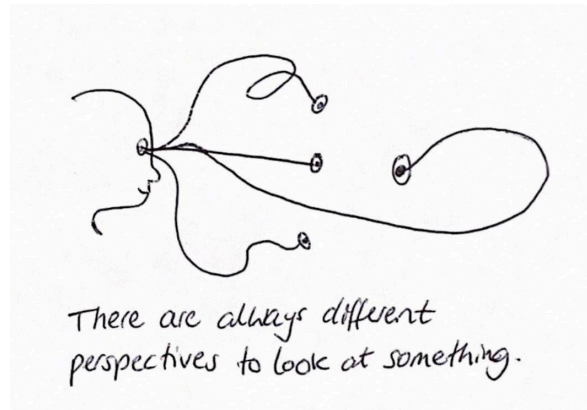


Neutrality الحيادية Neutralität

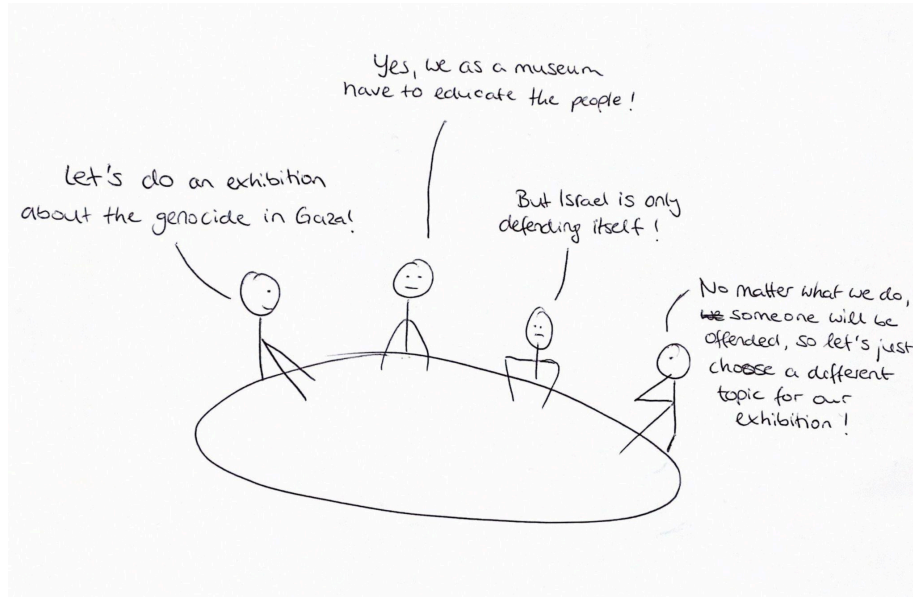
By Lisa Firlus



“Perspectives” by Lisa Firlus

“Museen zeigen Geschichte und Geschichte ist nun mal Geschichte.” (which translates to “Museums present history and there is just one history.”), my uncle once said when we were talking about my master program “Management and Communication in Museums”. I talked a lot about our curriculum and the role of museums with my friends and family and we often ended up talking about museums being or rather not being a neutral institution. I got the impression that, as my uncle, a lot of people have the idea of a museum presenting history or art in a neutral way and that they don't question the institution itself. But we tend to forget that museums have a purpose and it is not only and not always to contribute to the wellbeing of society. And as Grada Kilomba¹ puts it: “Theory has to do with biography and biography with theory.” So we can not forget that museums as an institution consist of people. Of people who have a biography that influences their way of thinking.

¹ Grada Kilomba is a Black Portuguese psychologist, artist and writer whose work focuses on memory, trauma, gender, racism and post-colonialism.



“Silence” by Lisa Firlus

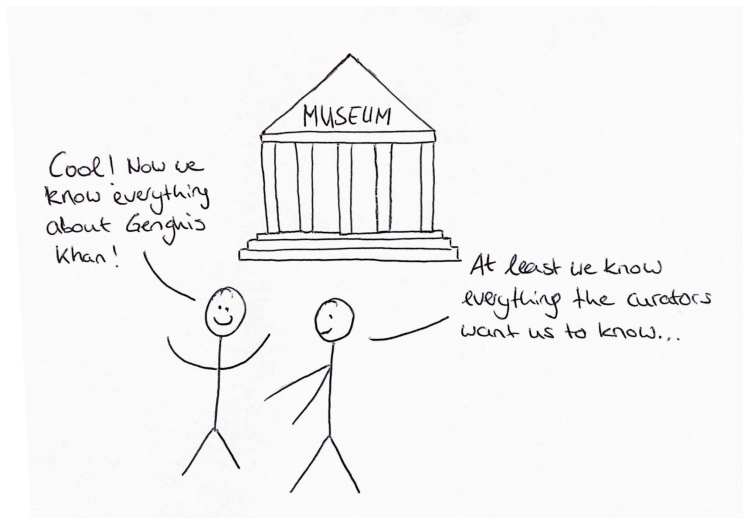
The political system and climate the museum operates in, has also a huge impact on the museum's work. Since museums are often governmental institutions, they rely heavily on the approval of their sponsors and funders. Democracy is no guarantee for unlimited free speech. Then there are also parties who cut cultural budgets or influential people who pressure museums to talk about topics in a certain way.



