

Pontus Hultén

Founding Director of Moderna museet, Stockholm, 1958-73. Founding Director of Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1973-81. Founding Director of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1981-83. Artistic Director of the World Exhibition celebrating the 200th anniversary of the French revolution, 1984-89. Founding Director of Institute des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques, Paris, 1985-95. Artistic Director of Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1985-90. Artistic Director of the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, 1990-94. Founding Director of the Jean Tinguely Museum, Basel, 1996. Guest curator of numerous major exhibitions worldwide. Officer of the French l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur, 1979.

"As you know, the Moderna museet collection is now in Bonn, as the fourth in a series of visiting collections that we've done down there. Actually, we're showing more of the collection than we ever had space to show here in Stockholm. It looks very good and has been much appreciated, both by the public and the media.

While working with the catalogue and poster for this show, we toyed with the idea of simply calling Moderna museet The Best Museum for Modern Art'. In the end, we didn't, but we actually considered it seriously.

Of course, there are many great museums in the world, but most of them are so damned boring, filled with big names rather than great works. What makes the Moderna museet collection special is that it's so healthy. Almost all of the important pieces are key works, not from the production phases of the artists' careers.

The unique factor was that the collection was built at exactly the right time, under very lucky circumstances. We were a small purchasing committee, with myself, Ulf Linde, Åke Meiersson and Gerard Bonnier, all in complete agreement to go for quality, not quantity. It may seem a simple thing, but it wasn't. The 27 works we bought with the original government fund of five million Swedish crowns would have seemed a very small number from a political point of view, but that issue never even came up in our group.

Another lucky factor was that there were still many important masterpieces available in the market, both among art dealers and in the artists' families. There were masters of two generations still around - first Picasso, Duchamp, the cubists and their children, then the surrealists. Many of these artists, and their families, just happened to be about to settle down and buy themselves big homes, which made them more inclined to sell. It was just a question of money, a situation that soon changed, as supply dwindled.

At that time, the late fifties and early sixties, we really didn't have that much competition in the market. The Museum of Modern Art in New York had entered an era of stagnation. The German museums hadn't yet got moving after the war, nor had the British, really. The French weren't buying anything at all from abroad at that time. So, when we came along with money in our hands, we were well received everywhere. We were unknown, sure, but often that can be an advantage.

Also, there was already a certain awareness, a curiosity about us among the artists, after 'Movement in Art' and '4 Americans

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A funny thing was that the price for an international masterpiece was firmly fixed: 200,000 Swedish crowns, whether it was a Giacometti, a Klein or anything else. Of course, there were also a number of mouthpieces which were more expensive and difficult to obtain, like our De Chirico, for example, which is generally considered as the outset of surrealism. In many of these cases, we were helped by artists and others who had taken a liking in our museum. Most important was Marcel Duchamp, who really was very helpful.

For `Movement in Art´, I had persuaded Ulf Linde to make a replica of Duchamp´s `The Bride and her Cavaliers´. We got started quickly, but after a while, we came to a standstill. Ulf and Duchamp were on the telephone daily, and listening to their conversations was most amusing. You can imagine two guys discussing subtle color nuances over the phone.

After some time of that, Duchamp said `OK, I´ll come up and help you´. He did, and he was a wonderful man in every sense. He liked the museum, thought it had good spirit. He found `Movement in Art´ very amusing and he was right - it was. Also, we had some works that interested him. In particular, he was impressed that Gerard Bonnier had works by his brother, Jacques Villon. I remember him saying `Hey, that redheaded bookpublisher, he´s no dummy, is he?´

After that, Duchamp did a lot for the museum. Among other things, he connected us with André Breton, who had De Chirico´s `The Child´s Heart´, a piece we were eager to get. This was during the Algerian conflict, and there had been a terrorist

attack against Breton, which made Duchamp think that the De Chirico was unsuitable to be kept at home.

When I visited Breton, I had prepared a ceremonious presentation. But as soon as he walked in the door, Breton bluntly asked how much I was willing to offer. I was a bit stunned, but I quickly regained my composure and said: 'We'll pay you like a Nobel Prize', which was 550,000 crowns at the time. Breton knew by then that he wasn't going to get the Nobel Prize, and I think he found my remark amusing. At least, the deal was later consummated.

