

1. Setting the frames: How can we understand and define the national museum concept?

TITLE: **National Museums Becoming Woman**

The title of my paper is National Museums 'Becoming woman'. It's a short-cut analysis of the past, present and future of National Museums, seen from a Deleuzian point of view.

I will try to answer the question of understanding and defining museums and their changing role through some of the considerations Deleuze has had in relation to life in general and its potential for having a dynamic impact. According to Deleuze life is "questioning power". All products of humanity, including Museums, are answers to the "problematizing" force of life. A good museum pays homage to the power of life in all its aspects.

National museums were built in the era of Freud to work on Oedipal premises. Men of influence took responsibility for building new structures from where it was possible to use cultural resources as a tool for the development of liberal forms of government.

Institutions housing contemporary art was actually able to fuel the imagination of the public. The art put on display had an immediate effect: it was in tune with the expectations of a crowd that was pleased when provoked to sentiments of loss or gain. The joy of being able to establish a new epistemological paradigm by structuring the past for the use of the present through periodization, stylistic criticism, iconography, historicism, and ethical evaluation, was felt simultaneously with deeper feelings of anguish and desire triggered by the arts themselves.



- Wilhelm Marstrand (1810 – 1873): *The Art Historian Niels Lauritz Høyen*, 1868. KMS870

What critics and art historians did, was raising the phallus by naming fathers and promoting their legitimate "sons", the Museum, turning them into a silent battlefield for the selection of the chosen people, and even for the killing of founding Fathers.

In Denmark the Oedipal scheme was inaugurated when the naming of a “Father of Danish Painting” took place. C.W. Eckersberg (1783-1853) was bestowed with the title posthumously in 1925. This pointing towards a father-figure marked the climax after years of struggle against the success of the breakthrough of modern European thought in the eighteenth century. The title seems to stick to him. It was used at the retrospective exhibition in two thousand and five at The National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Eckersberg was again made sacrosanct by the recent canonisation of twelve works of art as part of a larger compilation of canonical works, presented by the Danish Government in two thousand and six, where the work shown here appeared on the list, figuring prominently as the first oil-on-canvas painting on the list.



- C.W. Eckersberg, 1783 – 1853: *View through Three of the North-western Arches of the Third Storey of the Colosseum. A Thunderstorm is Brewing over the City*, 1815-1816. KMS3123

The elevation of C.W. Eckersberg throughout the last half of the eighteenth century was accompanied by the exclusion of others. Most prominently among those scorned in public was Eckersberg’s teacher N.A. Abildgaard. He was accused of being international, intolerably intellectual and even intimidating.

The painting shown here entitled *The Wounded Philoctetes* was the first internationally recognised painting made by a Danish painter.



- Nicolai Abildgaard (1743 – 1809): *The Wounded Philoctetes*, (1775), KMS586

But as a sign of the long-lasting “problematizing power” of the critics, it was not put on display at the National Gallery until the beginning of the nineteen eighties. Then again the “questioning force” of life asked whatever happened to History Painting after the rage of Modernity?

Perhaps I could ask you all whether you recognise Oedipal structures in *your* local histories of building up an imagined, national community based on the arts?

Deleuze offers a counter-image to the oedipal one, perhaps thereby opening the way for another understanding of how we could define national museums past, present and future, when speaking of a “becoming woman” and when defining the potential of art as creating “new intensities” beyond the oedipal framing. Thus the “becoming woman” of museums could offer a positive future for national museums, which were originally based on an Oedipal concept.

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To get to the heart of this “Becoming”, we must first consider the notion of “Identity”.

Making national museums is a matter of being able to make a community imagine its own identity.

But the notion of identity has changed since a national museum had first priority.

Exactly when and why the notion of Identity changed I don't know for sure.

But anyway Identity is no longer a question of *who you are*.

It's a question of what you *do*.

Once upon a time the old, essentialist notion of identity paved the way for the autonomy of art, for democracy, and for the life of the individual and everyday life to be something of interest at all.

In the beginning of making national museums much fierce fighting went on in order to select the right objects to enter into the collections. In Denmark, the Director of the National Gallery Niels Laurits Høyen fought it out with the King, Christian the Eighth (1786-1848). They both had the privilege of acquiring new works of art, but they had opposing views of which kind of art was good for the nation. A very serious issue to be sure. It was fought on the question of allowing *cows* to be on display.



- Johan Thomas Lundbye: 1818 – 1848: *A Cowshed on a Farm*, 1844. KMS446

I myself have been stunned by the amount of works in our collections showing cows. In one hundred and thirteen works of art, “cows” are mentioned in the title. As for “horses” the number is three hundred ninety five. Horses do have another status than cows, since horses could be of interest both to the general public and to the aristocracy.

Funny as it seems nowadays to be fighting over cows, it is a case in point, since the subject matter was once of great interest to the public, nearly all of them having been brought up in the countryside and now living in the city. The audience of those days were both anxious and thrilled by the abrupt changes, more money and more dangers of modern life. The melancholic longing for a lost, rural life had its own secular church for prayer, anger and redemption to go to, the new National Collections of Art.

