

Showing How Literature Breathes

Heike Gfrereis, Director of the Department of Museums at the Marbach German Literature Archives

Heike Gfrereis graduated in German Language Studies at the University of Stuttgart and is still lecturing there today. As Director of the Literature Museums in Marbach, she brings the fresh viewpoints of students to solemn gatherings and confronts scientists by countering with the elemental force of sources.

“The Value of the Original“ is written in large lettering in the foyer of the Modern literature Museum in Marbach, 25 kilometers from Stuttgart. In a room of exposed concrete and glass, it breathes spaciousness. In the center stands Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s Landsberg automatic poetry dispenser. But no books are to be seen!

The books come two rooms farther on, in the permanent exhibition collection called “nexus,“ which stands for connection and interrelation. In the glass showcases, lit by hundreds of cold light lamps, stand crowds of authors and thinkers of the 20th century, shoulder to shoulder: Rilke, Hesse, Ernst Jünger, Sebald, Gadamer, Heidegger. And of course Kafka, whose “Process“ is one of the highlights of the collection and causes prep-school students to make the pilgrimage from afar to Marbach. In addition to books and manuscripts there are also rows of souvenirs of the authors: letters, postcards, typewriters, even baptismal gowns and other mementos. “Our soul,“ is how Heike Gfrereis terms these treasures which are intended to create a personal bond with literature and both break down barriers by appealing to all the senses but also establish distance. “They show that literature is something true and real. And that it is not something which is self-evident, but rather a construct: a world of its own.“ Gfrereis has been Director of the museums on Marbach’s “Schiller

Hill“ since 2001. Prior to that, the 46-year old was an assistant at the University of Stuttgart’s Institute of Literature, where she also wrote her doctoral thesis. “Back then,“ smiles Gfrereis, “German Studies in Stuttgart were stamped by grand old men and were flirting with their own demise. It was an atmosphere in which I labored with the question of how to bring literary studies out of academic circles



As presented by the Marbach Museum of Literature, texts become concrete and palpable in their formation processes.



“Reading from sources often becomes an exercise in a different, more precise form of reading: a revelation.” Dr. Heike Gfrereis, Director of the Literature Museums in Marbach am Neckar.

and light a fire with them in the minds and hearts of people.“ Literary studies have always opened up for me the freedom of thought and the vitality of our use of language. Why should that die out?“ The Marbach Museum of Literature, a department of the world-renowned German Literature Archives, contains the collected historical highlights of German literature from 1750 down to the present and had no less respect in the past as a long-standing authority than today. One of Heike Gfrereis’ first challenges was an exhibition commemorating Hermann Hesse’s 125th birthday. The German Literature Archives possesses most of the gigantic literary estate left behind by the Nobel Prize winner in literature. The expectations for a major presentation of them in full was overwhelming.