While waiting in Breton's studio, I saw that he had fabulous pieces by his surrealist friends. There were key works by Dali, but I knew that their relationship was strained and that he would never dare sell these pieces. Also, there was a great Miró hanging above a book shelf. I commented, tactfully, that this painting was really hanging very high indeed and...well, Breton asked what I was willing to offer. I tossed up my usual 200,000 and ended up with yet another deal.

Dali was another priority that caused us some problems. Again, we turned to Duchamp, who knew about this large masterpiece, 'The Enigma of Wilhelm Tell' that Dali had kept rolled up in his studio for ages. The painting was highly controversial, as the man portrayed, as you know, is Lenin, which was most offensive in the eyes of the more orthodox surrealists. The agony had made Dali simply roll the painting up back in 1932. Duchamp knew, however, that it currently happened to be in Japan, where it was hanging without a frame. So I made the trip to Japan and got the painting for the standard 200,000...

The only matters that really caused some disagreement in our purchasing committee were those concerning pop art. Usually, I didn't have to persuade the others, but with this, I sometimes had to be quite persuasive.

When I visited New York for the first time, in 1959, I really went there to see the abstract expressionists - Newman, Rothko, De Koonig and Kline. I had known about this art before, but never seen it. Also, I was introduced to Calder, who was the big name in the older generation. Of the younger artists, I saw Stankiewicz as a true innovator in sculpture. Leslie was a typical New Yorker - an artist with amazing aggressiveness. Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, whom I knew from before, were living together. In a way, you might say that the selection of artists for '4 Americans' was a little funny, since this pop art group had not yet formed itself. But I just thought it was a good selection - and it was.

In those days, people didn't make nearly as much fuss about things as they do today. The costs weren't as high and there were much fewer obstacles. You just sent the stuff off by boat and that was that. I remember when, back in 1956, I went to pick up Picasso's 'Guernica' from the cargo expedition at Stockholm's southern railway station. I remember being disappointed when I saw the small size of the box it came in. We just threw the thing up in the back of a lorry and drove off with it, and that's all there was to it.

With the pop artists, I truly regret that we missed our chances to buy works from the exhibitions, both the first and the second time around. We really had opportunities there, and we weren't talking prices of 200,000, but rather 5,000. Most people, even the other members of the purchasing committee,

were hesitant about this art. They thought it was good fun for temporary exhibitions, but nothing to be kept for the future. Pop art was associated with America, television and commercialism, and viewed as less serious.

There was also a more subtle objection, in that this aggressive American art threatened to overrun the more sublime, low-key European artists, such as Tinguely and Klein. There were elements of truth in this, but I thought the timing was wrong for such delicate reasoning, when we really had a chance to enrich and enlarge our collection...

The most important element in the spirit of the museum in the sixties was of course our audience. It's the privilege, as well as the duty, of a director to build a devoted audience, especially in a smaller city like Stockholm. People will never come to see an exhibition like '4 Americans' unless they are convinced that it's going to be interesting.

Much of what we did back then was brand new, but none of it was speculative. It all came organically, like bringing the children in as part of the museum's program. We all had kids ourselves, and it was only natural. We never thought about it.

In those days, the spirit in Stockholm was very special. Sweden was way ahead, and had started to form a whole new definition of freedom for the citizens - economically, sexually, in women's rights, for children, and so on. Welfare had not yet become an abusive expression, and Olof Palme was a great leadership figure, long before he became Prime Minister. This was during the Cold War, and there were some very powerful political undercurrents here in Stockholm at the time

- something that's hard to explain to people who didn't experience these times.

The museum became part of this trend, although we really didn't have much to do with it. We most certainly broke new ground in the art world, even if few realized it at the time. We had rewarding interchanges with museums such as Louisiana in Denmark and Stedelijk in Amsterdam. Some colleagues from Paris and other major cities also came up here, but they really didn't take the time and focus to understand. Among international artists, though, and among film directors and composers, Stockholm became an important spot on the world map. They all came to the museum, carrying their works under their arms.

Our concept was to open the museum up to film, music, theatre, dance, children, youth, everything. But the art was always the nucleus around which everything revolved. It was actually an old idea that we were able to realize.

