

How does one wish a museum for modern art to function?

Pontus Hultén

The manuscript below with the title “How does one wish a museum for modern art to function?” was attached to a letter Pontus Hultén sent to the Dutch art collector and professor Pieter Sanders on 4 December, 1962. Hultén had been proposed as the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam after Willem Sandberg, and Sanders was promoting this; the text is a form of manifesto, in which Hultén outlines his views on art, society, and the role of modern art museums. Some parts may seem obsolete now, for instance his discussion on how so-called primitive cultures relate to the concept of development. Other parts are remarkably relevant even today. Hultén had a firm belief in art. Artistic freedom is described as an inalienable part of a healthy society, and the purpose of a modern art museum was to provide room for all artistic expressions. When we read this text today, it becomes clear how consistently Hultén championed the ideals formulated in it, and how they were to characterise his entire career.

In a museum for modern art one cannot, nor is it desired to show all modern art. There must be a choice. The determining factor of the activities of the museum and the function of the museum in the community become the base for this choice. In former times the museums stood traditionally on the side of the public and determining classes, watchful and suspicious against newly create art. The new art was first purchased after it became a museum specimen and it became a “museum specimen”, only when it was a question of whether the museum would purchase it. The museums were the guardians of good taste which sifted art and made sure that the many different interests of the determining classes were not infringed upon.

Of course this could not prevent new art from developing, but the history of modern art is full of examples of how so-called “good taste” adjusted itself to the relationship of art. One needs only for a moment to think of the life destinies, of for example, van Gogh, Gauguin or Cezanne.

Art stands in a direct relationship to the society in which it is created. When we have to do with a living artistic nature, art often

stands critically in relationship to society. When society wishes to completely dominate art the artists fight for their lives. Living art in our time does not permit itself to be directed. The official view of society on art has varied considerably during different periods. It is even today very different in separate parts of the world.

The so-called primitive societies are characterized by the fact that they are immobile, static. Generation follows generation without one noticing any large change. In such societies art is strongly bound to traditions, and development, to the degree it exists, goes much slower, all changes are considered as a threat to the existing. In societies where one often lives in spiritual and material half starvation, all attempts to renew something must be considered with fear, as an attack against the position which has been fought for and defended with great labour. One has one's nose just above the water and is frightened to move the least because one then risks sinking completely.

In Germany before the war one believed in an Empire of a Thousand Years and in the superiority of the white and especially Germanic race over all other people. One believed that there was to be found everlasting value enclosed with this race. From Nazi sources the attempt was made to bring about an art which was the bearer of these everlasting values.

In Russia it has been decided in official sources that the art which one believes is appreciated by the majority is the best.

In a dynamic society this transformation can be considered as a common denominator for that which takes place in the society, and the changed becomes the natural climate in the tradition of the new.

In the society we wish to live the fundamental idea is that confidence is placed in the individual possibilities of man. These fundamental values are associated with the fact that the existence of each individual is unique. One believes that man, individually, has the ability of creating a reasonable relationship to his fellow citizens, and to give a form to his existence. The art which wishes to express this fundamental idea, and which is created with this point of departure, can only be built on the sincerity of the artist towards himself. He cannot work after any rules which are decided upon in advance. Inasmuch as we change during our existence, we must constantly re-examine our viewpoints. The task of society thus becomes to give the artist an opportunity to develop his possibilities with the largest possible freedom. A modern museum, therefore, should stand on the side of the artists, not on the side of the public; observe with interest

and curiosity, not with misgivings, what the artist does. One must try in the first instance to understand, and only in the second to be critical.

At the turn of the century a revolution took place in art, similar to that in physics, philosophy etc. The world picture radically changed. "Modern art" came into being. That which is now being done belongs to a new tradition which was established at that time. Many of the discoveries which were made around the turn of the century were so pioneering that it is only now their real meanings are beginning to be understood. – The new art is often accused of copying. Father and son, of course, can appear identical for the person who does not take the trouble of looking closer.

The values which one works with in modern art are new, and new art has always worked in this way. The modern artist produces that which no one has seen, that which has not existed before.

But artists must clothe their works in a suit which causes the outworld to discover that it is an art work which is in question. Therefore he can borrow pieces of clothing from other artists. This does not need to mean that the body under the clothing have been taken from another. And besides it often happens that he uses trousers for a hat or vice versa, and that is also a difference. One takes over a form, but gives it new tasks and importance.