A COUNTER-DIDACTIC MUSEUM MODEL

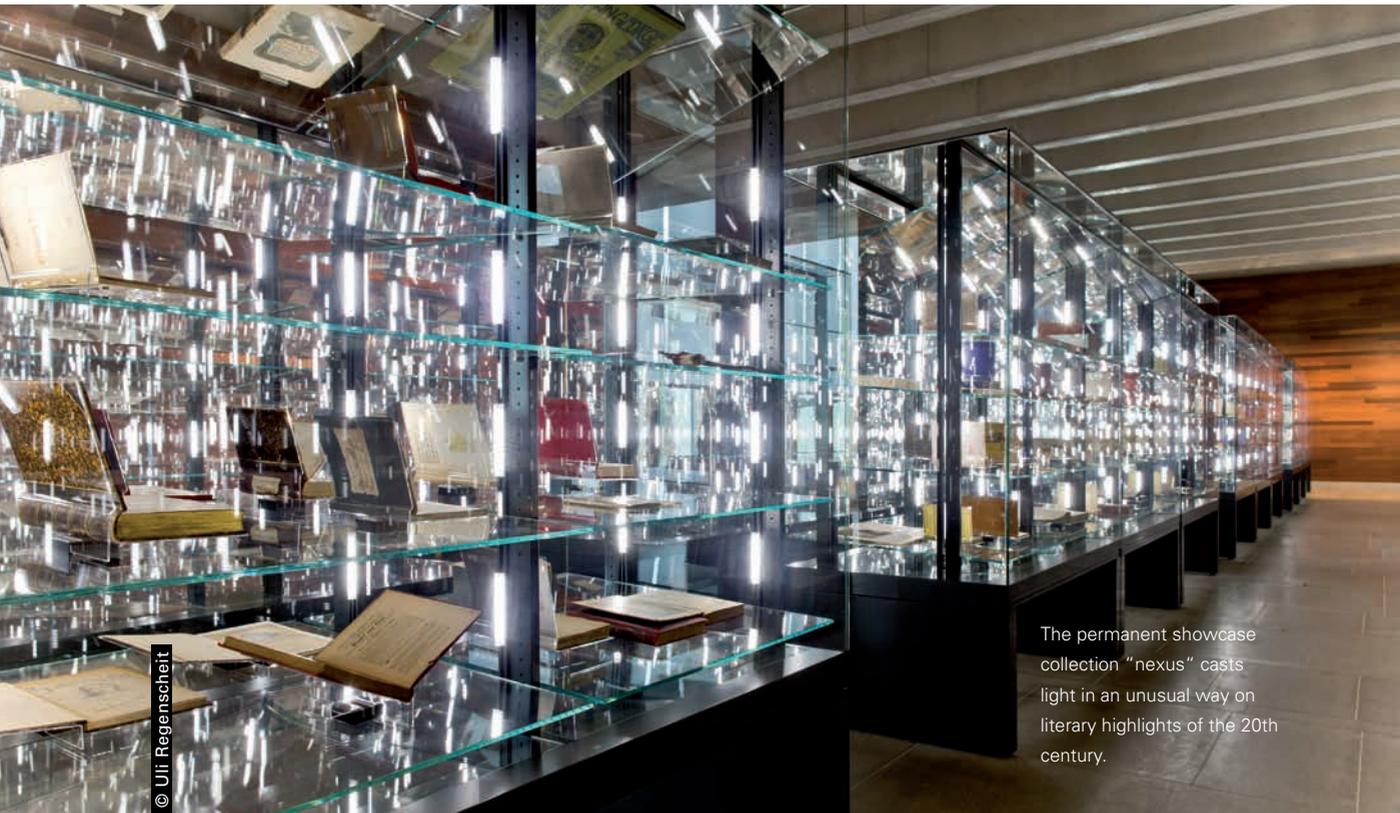
But Gfrereis, the bustling literature expert, developed a counter-model of the classical, author-dominated exhibition. She reversed the original Latin motto about things which cannot be shown in Hermann Hesse’s novel “The Glass Bead Game“ and presented handwritten texts showing how the novel is constructed. Gfrereis explains: “Materials and handwriting have their own very semantic role, and it has an impact over and above the mere experience of reading a book. “Reading from sources often becomes an exercise in a different, more precise form of reading: a revelation.“ But

creativity is needed to show the meta-level. True to the exhibition’s title “Into the Glass Bead Game,“ Gfrereis suspended the manuscript’s pages like a string of beads on a long band. “Hesse wrote a lot by hand on printed pages, revealing a world of writing on one side and a world beyond print on the other.“ And Hesse later admitted elsewhere that he deliberately wanted to counter the Third Reich by turning the pages over.

This approach leaves public favorites like the writer’s watercolors lying in a drawer. Or presents them in glass showcases just like manuscripts instead of hanging them up on a wall, as usual. It’s confusing, but it works. The Marbach museums receive 60,000 to 80,000 visitors a year, “and it’s precisely the modern collections that manage to interest people once more for classical literature.“ This radical style of presenting literature has sparked a regular boom on the museum scene. “A whole series of literature museums are now going up, in Vienna, for example, and in Frankfurt and America. And we’re acting as advisors for literature archives in Georgia and Moscow.“

SOCIAL CONTACT AS LONG-TERM TASK

But even so: bringing literature down to the grass roots level, making it a permanent feature in the cultural landscape of the Central Neckar River region, remains a long-term task. “Literature exhibitions tend to intimidate potential visitors,“



© Uli Regenscheit

The permanent showcase collection “nexus” casts light in an unusual way on literary highlights of the 20th century.