In the House of Culture in the Sergels torg square, we went a step further in our plans, with a vision of artists studios integrated in the museum, and such. Another idea was to focus on the media, which was then still in its infancy. We wanted to show people news being created and crafted. These ideas were a bit naive, but not as naive as they may seem today. Had we gotten started a few years earlier, I think we might have pulled the project through. A very unfortunate blow to the project was when its architect Peter Celsing, with whom I had been working in close collaboration, died in an early phase of the construction process, which resulted in a series of compromises that reduced the visionary quality of the building and the project.

Then came the backlash, with the movement of '68. The left started busting in open doors. It was a new generation making its mark, which was admirable in many ways, but it damaged the museum. The left saw us as reactionary, since many of our artists were Americans. Our view was that you couldn't relocate Swedish conflicts to Southeast Asia. I always saw this as being upside down.

Also, it became tiresome when the government started to scrutinize our usage of public funds. There were groupings, among conservatives, of course, but also also among more traditional Social Democrats, who regarded us as positioned to the extreme left, and our purchase policy as one-sided. And they were right. We did take a stand to the left, and we were a little extreme. Our usage of public funds could indeed be questioned. But these constant inquiries ended up consuming all our time and energy. It got to a point when I had to go up to Olof Palme and tell him that this good cause must now come to an end, which it then did.

In the early seventies, I had grown a bit weary of all this endless quarreling. In '73, Robert Bordaz, the founding president of Centre Pompidou, came to the museum. We went to the Opera Terrace for lunch, and all of a sudden he said: 'Well, I'll see you in Paris!'. I was baffled and wrote a letter a week later asking for more information. But Bordaz called back and said: 'You might as well come down immediately'. The building was under construction, and they needed someone who could answer the architects' questions.

The Beaubourg was a great project where the architects' strength in vision was matched by that of management. Unfortunately, Pompidou died in 1974, resulting in a violent

restructuring. Until then, the project had an open budget, but Giscard D'Estaing cut it down severely. It wasn't his project, and not at all his style. He tried to stop it altogether, but the administration convinced him that this would be more costly than to go through with it, which I'm sure wasn't true.

With the death of Pompidou, the project lost a lot in quality. We had to play hardball to get it off the ground, but once we got started, the box-office turnouts quickly became our protection.

In Paris, I was able to realize many of my ideas from the House of Culture in Stockholm, much because Paris didn't have that naivité that's so annoying in Stockholm. There wasn't this constant, nagging opposition, even though some rich people found it unpleasant to walk across the square in front of the Centre, where our idea of interactivity between the museum and the city came true in a funny way, with all the spontaneous performances in the street.

I've had very little to do with Moderna museet since I left in '73, and I know nothing of this strange new project with the new building. I'm sure that thoughts of unemployment must have been the cause of it, but no matter what, I can only think it's good and just that the government is finally making an effort to bring the museum into the new millennium. It's about time that they realize the value of the collection, after allowing it to stagnate for decades, as well as neglecting support for temporary exhibitions.

But such neglect isn't surprising, since politicians don't realize the value of anything any more. Politics, in Sweden as well as in other countries, has regressed into a tug-of-war,

where the politicians' and the medias' only motivation is getting at each other's throats, nailing each other for this thing or the other. The result is the lowest possible quality and a vulgar tone of the debate. That's what happens in times like these, with unemployment, low economy, etcetera. Cards get mixed up. Tender elements, like a philosophical debate, get trampled down. Since utopia dissolved in the sixties, politics have become hollow. They've set out on a course of self-destruction.

With art, however, there are also many things that have changed immensely for the better since we started out. The general level of education has risen dramatically, and the same goes for interest in art. Today, you can actually have a decent conversation about art with people you meet socially, and they have some real knowledge. Fifty years ago, this was unthinkable.

Also positive is that all this aggression toward modern art has finally evaporated. We used to have to constantly fight people who actually saw the whole thing as a humbug, who seriously thought Picasso was a charlatan, and so on.

I see the range of this change when I walk through the entrance of Nationalmuseum here in Stockholm today. It's a different world! There's a restaurant, a big shop, TV-screens and things. Back then there was nothing! I remember the first time I wanted to show 35-millimeter film in the museum. Management was astonished. 'Movies?' they cried out. 'But that's for chambermaids!'

I have to believe in this new project and I have to believe in David Elliott. He's in the role of an underdog, and that's

good. It's an advantage not being part of the establishment. It will be interesting to see what they can do. Stockholm is already an important city for art. Now it has every opportunity to become even more exciting."