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MUSEUMS/BERLIN

Leading by example

Gropius Bau was among the first major museums to reopen after pandemic-enforced closure. Director Stephanie Rosenthal reveals how she did it.

By Kimberly Bradley
Photography Robert Rieger

“A museum of the 21st century is a place where you give people the space to rethink,” says Stephanie Rosenthal, walking through Gropius Bau’s airy atrium. “What’s our relationship to land? How do we deal with the notion of borders? These are some of the key questions of our time,” she adds, explaining the themes of recent exhibitions. The fortysomething director took the reins of the Berlin museum in 2018. Her *modus operandi* since then has been to address contemporary issues while attracting a broad public. For her, it’s about letting people see art and ideas from a different perspective.

Under her direction, Gropius Bau has become one of the biggest draws in Berlin’s art scene and it could be a model of how a global museum can operate with agility and experimentation now and into the future.

Not so long ago, Gropius Bau was harder to pin down beyond the occasional blockbuster show. Opened in 1881 as a museum of applied arts, the



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(1) Façade reliefs from the original building, dating from 1881 (2) Annie-Claire Geisinger, head of communications (3) Gropius Bau’s main entrance was once blocked by the Berlin Wall

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1961

The Berlin Wall is erected next to Gropius Bau

1966

Gropius Bau is declared an historical landmark

1978

Renovations begin

1981

Official reopening



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(1) Getting into gear (2) Poster for the current Otopong Nkanga exhibition (3) Detail from Otopong Nkanga's 'Carved to Flow' (4) Wall-to-wall ideas (5) Beba restaurant's food truck (6) 'Down to Earth' exhibition (7) Things are looking up (8) Associate curator Natasha Ginwala, associate curator Clara Meister, director Stephanie Rosenthal and chief curator Julienne Lorz (9) Gropius Bau is in front of Berlin's House of Representatives

2001

Berliner Festspiele takes over management

2018

Stephanie Rosenthal begins as director

venue survived the tribulations of history (including near-demolition by an air raid in 1945) and, for a long time, focused on contemporary art, photography and archaeological exhibitions. The Renaissance-style building used to sit in front of the Berlin Wall, imposing and dark indoors. That's why Rosenthal decided to work with London-based architect Andreas Lechthaler to revamp the interiors – and rethink the role that the museum played in the city. “The building was very inward-looking,” says Lechthaler.

Rosenthal wanted Gropius Bau to be more future-facing and inviting. She and Lechthaler achieved that effect largely by taking things away. Black foils and walls covering windows were removed, allowing light to flood in and for the art to be visible from the outside. Skylights were deep-cleaned and one reception area removed; the atrium is now publicly accessible without a ticket – the architecture is making a visible statement of intent.

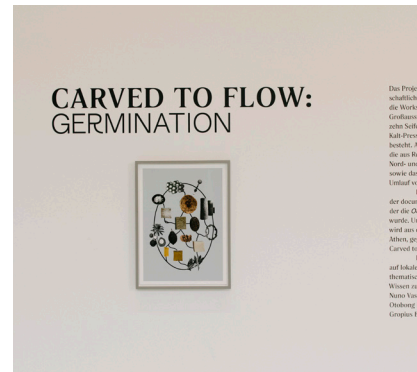
Even in the way exhibitions are designed, the team here are trying to challenge the tradition of dustier institutions: most shows have multiple entry points and not just one path through, which allows for freer interpretation by the visitors. An upstairs studio is now dedicated to a year-long artist's residency, which delivers on Rosenthal's idea that the museum should be a living space where art is not only shown but also produced. “The long-term goal is to create an institution where people want to



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spend time,” she says. “How do you feel when you come in?”

Many visitors say that they feel inspired and intrigued; often surprised and sometimes soothed. In May this year, Gropius Bau was one of the first European museums to reopen after the abrupt closures prompted by the pandemic, when Lee Mingwei's show *Li, Gifts and Rituals*, about hospitality and intimacy, began. Smart measures such as staggered entry, Plexiglass shields for singing performers and



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1881

Opens as a museum of decorative arts (as Martin-Gropius-Bau)

1945

Allied bombs damage the museum, nearly destroying the north façade



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arrows on the floor to guide visitors worked so well that other European museum directors called Rosenthal seeking advice on how a museum could calmly manage a crisis.

Even without many tourists, visitor numbers this spring and summer were greater than the museum had expected. “Berlin audiences are the best,” says Rosenthal. “They stay engaged and all generations visit; it's not like they're just ticking off a box.” Performance and temporary art in particular draws crowds. Gropius Bau is deliberately reaching out to new audiences: in January a series of performances as part of a global initiative by K-pop boy band BTS brought in people who hadn't set foot in a museum in years.



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Stephanie Rosenthal's tips for museums:

1. Don't follow a strict set of guidelines.
2. Be adaptive to political, social and aesthetic changes.
3. Let the museum's architecture and history guide you.
4. Consider place: Berlin's turbulent history, the international artists living there and our immediate audience are essential to Gropius Bau's work.
5. Be a good host.
6. Listen deeply to different perspectives.
7. Follow your passion.
8. Care about the artists and your team.

The principles guiding exhibitions are particularly relevant to current times. Along with “land”, both “care” and “repair” have been recent themes: latest project *Down to Earth*, curated by the Berliner Festspiele, rethinks sustainability and climate change through art and workshops with the public. The project avoids the use of electricity for lighting and temperature control. And that idea of care extends to the construction of the exhibitions as well: materials such as plinths are generally reused for multiple shows.

“We’re doing shows that no one else dares to do,” says chief curator Julienne Lorz. “People think about Gropius Bau in a different way now.” That often means jumping between big names with universal appeal and a hyper-local support of Berlin-based artists – a pool that is varied and vast. “What does it mean to have this institution in the centre of Berlin, and connect to the city’s artists?” asks associate curator Natasha Ginwala, referring to the museum’s moves to involve them as much as possible in the programming.

One of the reasons for Gropius Bau’s success is its ability to be many things at once without ever losing focus. Eating lunch together at a food truck set up by on-site Jewish-Middle Eastern restaurant Beba, the all-women core team exudes collaboration but not bland unanimity; all ideas can be heard. The curators aren’t afraid to combine contemporary art’s cerebral side with feminine

intuition: the first show under Rosenthal’s watch featured 1970s video art by Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, whose work is an abstract take on the female form. Nigeria-born Otobong Nkanga’s current show, *There’s No Such Thing as Solid Ground*, is also body-based and sensual; it’s the result of her year in residence at the museum in 2019.

That’s not to say that blockbuster shows don’t happen here; they do. On the agenda for March 2021 is a Yayoi Kusama show. But as the world has turned towards thinking seriously about living more gently, Gropius Bau is demonstrating to institutions how they can care for their audiences, their artists, and big ideas – and is making us care in the process. — (M)



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- (1) Museum to write home about
- (2) Shani Leiderman, owner of Beba, inside the restaurant's food truck
- (3) Walther König bookshop
- (4) Otobong Nkanga's 'Taste of a Stone, Kolanut Tales'