The landscape, with or without cows, sheep or horses, seems to hold the public’s interest, even today. National Identity is still linked very much to landscape painting around 1850 in popular culture.



- From the exhibition *The World as Landscape (also, misguidedly, called “A Mirror of Nature” because of the title of the English catalogue)*. *Northern Landscape Painting 1840-1910*. Johan Thomas Lundbye, (1818 – 1848): *A Danish Coast. View from Kitnæs by the Roskilde Fjord*, 1843. KMS412

If only we could find out what people miss in their everyday life as citizens of a given nation, we would know exactly what to put on display in our museums.

Normally, we tend to think that it takes blockbuster exhibitions to make people come to the museum by the thousands. And surely it helps a lot to show yet another exhibition based on Great Modern Classics such as Monet or van Gogh.

But in fact it doesn't really matter anymore what you've got on show for the public, and that's a completely new situation for the national museum.

Since the entrance fee to the national gallery of art in Copenhagen was abolished after a period of more than ten years, people have come to see the collections re-installed, making the national gallery the most visited museum in Denmark in the year two thousand and six. - for the first time ever, since the number of visitors started to matter so much.

The special exhibitions get less attention because of the entrance fee to be paid.

They get even less attention by the public than special exhibitions used to get when the museum was not accessible for free.

This leads to the next 'breaking news': It doesn't matter if you show your well-known collections, or if you put on even more new, special exhibitions.

This is only the logical consequence of identity not being a matter of "who" you are.

The identity of the museum is no longer to be found in the collections and the special exhibits.

What counts now is only if the museum is a place where you will find movement and change.

What matters is what Museums *do*.

They bring people together, they make silence tolerable, they amuse, they entertain, they irritate a little. All this is often done in a rather discrete and, hopefully, clever way. Museums are usually polite in their offerings of long forgotten history. Even when hot, contemporary, ethical or political problems are put on stage, it's kind of nice. But "nice" is to be done away with.

Museums are starting to have more influence on the activities of the audience as we do in Copenhagen by inviting teenagers to work together with us on our new educational services. In the U.K. museums play an active role in trying to involve a lower-class public, foreigners, and illiterate people. The new museum *takes care* of its neighbourhood community.

What does matter is the amount of activity accommodating any exhibition or collection on display. Make an event of your permanent collection, focussing wholeheartedly on the experience for the viewer by rearranging it once a year in a new, meaningful and splendid way, and the press, as well as the public, will be on the spot to check it out.

The lesson to be learned is this: The permanent collections should get the same attention as a special exhibition.

Identity matters. Substantial changes in our understanding of identity matters a lot, since the entire history of Western thought is based on being and identity. We have always imagined that there is some transcendental Being working through Becoming

A museum is made to be the basis or institutional foundation for the structuralisation of the proper language and point of view of experience.

But now the imminence of the appearance and disappearance of Being is revealing itself in numerous ways. There is no single moment or work of art allowing the perfected Spirit to show itself.

Even Identity is not really up to the task of knowing itself completely, since Becoming has always been a matter of openness to change.

So, now *Creativity* is more important than *Identity*.

If the Museum gives room for *Creativity*, then it's a place to go.

Human creativity allows for such ideas as Art, Genius, Identity and Subject, to emerge.

Ideas like Identity and so forth are all made up to raise reliable structures, to allow for the Phallus to Rise.

Fine, but *creativity* in the Deleuzian sense, is linked to the *breakdown of structures*.

If a Museum turns all closing, self-relying systems into a system of looking for openings, for excess, and for instability, then they start to be *Becoming* in Deleuzian terms.

If Museums mutate as time goes by, they might be allowed to continue to exist.

Another thing for the Museums to take into careful consideration is *Diversity*.

Only if museums can handle a vast range of different activities going on at the same time, are they fit for survival.

In this sense, museums should be facing the same difficulties as does the contemporary artist.

Museums, once so stable, should think of themselves as *instable communities*. Not because of unreliable income, but because they want to be unreliable, to surprise, to be radical, or to be so “old school” that it breaks down Modernity.

If the Museum was once a homo-social community reproducing the clichés of manhood, the ideals and metaphors for the museum invoked by Deleuzian thought - i.e. of Becoming aware through being of what you *do* and not of who you *are* - are “Female” through and through.

Speaking of becoming as making something new, is like producing numerous new children out of the womb of the Institution. First, each new event at the museum should be slightly different from the previous one. Second, it should not repeat the masculine, one-eyed focus on the artworks.

Then the new national museum can try to be a small “Society of the Spectacle” where real life is transformed into a representation at the museum placed in the middle of a larger society of surveillance, where the spontaneity of lived experience has degenerated into effects of pure simulation. With Deleuze (and Baudrillard) we can happily embrace the hyper-real simulacrum of reality produced by the Museum becoming Woman.

The artworks themselves will not lose their attraction or power in these instable surroundings.

On the contrary. They will still show off the power bestowed upon them to expose, discuss, and question the spectacle, surveillance, and control of normality.