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## NATIONALITY AND ART

By Peter Schjeldahl

Contemporary Scandinavian art, in ~~the~~ the fields I am aware of, strikes me as extremely weak, and I wonder why. It wasn't always so. From Kierkegaard to Bergman, there was no lack of monumental achievers. Certainly, most educated Americans know and esteem Ibsen, Munch, Strindberg, and Sibelius, and perhaps Saarinen, Hamsun, and Dreyer as well. What happened to that tradition? What, for instance, has happened to the <sup>regional</sup> ~~national~~ influence of Munch, an artist of intense relevance today in America, Germany, and elsewhere? Are Scandinavians indifferent to the challenge of their <sup>own</sup> ~~her~~ heritage? In my brief exposure <sup>last year</sup> to the art worlds of Helsinki, Stockholm, and Oslo, I <sup>frequently</sup> got the ~~strong~~ impression that they are.

The energies of many artists I have met in Scandinavia seem distracted or withdrawn, tending to focus anywhere except in the immediate thrust of their work. There are exceptions, notably the marvelous painter Per Kirkeby, and even he

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impresses me as self-protectively cautious in his ambition, as if ~~only~~ only by holding to a quiet note were it possible to keep a steady ~~initiative~~ <sup>initiative</sup>. There is nothing wrong with taste and restraint, which are essential to Kirkeby's special quality. However, his example serves to deepen the sense I get of a bad climate for art, a disposition of the culture that obliges artists to be extraordinarily tough and canny merely to preserve their individuality. The idea of having a genuine impact locally, let alone in the wider world, seems so unreal to many artists here as not to be worth talking about.

I know only a little about the problems of art in Scandinavia, but I believe I can see certain broad institutional and ideological aspects of them. One is the artificial condition of government patronage, a condition admirable in ~~principle~~ principle but depressive in practice. The accommodations made by Scandinavian governments with their artists appear to have worked out well for everyone concerned while working out badly for artistic vigor. It is fine for artists to receive career support, and even okay for governments to use art as a diplomatic export, as in the "Scandinavia Today" program in the United States. But in this trade-off of self-interests, the independence of art is compromised, and art's expressive purposes are blurred. The result can be an atmosphere of public hypocrisy and private cynicism.

Cynicism, which is lethal to art, is a disease brought on by tolerating too many lies. The reconcilability of

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art and "national interest" is one lie. Another, opposite lie is ~~the~~ the notion that art somehow exists above the vulgarities of nationality, in an ahistorical sphere all its own. The two lies may even prop each other up. An assault on the second lie is now underway in ~~the~~ Europe, most remarkably in Germany. It raises a number of questions that may bear on the situation and <sup>the</sup> potential revival of art in places like Scandinavia, and I will deal with some of <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ questions in my remarks.

"Internationalism" is a dream so beautiful that it has survived much evidence of its falseness--perhaps especially in America, where it is one of the naive luxuries of imperial power, but I think not only in America. We want to believe that there is a type of consciousness--attainable through ideology or simple good will--that transcends accidents of birth and ~~the~~ upbringing and functions in the cause of a united humanity. We will not surrender this consoling belief short of crushing demonstrations that it is empty. Just such demonstrations are given today--not only by political calamities, but also by the positive proof of art. The best art now is superlatively national.

When invited to address this congress, I was asked to discuss the identity of Scandinavian art. I have trouble doing this with reference to contemporary work because the identity I encounter seems fuzzy and incomplete. I can't keep it in focus long ~~enough~~ enough to have cogent thoughts

about it. Frustrated, I find my mind wandering to tangential matters, such as the question of provincialism.

The forms and ideas in most new Scandinavian art spring from a vague international pool of forms and ideas that can be identified, in some variant, almost anywhere. But somewhere in the history of each form or idea is a moment, often associated with the name of a single important artist, when it was inextricably linked to an expression. *When the form or idea and the expression were identical.* There was, in the strictest sense, an identity. ~~My~~ <sup>M</sup> experience of the work is divided: part of it is displaced into the past. This is what I mean by a fuzzy and incomplete identity.

*(of fuzzy and incomplete identity)*  
Another way of stating the problem is that the forms and ideas ~~being~~ brought to the task of expression do not seem inevitable--as if a pair of pliers were being used to do the work of a hammer. A provincial culture is one in which ~~the~~ tools and tasks are not fitted to one another.

Provincialism is a ~~very~~ painful condition for the sensitive and ambitious. It can embitter. The worst sort of provincialism bitterly denies the very possibility of a real identity between any form or idea and any expression. It seeks to universalize provincialism, cynically declaring ~~that~~ that any apparent exception to it is a fraud. (The attitude is: "I'm doing work as good as anything in New York, but they are conspiring against me because I'm in Chicago.") With great relief, I have encountered little evidence of

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this attitude in Scandinavia. The more prevalent <sup>face</sup> ~~face expression~~ of provincialism here, I will take the risk of saying, is wishful. Scandinavians hope their art has some kind of identity. They hope this to the point of believing that it must be so, though they are at a loss to explain how it is so. It may strike them as a good idea to have a foreign critic come and tell them what their identity is.

But, even in the best of cases, you cannot say what an identity is, only that it is. Then you can say that it seems either complete <sup>or</sup> ~~or~~ incomplete, satisfying or unsatisfying, and you can report whatever pops into your head while you are <sup>confronting</sup> ~~standing and staring at~~ the work that seems to embody it. What pop into my head ~~is~~ while I am <sup>confronting</sup> ~~standing and staring at~~ new Scandinavian art, with its incomplete and unsatisfying identity, are thoughts about provincialism.