as Gfrereis well knows. “We have to constantly find new ways to lower that barrier.” That applies to themes, too: for example, the “Book that Moves” exhibition in the autumn of 2015 will aim to show exactly the mobility, the entry into other worlds, that is possible with books. The second avenue of approach is an adjunct program which opens the museums to the landscape lying all around and to the famous authors who lived there: the fortress of Hohenasperg (Schubart), the city of Ludwigsburg (Schiller) and the Michaelsberg Hill (Mörrike). Or again, the Museum Director puts the focus on literature in connection with wine in the context of an actual wine-sampling event. And to reach out to schools, she initiated a show-and-tell by children with objects left behind by the authors Erich Kästner and Michael Ende. She also works closely with the city of Marbach, which often lets stores remain open for business on Sundays during exhibitions in the literature museum. Gfrereis is convinced that “No museum today can survive with exhibitions alone.” On the other hand, co-

operation with other museums in the region needs more work. Even though the cultural program of the region lists Marbach as an “Outpost,” Stuttgart remains far away, so that “it is hard to become part of the cluster of museums there.” But the gap is being bridged through exchanges with the University of Stuttgart, where Heike Gfrereis has now been named Honorary Professor. The Marbach Archives are an important drawing card for literary studies in Stuttgart, especially for the “Stuttgart Research Center for Text Studies” which was established in 2014 and works to network methods of classical hermeneutics with the information possibilities offered by both material and digital media. Becoming acquainted with the archives is obligatory for the students, “because without archives, ‘material studies’ of literature remain merely a matter of theoretical discourse.” And many trainees and museum “Ciceros” (guides) come from the University to experience first-hand that it is quite possible to find a job when one has made a personal choice for the study of literature.

REFRESHING PERSPECTIVES FROM THE OUTSIDE

In return, the students often bring the refreshing perspective of outsiders with them into the Museum, as was the case during a small exhibition of texts by Eduard Mörike. The young people, at first a bit at a loss in dealing with this Swabian lyrical writer, took refuge in humor. At short notice, for example, they visualized Mörike's famous poem about the rabbit, the hen and the egg in the form of fried eggs. "Categories of humor like that make it clear that it is permissible to take a few chances rather than blocking one's view by constantly looking for a deeper meaning in literature. Reading literature means: thinking for oneself, being critical, not hushing in prayer," says Gfrereis.

What is more, researchers from all over the world find themselves drawn here. "Marbach is a one-of-a-kind global location for Germanistic discoveries," says Gfrereis proudly. For example, the nearness to Marbach was a decisive criterion for Humboldt scholar Liliane Weissberg from Philadelphia's "Penn" University to select the University of Stuttgart for her research sabbatical.

REVOLUTIONIZING THE REVOLUTION

New impulses are planned this year from a top-to-bottom reorganization of the permanent exhibition: it will follow up on the "Little Revolution" of 2006 by once again turning what was then new on its head. The number of collections has grown by leaps and bounds, especially due to the purchase of the Suhrkamp Publishers' archives. Added to that are spectacular new acquisitions concerning living authors like Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Botho Strauß, Peter Handke or Martin Walser. Room is needed for their presentation. But another form of reception is also concerned. "We want to focus in future even more on writing." Only 333 of the current 1,300 exhibits are to remain. That will make visitors look more intensively, and each exhibit will become more significant.

Instead of a stack of papers from Kafka's "The Trial" only a few individual pages will then be on display. "We want our archive to show how literature breathes and thinks," says Heike Gfrereis. So it's no surprise that the new permanent exhibition is to be called "The Soul".

Andrea Mayer-Grenu

Stuttgart Research Center for Text Studies

The Stuttgart Research Center for Text Studies devotes itself to a methodical reflection concerning new approaches in text-oriented studies and also aims to help build bridges between different approaches in text-based disciplines as they seek to unlock, describe, and interpret the secrets of a text. It has three key areas: Hermeneutics, Material Studies (together with the

German Literature Archives in Marbach) and Digital Humanities (together with the University of Stuttgart's Institute for Natural Language Processing). The target of the Center is to carry out high-level, interdisciplinary, networked research in the areas of the textual sciences, to fortify instruction in these areas, and to encourage and support the next scientific generation. *red*