I believe that the values in art, this larger or smaller "quality" may be described as a larger or smaller versatility of the art work. How often has it not happened that two friends in discussing an art work, which is loved by both, have discovered that they admire it for entirely different reasons, almost like seeing two entirely different pieces of art. This is not directly connected with the form of the art work, its appearance. The more simple the form, the more complex the experience may be. I mean that the genial art work is as many sided as an infinite polygon, and inasmuch as time and spectators move they constantly discover new sides. We admire the Altamiragrotto paintings for other reasons than the contemporaries. We cannot see a Vermeer or Leonardo as one saw their works during the 16th or 17th century, they reflect now another light coming from another point of departure, but we can love them, nevertheless, from our viewpoint because they have this wonderful richness. The more versatile a art work, the larger is its "quality". And this is directly connected with the fact that one believes that the unique in the existence of each individual is a fundamental value. "Poetry must be done by all and not by only one", writes Lautreamont.

How is this fundamental attitude expressed when it concerns the choice of what the museum shows? How will this affect the activities of the museum, its function? The attempt is made to give an all-rounded and as current a picture as possible of that which occurs in art without consideration to the good tastes or preconceived opinions, but with as much devotion as possible. One will try to avoid, for example, impersonal and “official” interests of a chauvinistic character. Likewise snobbish interests must be avoided. One tries to avoid the pressure of art dealers. (At the same time as one is suspicious towards the commercial interests it must be remembered that it is completely legitimate for artists to sell their works and that this sale must be organised by someone). One will attempt to show that which is *original, personal, unknown*.

In the strongest possible way it is desired to show the classics of modern art, and the new creators of modern art, independent of all outside artistic considerations.

The boundaries between the different spheres of art become more and more mobile. It is not always this mobility is symbolised so obviously as when the same artists are engaged at the same time with, for example, painting and film or theatre or music, but this combination of forces is without a doubt a typical expression of the widening of the artistic perception that characterises this century. It thus becomes natural for a museum of modern art to show film, music, architecture, poetry, ballet etc. This also enriches the activities which is valuable because it draws a new public, persons who might not otherwise have approached the museum so soon.

When it concerns painting, sculpture, sketching, graphic etc. which are, of course, still the central points of the activities of the museum, there are two major functions for the organisation: to assemble and arrange exhibitions. There is no necessity to discuss that the museum should preserve.

On the other hand the extent to which the museum will arrange temporary exhibitions has been subject for considerable discussion. It belongs to the most necessary tasks of a museum to give information about what happens in the field of art throughout the world. The task cannot be left entirely to the management of art dealers. The attendance figures show that the public is interested in seeing modern art in temporary exhibitions, where it is presented in a concentrated surveyable way, in the form of separate exhibitions, or theme exhibitions, or group exhibitions. The purchase by the museum

of foreign art is not sufficient as a guide of what occurs in the sphere of art throughout the world. The combination of temporary exhibitions and permanent collections are the ideal forms for the central activities of a modern art museum.

Exhibitions in Moderna Museet 1956–1962

- No 1. Picasso's *Guernica* 1956, the big painting and 62 sketches
2. Le Corbusier 1958, architecture, paintings, sculptures, tapestry drawings etc.
3. Otte Sköld, memorialexhibition 1959, paintings etc.
4. Handelsbankens konstförening 1944–1959, small exhibition to honour a good art-club in a big bank
5. Återblick 59, small exhibition of the best Swedish art shown in Stockholm during the past 10 months
6. Axel Salto 1959, Danish art and craft one-man show
7. Sebastian Matta, 15 former av tvivel 1959, paintings drawings etc.
8. Robert Jacobsens *Dockor* 1960, sculptures
9. Jacques Villon 1960, paintings and graphic work
10. Siri Derkert, *På väg* 1960, paintings, collages, engravings, drawings, sculptures etc.
11. Återblick 60, small exhibition of the best Swedish art shown in Stockholm during the past 10 months
12. Sam Francis 1960, paintings and watercolours
13. Anna Casparsson 1960, embroiderywork by a 100-year old Swedish woman
14. Architecture in Finland 1960, big architectural survey done in collaboration with the Finnish Architectural Museum
15. Tapestry done by Egyptian youth 1960
16. Paul Klee 1961, paintings, drawings, graphic work
17. Sonja Henie and Niels Onstads collection of modern international art 1961
18. "Bewogen Bewegung" 1961
19. "Pioneers" from Stedelijk Museum 1961
20. Norwegian modern tapestry by Hannah Ryggen 1933-61
21. Grafiska förberedelser 1962, small exhibition of modern Swedish graphic works
22. 4 amerikanare, painting and sculpture by Alfred Leslie, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Stankiewicz, 1962
23. Jean Arp, sculptures, paintings etc. 1962