. Museums that I respect and admire are not based on how crowded they are. After all, one goes to a museum for the quality of the experience, not for the crowd numbers. To my mind most museum attendance figures, from a purely scientific point of view are unverifiable. I truly believe there is a lot of fudging of numbers going on out there.

### **The whole notion of attendance and visitors was voodoo economics**

In our case, part of our budget—like many museums—definitely relied on box office, which is earned income from tickets paid to these exhibitions. It was very clear to me from the beginning that the whole notion of attendance and visitors was voodoo economics. I couldn’t understand how the counting was done. It was immediately clear to me when I arrived that we needed to develop other income streams in order to present a coherent picture of my directorship.

Haus der Kunst does not count visitor numbers, it counts visits to exhibitions, which means the number of clicks. So, you could buy a ticket and go into an exhibition and suddenly have to dash to the bathroom, so exiting the exhibition. When you return, another person at the door with a counter clicks you again. Then, in the middle of the show, you decide to go to the café to get a drink. When you come back to the exhibition, you’re counted again. Now, one could question how that translates to “visitors”. Museums use different euphemisms to arrive at the picture of success which attendance numbers supposedly represent.

I am not saying that visits themselves are the wrong way to count but it does have an impact on box office, so while you may have a high number of visits, you may also have declining income, which presents us with a paradox—those two things do not quite measure up.



Okwui Enwezor, former director of Haus der Kunst, standing between paintings in the exhibition “Histories in Conflict: Haus der Kunst and the Ideological Uses of Art, 1937-1955” in Munich, Germany, 04 June 2012. Photo: Sven Hoppe © Alamy

However, we do know there are certain reliable formulas to gin up attendance figures. If you wanted to draw a crowd the one option is the three Ms—Manet, Monet, Matisse—they never fail. The triumvirate of early Modernism are reliable crowd-pleasers. And, of course, Picasso stands head and shoulders above everyone else. But even with Picasso it depends on the kind of shows you do, the loans you can obtain and at what time of the season and where the show is presented, as well as what the curatorial conceit is.

### **If you wanted to draw a crowd, the one option is the three Ms—Manet, Monet, Matisse**

I am not in principle against large numbers—who doesn’t want loads of people to come to an exhibition you create? Of course, that is always a desire. But the mission of the museum is not about attendance figures and a mass of visitors—it is to show the complexity of the field of operation, exhibiting both artists who are very well recognized and popular and also artists who are deserving of critical attention. We always have to parse the difference between loved, admired and respected. Each of these play a major role in decision making.

I am not opposed to popular exhibitions: I have made them—my [Documenta](#) was visited by hundreds of thousands, as was Venice and others. But, for me, visitor numbers are only one measure and I think we need to be careful that we don’t make them the only measure of success. This is what museums are struggling with. During my tenure at Haus der Kunst I was willing to risk that fundamental misunderstanding in order to champion what I believed was the central mission of our institution, which was to engage with the field in as broad and complex a way as is possible for the public to grasp.

When I first arrived at Haus der Kunst there had not been, at least to my memory, a single monographic retrospective of a female artist in the previous 15 years and I said to my team very clearly that we needed to change that. Of course, there was some grumbling about political correctness—and, by the way, that term shouldn’t be used as a way of avoiding blind spots. I told my team that I wanted the museum to show more women artists as an expression of a critical institutional value and not to fill quotas. I wanted to show more female artists because that is a weakness in the history of the museum and I wanted to correct that, as well as make our program more diverse and show artists from diverse contexts and other parts of the world. It was my belief that there was a necessity to engage artists in a conversation that I feel is happening all around us. I didn’t want us to jump on a bandwagon but to play the role of thought leaders in the conversation not just in the bigger world but in our own unique microclimate in Munich.

### **A museum must also reflect the world that it is a part of, not just blithely rely on cynical popularity**

Exhibitions do not explain themselves and the meanings of artworks are not self-evident so we needed to create programming—lectures, symposiums, conferences and so on—to bring meaning to what we were doing. And that obviously is neither popular nor populist, especially when you feature artists of color.

Because I am a director of color there is an assumption immediately that [diversity] is about me—but it isn't. While nobody complains about the preponderance of white artists, the moment you exceed a certain number of artists from a certain part of the world, people notice and they think it is an agenda. So, you have to stand up, especially in a monocultural society, and do extra legwork to explain why the kinds of programming you do matters, and why certain kinds of exhibitions should happen.

The retrospective of Hanne Darboven [[Hanne Darboven: Enlightenment](#), September 2015-February 2016] was not elitist—she was the first female German artist of her generation that Haus der Kunst presented in a retrospective and I thought that was proper. Yes, it did not draw a huge public but for me it was a hugely powerful and rewarding exhibition.

