

Towards a Larger World

When Moderna Museet was founded in 1958, Paris and New York were the centres of the latest movements in art. The Museum was actively involved in introducing pop art to the Nordic region, with Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Niki de Saint Phalle as its figureheads. Iconic works by surrealists such as Meret Oppenheim and Salvador Dalí were also acquired, and the influence of Marcel Duchamp continues to have a deep impact on art to this day.

The Moderna Museet collection predominantly represents the Western tradition. Women artists have become more prominent in recent decades, and interest has also expanded geographically, changing the art scene from its very foundations. Today, no one metropolis has the same central position as before, and artists are active in many different locations at the same time, showing their work in constellations and contexts that shift our customary notions of centre and periphery. In Sweden, too, artists have more scope to expand the standard Western narrative.

Naturally, these changes impact on the activities of Moderna Museet, not least when it comes to art collecting. Half a century ago, the Museum was in step with the times and was a catalyst for future tendencies. But how does an art museum operate today in order to remain vital and relevant, open and inclusive, in our globalised culture? This is a slow process, and one that concerns all museums of Moderna Museet's size.

Towards a Larger World presents a selection of relatively new works from the Museum's collection. A common feature is that they all bridge the gap between languages and continents, and thus reflect the complexity that has come to be increasingly characteristic of our era.

Etel Adnan / Meriç Algün Ringborg / Pia Arke / Kader Attia / Emily Jacir / Enrique Martínez Celaya / Oscar Murillo / Sirious Namazi / Rirkrit Tiravanija / Adrián Villar Rojas / Ai Weiwei.

Curators:

Daniel Birnbaum

Ann-Sofi Noring

Etel Adnan (1925)

Utan titel / Untitled, 2013

Utan titel / Untitled, 2014

Utan titel / Untitled, 2014

Purchased 2014

Etel Adnan, born in Lebanon, and today resident in France and the USA, is a painter, poet and philosopher. Her small-scale paintings are often constructed in a similar way: a number of defined colour fields done in thick paint, with one minor detail (many times a circle or a square) that stands out and creates abstract landscapes for the inner eye; she has compared abstract art to poetic expression. Adnan draws her themes both from memory and from places where she has spent time and which have meaning for her. Mount Tamalpais in California, in particular, has played a crucial, almost dependent, role for her painting and writing. Personal memories are transformed into universal thoughts about human existence on earth. Traces of a palette knife demonstrate the artist's process, marking what seems to be both spontaneity and impatience, as when the canvas shines through the corner of a yellow rectangle. The artist chooses to write, especially her poetry, in English, a language that she feels allows freedoms without the risk of being misunderstood.

At the same time, she also continually points out the importance of having a diversity of languages.

Meriç Algün Ringborg (1983)

Ö (The Mutual Letter)

Purchased 2013 with funds from the Carl Friberg's foundation

“Many of my works are text-based because language, translations and interpretations play a major role in my everyday life”. This is how Meriç Algün Ringborg talks about the subjects that permeate her body of work, and which become very palpable in *Ö (The Mutual Letter)*. In this work, Algün Ringborg collected 1270 Swedish and Turkish words with the same spelling and meaning in both languages. These words have been compiled into a dictionary and an audio work, in which the artist and her Swedish-speaking partner read each word alternatively in their own first language. To a native Swedish listener, it sounds as if Algün Ringborg is speaking Swedish with an accent, and vice versa for a listener with Turkish as their mother tongue.

Yet this exchange has no meaning for someone who speaks neither Turkish nor Swedish; it is thus just an exchange of words that places us as listeners in the position of tourists or newcomers to a country whose language simply does not belong to us. Instead, the language is something that passes us by, it excludes or includes us, something we can relate to, or not. The path towards a larger world raises questions regarding the power of language.

Pia Arke (1958 - 2007)

From the series *Kronborg*, 1996

Donated by the artist in 1996

Pia Arke's own history reflects the history of colonialism: she was the daughter of an East Greenlandic seamstress and a Danish telegrapher. Pia Arke defined herself as a mongrel – of mixed origin, a mixture that appears to be incongruent – and also described photography as a mongrel, since it is situated between the natural and the technological.

