

Annual Conference ICOM Germany 2022

## Panel Museums Change Societies

Statement by

**Prof. Dr. Wiebke Ahrndt**

Director Übersee-Museum Bremen

President German Museums Association (Deutscher Museumsbund)

Talking about future is always talking about today, saying what is now important to us. It is also talking about oneself, our fears and wishes for the future.

Talking about future is also talking about power. As a citizen in a democracy, and as a director in a cultural institution, I can be an agent of change. My power is certainly limited, but it is, if I use it for these purposes, a potential for change.

Given the heterogeneity of the museum landscape and also the uncertainties we are currently facing, it is right, as Mr. Murawski does, to speak of futures, in the plural. Even if all museum professionals agree on common guidelines, to help us build the future, it will certainly take different forms, fortunately. The diversity of cultural expressions is at stake.

Talking about radical transformation is very motivating and attractive. but I am not sure that radical changes are necessary on the one hand and on the other really possible in the museums sector. We have seen this in the new definition adopted by ICOM this year. The values that this definition defends – diversity, participation, inclusion – are absolutely essential. But the former definition spoke of the museum “at the service of society and its development”. We now have a clarification of this passage, but no radical change.

The transformation is not only necessary but above all it is underway. Museums have never been monolithic institutions, inflexible, and closed to any desire for change. The mere fact that museums are open to the public binds them as a matter of principle to the outside world. Museums cannot live without taking into consideration their environment. This is the very definition of the museum. Museums have been in constant transformation since they existed. The challenge today and the question raised in this workshop is whether the museum is able to produce actively the better world we imagine and wish.

I think that the world (the cultural, political and cultural environment) transforms museums more than the opposite. If we want to change the world, museums may not be the most appropriate instruments. But it is possible to contribute to it. As for my humble role, I am committed to ensuring that my institution systematically and strategically opens up in at least two dimensions.

The first is the integration in my team of professionals from communities of origin bringing their perspective and expertise to treat objects from non-Western cultures. They profoundly enrich our approach to the objects that are deposited and preserved in our institution. Their work and sensitivity is also perceived externally by visitors, users and partners, which we hope is also a cultural enrichment for everybody.

Our second axis of openness is our digital transformation. Indeed, we not only want to transparently present all the objects and make accessible the knowledge we have about these objects all over the world, we also want to set up international collaboration processes that allow our museum to exist and above all to develop in the digital world.