“Resources” by Lisa Firlus

So each and every story that museums tell, are told within a political environment and told by people with a specific biography and therefore from a certain perspective. Curating means selecting what you want the visitors to know and what you think is important. The museum decides whose stories are told and even more important whose aren't.

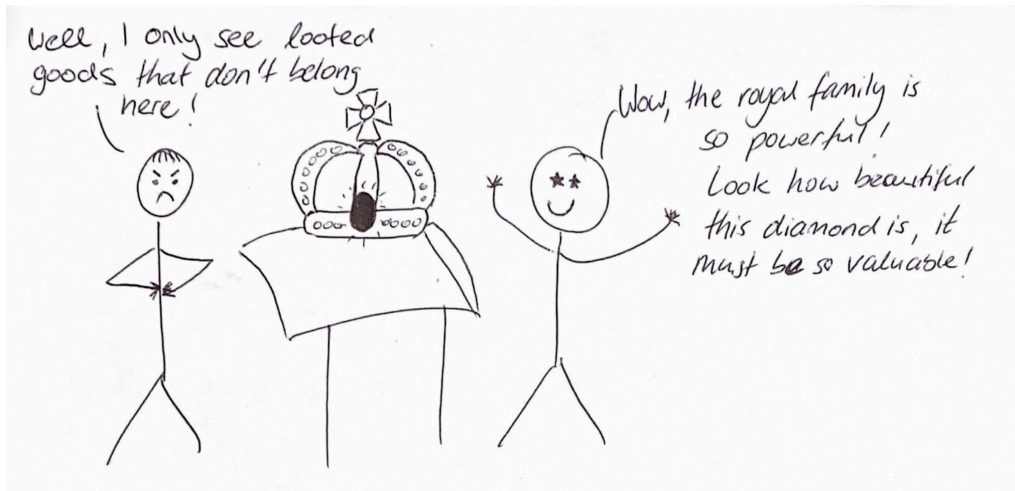
“We [as museum professionals] want to manipulate the visitor to feel something”.²



“Curating” by Lisa Firlus

Because what would a museum visit be, if you would feel nothing? And is that even possible? You always feel something even if it is emptiness. And another may feel completely different about the same topic or art piece. Our individual background conditions the emotions we are feeling while visiting a museum. Even silence is a form of communication and therefore not neutral. You always position yourself in some way, if you like it or not.

² SAWA facilitator John-Paul Sumner on the 31th of October in Sharjah.



"Associations" by Lisa Firlus

With different perspectives and emotions being always involved, there is no such thing as neutrality and it therefore should and can not be the goal of museumwork. But what we should aim for is the awareness and transparency of our own perspective, the sensitivity to the emotions of others and the will to include diverse points of view in our daily work.