## Popular v populist

I think that this is a very important issue, especially in the current political climate, not only in Germany but in Europe, in terms of the nationalist sentiment that is beginning to not only to become mainstream but to become normalized.

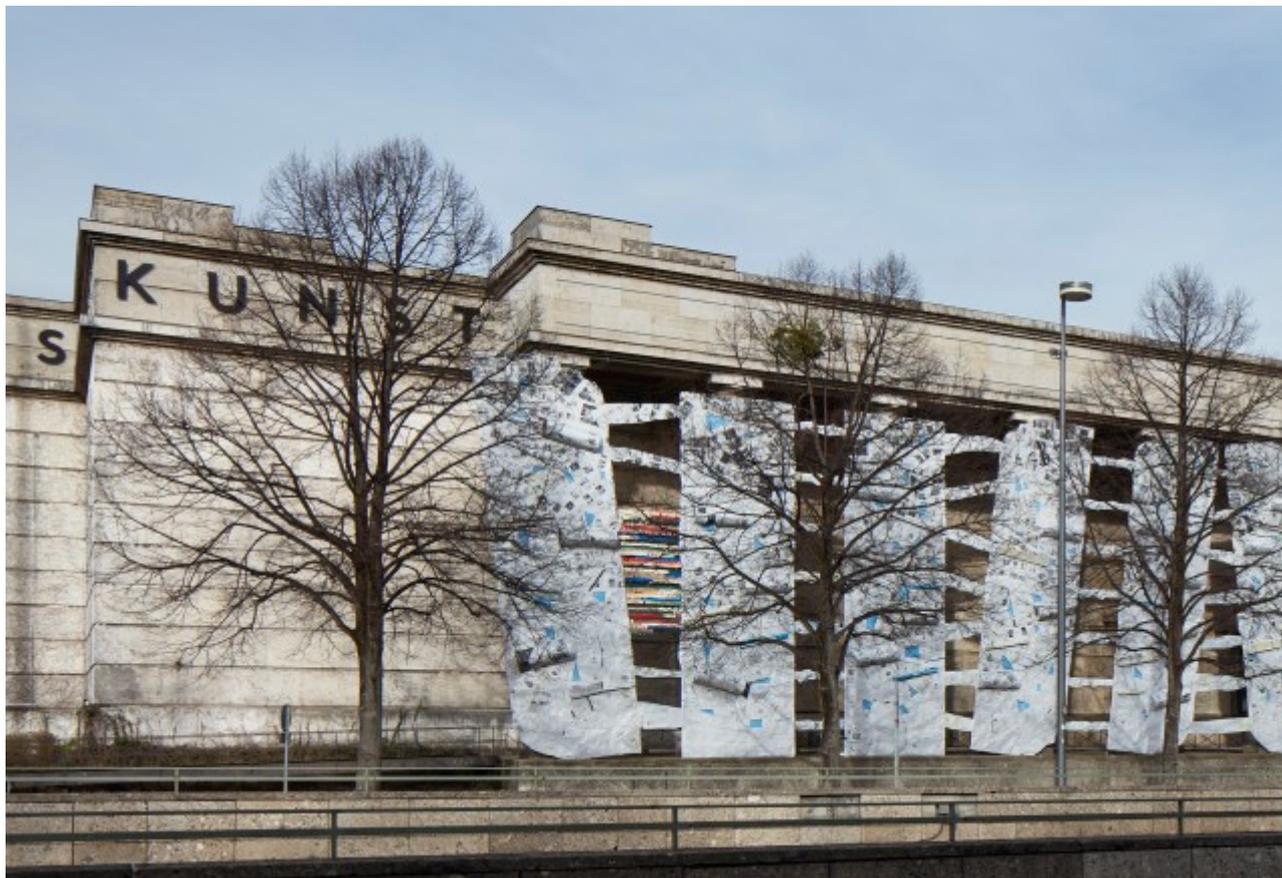
I remember when the refugee crisis initially started, I addressed my team and said this is a very serious issue and we really need to think of ways to engage, which might not be through an exhibition but it may involve programs or other things we can bring on board to show awareness. In fact, we did do a panel discussion immediately after the refugee crisis started. I am a huge believer in the idea of museum citizenship. A museum must also reflect the world that it is a part of, not just blithely rely on cynical popularity

I was also very much concerned about the term “refugee” because it had become shorthand for immigrants in general—it doesn't really matter who you are, because it's about the moment you look different and “Other”. So, we had to be careful in terms of broadening knowledge and to pay attention so we didn't fall into the trap of repeating stereotypes that were going around. When you look at the political campaign posters in Munich, they are deeply disheartening, and the way immigrants are referred to and the way refugees are dehumanized, the language of politicians and so on.

