

Symposium «Over Her Dead Body Redux – Feminism for the 21st Century»

Welcome Address Corine Mauch

Friday, October 20, 2017, University of Zurich

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Guests from Switzerland and from abroad
Michael Hengartner,
Judith Butler,
Elisabeth

It is a great honour for me to welcome you here in Zürich.

Two things connect me to Elisabeth Bronfen, whom we are celebrating today: A passion for good food – we know each other from a traditional gathering to eat asparagus. But more importantly in this context – we are also connected by our roles as women in offices of public interest. When you, Elisabeth, came to the University of Zurich 24 years ago, you were the youngest female professor in the German-speaking region. You immediately waded into public debates in your lively way – that's when you encountered chilly headwinds now and again.

A young professor who pointedly adopted her own stance and sought the limelight and publicity rubbed people up the wrong way. A woman, and certainly an intellectual woman, was not expected to go for this type of publicity. I myself was working at the ETH Zürich at the time - the wind blowing there was not exactly feminist, either.

When I was elected the first female Mayor of Zürich in 2009, I experienced in person how the media and male-dominated editorial offices reported on a woman as a political player (always comparing of course to the 'norm' of my male predecessors), and how plainly gender stereotypes were reproduced. Today, I think both of us are measured more by our achievements in politics and academia.

Ladies and gentlemen, with this symposium starting today, you are celebrating an extraordinary intellectual personality whose refreshing intelligence has gained admiration beyond the confines of academia. To mark this occasion, you will be discussing the importance of a 'Feminism for the 21st Century' – a current and highly relevant topic, not only from the academic perspective but for the society at large. It is an issue that engages me personally as Mayor of the city of Zürich and as a citizen.

It is a particularly great pleasure that you, Judith Butler, and other prominent feminists have come to Zürich on this occasion. Naturally, Judith Butler's 'Gender Trouble' was a crucial reading in my feminist book group, which was formed around 25 years ago and still meets regularly (although for some time now our meetings have centred mainly around food ...).

The feminism of the nineties has had a major impact. As the Mayor of Zürich, I am proud to say that equality of men and women, of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, intersex and trans people is highly valued in the city of Zürich, and our equality policy has a broad support base, not only in civil society but also in the political realm.

And yet: women are still vastly under-represented in positions of political, economic and academic power. Despite these inequalities, I am noticing a certain indifference to gender-specific discrimination. Or is it rather a kind of pessimistic resignation, classing it as 'normal'? But we refuse to accept this. Because this is not what real equality looks like.

The fact that a businessman showing off sexist statements was elected President of the United States is only the tip of a social and political backlash. I am also seeing fundamental feminist achievements called into question here in Zürich. Power structures, which developed on the grounds of cultural and historical gender roles, are hardly being challenged anymore with passion. Instead, I observe a recurrence of references to a 'natural' gender hierarchy.

For example, relevant parties, but also a reputable Swiss newspaper calling itself liberal, are waging a war against Gender Studies by discrediting this discipline as using unscientific methods and being overly ideological. It is ultimately a campaign against critical thinking on existing power structures and against minorities of all kinds.

Fortunately, the anti-feminist, retrograde tendencies are also generating counter-movements. I am thinking of the global 'Women's Marches' or the hashtag 'Aufschrei' ('outcry') in Germany and Switzerland which led to a public debate on Sexism. Let's take advantage of this momentum.

I can also observe an increasing interest in the history of women's liberation. For example, young historians are working on a book about the Villa Cassandra, which was the first education and leisure centre for women in Switzerland in the nineties. As a former active partner and collaborator of Villa Cassandra, I am very happy about that.

While the feminist theory of the 1990s enabled experimenting with rigid gender identities in a playful way, I personally also felt this fight for equality to be a severe matter.

I am convinced that today we still are in need of this atmosphere of awakening that characterized the 1990s feminism. Be it in the academic discourse, in political life or in social movements. We need a strong feminist foundation so that we can self-confidently and optimistically – in theory and in practice – engage in promoting a fair and true-to-life gender balance. Equality is compulsory. As in figure skating: It is a compulsory dance, but there is also free skating, of course.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you an insightful and an inspiring symposium on Feminism for the 21st Century.

Thank you.

(Es gilt das gesprochene Wort)