Her work raises questions about postcolonialism, including questions about moving from being a mongrel to being a human being. The images of the *Kronborg* series make visible the interaction between the photographic space, the exposure process, and the artist herself – it is the artist's own shadow that cuts across the images of the beach. She enters the photographic process, not as subject nor as object, but by instilling her body within the process itself. Pia Arke frames the shot and integrates her body into the process, asserting her own agency and not that of the camera. Pia Arke commented that the only reliable way to get close to colonial history is by taking it personally.

Kader Attia, (1970)

Open Your Eyes, 2010

Purchased 2014

Kader Attia was born in 1970 and grew up in Algeria and the suburbs of Paris, but now works largely in Berlin. In his art practice, he often returns to this experience of growing up in two cultures, which is a point of departure for his symbolic and poetic method of investigating the repercussions of Western cultural hegemony.

Open Your Eyes, is a memorable slideshow installation that compares Western ideas regarding the repair of the human body with ideas regarding the repair of artefacts in non-Western cultures. The slides display, for example, portraits of First World War veterans whose scars create a visual narrative of destruction and reconstruction that is reminiscent of the restoration of objects from Africa.

The slides are organised in the form of a comparative slideshow, thus elucidating concepts like perfection and beauty, value and wholeness, morality and aesthetics. Via these juxtapositions, Kader Attia creates a powerful critique of the interaction of colonialism and modernism during the 20th century.

Emily Jacir (1970)

From the series *Where We Come From*, detail (*Reem*)

From the series *Where We Come From*, detail (*Marie-Therese*) From the series *Where We Come From*, detail (*Johnny*)

From the series *Where We Come From*, detail (*Mahmoud*)

(all works 2001-2003)

Purchased 2004

The experience of migration and how a place is experienced as being hard or even impossible to reach are central to Emily Jacir's art practice. Jacir's well-known series *Where We Come From* takes this state of affairs as its point of departure. The artist was born in Bethlehem, Palestine, but now works largely in New York. Thanks to her US-American passport, she has the option of returning regularly to Palestine, which was essential for the creation of this series. Before beginning the work, Jacir asked 30 Palestinians, living in the diaspora or in the occupied territories: "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" The answers were diverse, including: "Go to the Israeli post office in Jerusalem and pay my phone bill"; "do something on a normal day in Haifa"; "Take a photo of my family home in Palestine, with the street name and the name of the occupiers". These wishes act as reminders of the deep significance of the most everyday of activities, with Jacir's photographs as evidence of wish-fulfilment.

Enrique Martínez Celaya (1964)

The Early Hunger, 2009

Donation by Boris Harman Said, 2012

Many of Enrique Martínez Celaya's paintings evoke a wintry atmosphere as if he were based in northern Europe and not in the mild climate of Los Angeles where he lives and works. *The Early Hunger* is no exception. Could that be a tropical bird merging into an unfamiliar winter landscape? It seems to have got lost and to be expressing some kind of longing. But for what? Perhaps the bird does not belong anywhere at all?

Enrique Martínez Celaya was born in Cuba in 1964; his family left the country only a few days later. He has commented that, when he arrived in Spain in the 1970s, he experienced great loneliness for the first time, a feeling that he often returns to in different ways in his art.

Yet he also notes that longing and loneliness are not necessarily only destructive. There are times when longing can express hope, some kind of desire for change, perhaps even something new and unexpected. From a wider perspective, Enrique Martínez Celaya's work provides a vision of a world where demarcation via nations, cultures or climatic zones no longer suffices.

Oscar Murillo (1986)

The Problem of Digesting Something that's Bigger than You Can Handle #2, 2013
Purchased 2013 with funds from Carl Kostyál

Space is an idea underlying everything in life and Oscar Murillo's work is no exception. Murillo always works with canvases lying on the studio floor, painting with materials such as oil paints, graphite and pastel crayons, mixed with dirt and debris from the floor. The idea of moving in space is also present in Murillo's own life – growing up in one place (Colombia) and now living on the opposite side of the planet (the UK) – and this is made apparent when the canvas is moved from the floor to the wall.