### **It doesn't matter who you are, because it's about the moment you look different and “Other”**

I feel there was a moment in the 1990s when it appeared that Germany was really much more open and accepting of the fact that there were immigrants in its midst. This is very difficult to speak about because you don't want to personalize it, but I have two examples relating to me. The day after I was announced as a director of Haus der Kunst in 2011, a *Berliner Zeitung* journalist Ingeborg Ruthe wrote the most nauseating racist article about my appointment and what it meant, about my role as a champion of African art and all of that. The headline of the report was “[An African in Haus der Kunst](#)”. She wrote that, in reality, I was just a global player, actually a New Yorker, and then concluded that I am a person who in Africa is referred to as a “coconut”—brown on the outside and white on the inside. I am not joking. It was so appalling that I didn't know whether to start my tenure by writing a letter of protest to the editors or to just simply ignore it. Ultimately, I ignored it, but it remains vivid in my memory.

The second example was a writer for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Susanne Hermanski. She wrote such aggressive and unbelievable nonsense about me and Haus der Kunst. Firstly, about my lack of commitment to the city of Munich, and generally to Germany, because I didn't speak German. I mean, the people who hired me knew I didn't speak German and that wasn't a problem at all. It was a code used to speak about the lack of integration of immigrants common in right-wing rhetoric. In any case, I did not view myself as an immigrant. I hadn't migrated to Germany, I was recruited for the job.



El Anatsui, *Second Wave* (2019). Installation on the facade of the Haus der Kunst. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich

Secondly, she said that nobody knows anything about my private life in Munich. I wondered who wanted to know and why that was relevant. Finally, the outrage she expressed when I took up the position of artistic director of the Venice Biennale was just incredible. But I became very much upset about the comments about my not speaking German, which was a kind of constant refrain in the press here, and the description of me being an enigma. Again, it has this idea of the unknowable foreigner—whatever that means.

You go through your job in a climate like this, with these incredible forms of depersonalization and naked racial animosity. Thank goodness in the last election populism did not win. But nonetheless, the extremist racist Alternative für Deutschland won 11%—how could this be? The campaign for “heimat”, homeland, of course is code word—and those code words are grist for the mill of white nationalist violence, be it in Charlottenburg, Leipzig, Strasbourg or Naples.

**There are code words to push back against change. Things like “quality” and “derivative”—which are actually just subjective terms that do not have anything to do with the issue at hand—tend to be the easy crutch**

Such violence exists not only in Germany but in the popular imagination. When people engage with different forms of erasure that have occurred in institutions, there are code words to push back against change. Things like “quality” and “derivative”—which are actually just subjective terms that do not have anything to do with the issue at hand—tend to be the easy crutch. So, museums in general have to face up to that and not become self-congratulatory when they present the work of so-called minority artists or underrepresented or under-known artists—they shouldn’t say “OK, we have done that now, so let’s turn back to the popular and the populist.”

Of course, this affects the kind of art you can exhibit. Nobody needs to tell you not to show this, you already know you can’t, so you create a climate that leads to a lack of curiosity and critical inquiry. It brings a chill to curating and the ability of institutions and curators to actually undertake more serious work. I am just hoping the curators left at the Haus der Kunst will be able to continue to defend the importance of these ideals and the value system I tried to bring to the institution while also charting their own path in the organization.

The [cancelation of the Joan Jonas](#) [in 2018] was done through the false claim of budget shortfall—whatever has been given

as the reason why is not true. And right after that they also canceled Adrian Piper's show, which was organized by MoMA and the Hammer with Haus der Kunst. They canceled it specifically because they said it was too expensive and would not be popular, that is what I heard—it was canceled after I left. So, the chickens have come home to roost. And, of course, these were two major female artists.

For me the whole idea of running an institution through reliance on blockbusters is not sustainable. We have to find another way of running credible institutions that are well-visited and popular but without sacrificing the other important things that are part of our field and value system. If museums are packed with people but still believe they need the support of blockbusters then there is a problem—if museums want to have blockbusters even though they have 60 million visitors a year, well, that's a tension between visitor numbers and box office.



Okwui Enwezor, former director of Haus der Kunst. Photo: Andreas Gerbert

Sometimes the economics of having a very popular museum become unsustainable... Just add it up. Sometimes it becomes not really worth it because the popular shows are also the most expensive. Of course, I am not saying museums should depress their own visitor numbers willingly but these are things to consider when you talk about popularity—the costs, and the toll on staff.

One other thing is how you measure the success of every museum director in America who either retires or goes somewhere else—nobody ever talks about their intellectual achievements. It's just noted that they expanded the building and doubled the number of visitors. It's purely neoliberal mumbo jumbo. It's not about content or equity or anything else. No, their achievement is just the amount of money raised to build a new wing named after some... oligarch.