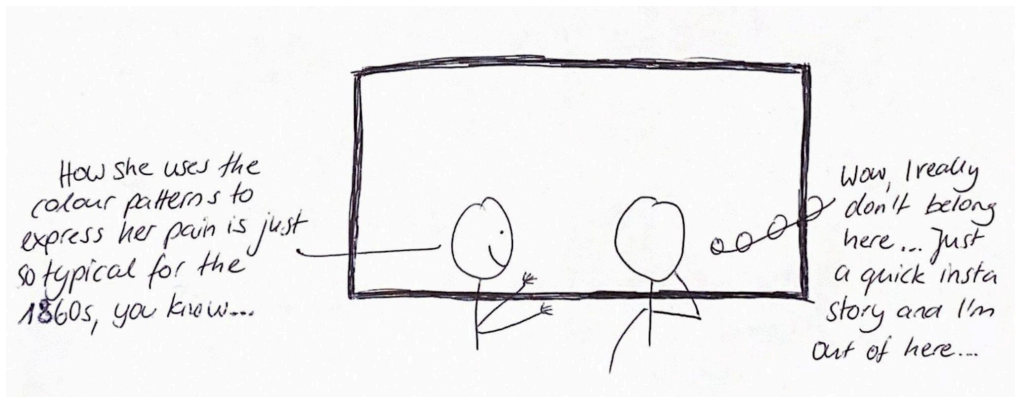


"Language" by Lisa Firlus

The SAWA experience and inspiration

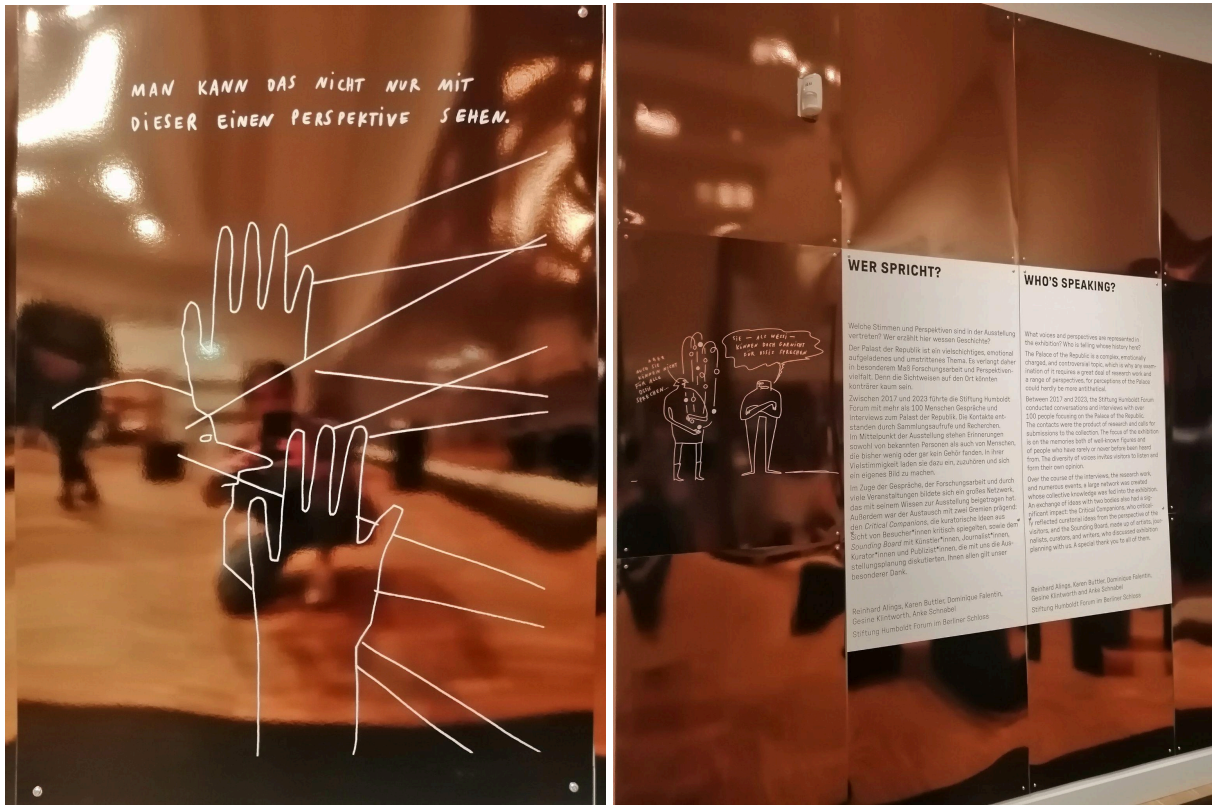
When we met in Berlin, we visited the temporary exhibition "Blown away: The Palace of the Republic" by the Stadtmuseum in the Humboldt Forum. In the entrance, the whole walls were covered in bronze paper and had little sketches

in them. They visualized the process of curating by showing different situations and conversations between the museum's staff and participants during workshops but also everyday situations that happen in museums. I was fascinated by the way these little sketches broke complex and emotional topics down to a few lines and words without losing any meaning. They made it accessible to a wider audience and motivated me to read the nearby texts.



"Misfit" by Lisa Firlus

The idea accompanied me during the following museum visits in Berlin and Sharjah and the online sessions. Since at SAWA we share a lot of our personal experiences and discuss our personal point of views, I felt that this would be a good way to visualize our work, thoughts and feelings without pointing out specific people or institutions. Not as an attempt to stay neutral but to make it universally applicable to all kinds of museums all over the world. But also to make them accessible to outsiders and non-museum professionals - like my uncle for example - to give them something to think about when going to a museum the next time.



Sketches in the temporary exhibition "Blown away: The Palace of the Republic" by the Stadtmuseum in the Humboldt Forum. (Photographed 14.05.2024 by Lisa Firlus)