Ousted Cooper Hewitt Director Calls Investigation a ‘Sham’

In her first public remarks since she was forced to resign, Caroline Baumann said an inquiry that focused on her wedding was unfair and colored by sexism.

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In her first public remarks since she was forced to resign two weeks ago, the former director of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum called the investigation into the circumstances of her wedding, which led to her ouster, a “sham” colored by sexism.

“This is not how we treat human beings,” the former director, Caroline Baumann, said in comments released Thursday through her lawyer, Luke Nikas.

Ms. Baumann, 53, stepped down as director on Feb. 7 after the Smithsonian’s inspector general found she had violated conflict-of-interest rules in connection with her September 2018 wedding. The reason for her forced resignation has previously been reported, but new details about the investigation emerged on Thursday in an inspector general’s report obtained by The New York Times.

The report said that Ms. Baumann had used, or created an appearance that she had used, her “Smithsonian position for private gain” by obtaining free use of a Hamptons property for the ceremony, and giving the nonprofit affiliated with the property free use of Cooper Hewitt spaces for meetings; by obtaining a discounted wedding dress from a Brooklyn designer and then giving the designer a free ticket to a Cooper Hewitt gala; and by using Cooper Hewitt staff members to help publicize her wedding.

Ms. Baumann has disputed the report, which Mr. Nikas said “contains frivolous accusations that we will easily disprove with the documents and the witnesses involved.”

Seven of the 27 Cooper Hewitt board members have quit in protest. Her supporters contend that at worst, Ms. Baumann had made some ill-advised but innocent decisions, and that the Smithsonian had treated Ms. Baumann too inflexibly and bureaucratically in making her leave.

Though the board has primarily an advisory role, with major decisions made by the Smithsonian secretary, Lonnie G. Bunch III, several trustees said they should have been consulted before Ms. Baumann, the director of the Upper East Side museum since 2013, was pushed out.

“I learned nothing I didn’t know, except some more details of the investigators’ cluelessness and shoddiness,” the author Kurt Andersen, one of the trustees who resigned, said of the inspector general’s findings. “I still find it incomprehensible that the secretary decided these supposed infractions merited termination, and also that he didn’t seek advice from the board about this.”

The Smithsonian, which was created by Congress and is partly funded by taxpayers, is not technically a government agency, but it maintains policies similar to those of many federal offices, including conflict-of-interest rules. Like many agencies, it also has an inspector general to investigate potential wrongdoing.

“The Smithsonian abides by a code of ethical conduct, which demands the highest standards of honesty, integrity, professionalism, and loyalty to the institution,” the Smithsonian said in a statement Friday morning. “As a public institution subject to federal oversight, we must maintain a shared commitment to these core values and an expectation of ethical conduct in all of our activities.”

The inspector general’s report said its investigation was triggered by a complaint, from a source it did not identify, regarding Ms. Baumann’s wedding and other matters.

Investigators noted that Ms. Baumann had paid $750 for a dress from a Brooklyn designer whose gowns, according to her website, begin at $3,000. The designer, Samantha Sleeper, said in an interview with The Times that the price was fair because it was a simple dress she made herself, not an extravagant gown, and that Ms. Baumann had not promised her any favors.

But the inspector general’s report noted that shortly after her wedding, Ms. Baumann asked her staff to give Ms. Sleeper a free ticket, worth $1,700, to the annual National Design Awards gala that the museum held the following month. Ms. Baumann said she had not granted the ticket as a trade for the dress, and investigators noted that more than 100 of the nearly 500 people at the gala had received free tickets, which the museum often gave out if seats needed to be filled.
Nevertheless, the inspector general concluded that the price of the dress and the ensuing free ticket gave “an appearance that these actions were a quid pro quo,” a violation of Smithsonian conflict-of-interest policy.

The inspector general also faulted Ms. Baumann for receiving free use of an East Hampton property affiliated with a nonprofit, LongHouse Reserve, for the wedding ceremony. The property usually charges upward of $25,000 for events, according to the report, though officials of the nonprofit have characterized the ceremony as a small informal affair; the formal reception was held elsewhere, on Shelter Island. Ms. Baumann told the inspector general that she had asked to use the LongHouse property because she was friends with its founder, the textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen.

Ms. Baumann allowed LongHouse to use Cooper Hewitt rooms for two meetings, the first occurring nine months before the wedding and the second two months after the wedding, without charging rent.

According to the inspector general’s report, the value of the two rentals was $33,875 combined. It reached that figure by noting that corporations were required to donate at least $20,000 to use the spaces LongHouse used; the rest was based on hourly fees Cooper Hewitt typically charges companies that rent museum spaces.

Though the director has the power to waive rental fees for Cooper Hewitt rooms, the short time between her wedding and the LongHouse meetings “created an appearance that Baumann gave preferential treatment” and “that these actions were a quid pro quo,” the report said. It added that she should have reported the use of the Hamptons property as a gift.

Investigators also faulted Ms. Baumann for using museum staff members and contractors to help publicize her wedding to the news media. Ms. Baumann said she had done so because the Cooper Hewitt’s publicity consultants had encouraged the museum to “shed more light” on Ms. Baumann as a person. The inspector general, however, said that Ms. Baumann should have checked with a supervisor or an ethics counselor before using museum staff members for a personal event.

In her remarks on Thursday, Ms. Baumann seized on Ms. Sleeper’s account of her interview with the inspector general’s agents. According to Ms. Sleeper, one of the agents, a man, said he had heard that Ms. Baumann was a “bitch” and a “‘Devil Wears Prada’ type.”

“The agent at the center of this used derogatory, sexist language,” Ms. Baumann said. “He was overtly discriminatory to me and to others, and produced a sham report.”

“As a society,” she said, “it is not acceptable to treat people this way.”

The inspector general’s office has declined to comment on the complaint about the agent’s remarks, but a lawyer for the office said last week that the office adhered to integrity standards.

The inspector general also investigated the museum’s hiring of Ms. Baumann’s boyfriend, now husband, John Stewart Malcolmson, for a $5,000 graphic design job in 2017. Investigators did not conclude that Ms. Baumann directed the hiring of Mr. Malcolmson, a branding and graphic design consultant, but the inspector general said she should have disclosed the fact that she had a relationship with a museum contractor in her annual financial disclosure report.