For Murillo, the creative process is one of mediation: a direct relation between the artwork itself and the space in which it is created, which could also raise questions as to how we create our identities, how all that surrounds us and impacts on our environment resonates within us and shapes us. For Murillo, the material of dirt present in his artworks is a way of keeping some kind of control over them once they have left the realm of the studio. Dirt is everywhere in the world and acts as a democratic agent.

Sirous Namazi (1970)

Sirous Telling Jokes, 1996
Purchased 2013

In *Sirous Telling Jokes*, an early work by Sirous Namazi, the artist makes jokes in Persian, his mother tongue. The lack of subtitles is deliberate; viewers who do not speak this language have to rely on body language, facial expressions and pauses to work out when they are supposed to laugh. Namazi came to Sweden from Iran as a teenager and it is perhaps not so surprising that his first work comments on what happens when different cultures and languages meet and the problems and types of exclusion that can emerge.

In many of his works, Namazi explores the borders between people, like, for example, in *Periphery* from 2002, which is also part of the collection of Moderna Museet. It is a full-scale model of a traditional balcony and satellite dish. The work creates a borderland between the private sphere of the home and communications technology, and also raises questions about the borders between the personal and the universal, a subject that Namazi often returns to.

Rirkrit Tiravanija (1961)

Untitled 2000 (How it is possible...), 2000
Purchased 2000

Rirkrit Tiravanija was born in Buenos Aires in 1961, grew up in Thailand, Ethiopia and Canada and now works in New York, Berlin and Bangkok. His art practice has been shaped by social activism together with ethical questions.

In 1990, he served Pad Thai to visitors to a gallery in New York instead of exhibiting art, an act that he has repeated several times in different locations over the world, each time serving different meals. Two years later, he filled a gallery with discarded objects that transformed the exhibition space into a storeroom rather than a site for venerable art objects.

Rirkrit Tiravanija has successively ignored any prescribed divisions between life and art by creating environments for playful activities in the public space. In 1998, for example, he launched a project in Sanpatong, Thailand by making plots of land available to inhabitants and artists with the aim of generating a sustainable environment. *Untitled 2000 (How it is possible...)* is a house built by Rirkrit Tiravanija on that site. Moderna Museet acquired the house for its collection several years ago.

Adrián Villar Rojas (1981)

Los Teatros de Saturno III from the series *Fantasma*, 2015
Purchased 2015

For Adrián Villar Rojas, theatre is the way we create new situations for the artwork to happen. Theatre is also a place for contemplation, a place where we, as humans, create our own language and our own rules. These can, however, not be imposed onto nature, and Villar Rojas considers that attempting to do so would be “simply delirious”. In the work of Villar Rojas there is a constant preoccupation with ecology, decay, and time. The work is in a state of constant change: some things in it die as new things appear. The focus is thus on the transitory and ephemeral nature of art objects.

Saturn is the god of time in Roman mythology, and the work *Los Teatros de Saturno (The Theatres of Saturn)* reflects on the lifespan of art: what will happen when it no longer means anything to anyone? Not only is the paradox of time highlighted in this work – often Villar Rojas’ intention is for these objects to be destroyed and dismantled at the end of the exhibition – there is also a paradox in showing this work in an exhibition of “new acquisitions”.

Ai Weiwei (1957)

Fairytale – 1001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs, 2007
Donation to The American Friends of the Moderna Museet Inc. from Theodor and Isabella Dalenson, 2013

During the 12th edition of *documenta*, the recurring exhibition held in Kassel,

Ai Weiwei arranged for 1001 Chinese people to visit the German city. The only requirement was that these visitors from China spend time in Kassel, where they could meet the local population and participate in the exhibition. The visitors came from many different sections of society, working in a range of occupations and the action highlighted the issue of freedom of movement and how collective memory is created. In addition to the participating visitors, the work *Fairytale* was also composed of 1001 antique chairs from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912); six of these are being exhibited here. Ai Weiwei defined the chairs as “a symbolic gesture of memory and our past”, and noted that they were originally objects used by the privileged. With this awareness, and the fact that today it is very difficult for some people to move to another part of the world, the artist raises questions about how we apply historical knowledge and structures in today’s society. The politically active Ai Weiwei was forbidden to travel between 2011 and 2015 and was not allowed to leave China.