It may be helpful ~~to~~ to shift our sights southward, to what is going on in Germany and Italy, two countries producing a certain amount of art whose national identity is both complete and satisfying. In the work of a Kiefer or a Clemente, I believe, one feels a perfect fit between form and expression, tool and task, such that what pops into one's head while one is <sup>confronting</sup> ~~standing and staring at~~ it is ~~steadily~~ steadily relevant and inspired. The work has an identity wholly in the present, with ready access to the past and the future: a condition it shares with nationality as such. To think about Kiefer is, willy-nilly, to think

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about Germany, and the more one knows about Germany, the more precise and provocative Kiefer becomes. One need not like Kiefer's work--though I happen to like it enormously--in order to register this effect. But perhaps Kiefer is not the clearest example, because his themes are explicitly German.

So think of the Neapolitan Francesco Clemente--who, true to the compulsive atomization of ~~the~~ Italian culture, now lives in New York. Unless I am missing something, there is nothing so very Italian about Clemente's main theme, which I take to be a kind of personal and universal dance of sensuality and anxiety. Recently, however, I saw a show in Washington, D.C., of 17th-century Neapolitan paintings, and I was struck by resemblances in form and particularly in feeling between Clemente and such painters, previously unfamiliar to me, as Luca Giordano.

The point is not simply a matter of influence. Clemente has also been influenced by the art of India, without shedding much light on Indian national identity. The point is that, like leaves on a 300-year-long vine, Clemente <sup>and Giordano</sup> partake of a common sap, an identity. To put it another way, they share a secret: Naples. As often happens in such cases, when art leaps a gap in time, I was afforded a vastly increased appreciation of a kind of art that used to bore <sup>me</sup> the Baroque, in this instance--and I had a wonderful time with the show.

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A discouraging irony about national identity, as about personal identity, is that if you feel ~~compelled~~ compelled to think about it, you almost certainly do not have it. Identity--which might be defined as a deep ~~an~~ agreement with <sup>or</sup> ~~oneself~~ self, such that what agrees and what is agreed with are the same--is a quality of mature being as redness is a quality of a ripe apple. This raises the question of how personal and national identity become fused in art.

It is not by an artist setting out to be "national," as witness the dreadful pastiches of ~~the~~ various national and social realisms--art that, besides being bad, is in no true sense ~~national~~ national at all. Rather, I believe the artist proceeds in the opposite direction. Art is most vitally national in its individualistic antagonism to prevailing fictions of nationality. The development of the artist passes through cosmopolitanism--through the city and its revaluation of values--to the achievement of an identity <sup>which</sup> ~~that~~ may take everybody, including the artist, by surprise. His nationality, like everything else about him that is authentic and unconscious, rushes into the vacuum formed by his rebellion. For this to occur, good luck in cultural time and place are ~~are~~ required--luck that may be understood by looking at how it can fail.

Think of France. What finished Paris as the world center for advanced art? World War II, of course, but what aspect of World War II? I suggest that it was a split sensibility that, though it began earlier, was concretized

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by the Resistance: a political commitment to internationalism and abstract analysis divorced from the sensuousness, the erotic immediacy, of French culture as it is lived. Lost was the critical individualism of the classical French modernist since Manet and Baudelaire, not to mention the imposing integration of rigor and pleasure in Monet and Matisse. Lost, too, was the cosmopolitanism of a city where ~~foreign~~ foreign artists could give, as well as get, cultural sustenance.

Since World War II, New York has performed the function once filled by Paris. This is the function of a place where all differences, personal and national, are casually accepted, and where these differences are subsumed to a shared adventure, a common ~~pursuit~~ pursuit of the new. Many of the Abstract Expressionists were European immigrants. Others, like Jackson Pollock of ~~Wyoming~~ Wyoming and Los Angeles, were internal immigrants. I identify with generations of young Americans who, like Pollock, have wanted to escape their nation without actually leaving it. New York has been our solution, and it still is.

The economic and communications power of New York naturally reinforce its cultural role, but the phenomenon I am describing--the phenomenon of an individual emerging from a collective background, in tension and harmony--can occur in any city, however fleetingly. Think of the Christiania of Munch, a small, poor town in which a

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world-wide ~~revolt~~ revolt of youth against received values took on specific tones and flavors. Loathing of and a need to escape the past, manifested in a Norwegian place, gave Munch a crucial orientation. They reduced his Norwegianness, but they refined it, too.

A painting subtly exciting to me is Munch's Inger at the Shore, in the Rasmus Meyer Museum in Bergen. One of his last works in a Naturalist mode, it was painted in 1889. The scene is unremarkable: a girl in a summer dress sitting among rocks at Åsgårdstrand. But something fantastic is stirring, or trembling, in the paint and the line. Within the overall Naturalist decorum, the rocks are faintly alive, like bodily organs suffused with blood, and there is a slight sinuousness, a hint of arabesque, in the contour of the figure. My hindsight sees the violent miracle of Munch's mature style about to explode. Meanwhile, however, there is just an ordinary Norwegian girl at a Norwegian shore on a Norwegian summer night, painted in the provincial style typical of Norway at that time. Inger at the Shore is an image of the dialectic of personality and nationality at an instant of excruciating tension.

Today this point is again being reached and surpassed, by artists including Kiefer and Clemente. In America, the most ~~significant~~ significant artist of the moment, I believe, is David Salle, with his cold-blooded reworking of the aesthetics of "New York School" abstraction in combination

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with figurative elements from the modern stockpile of dead and dying images. His work emits a withering hostility to inherited forms of both high and popular culture in the United States, with the result--which only appears to be paradoxical--that it is helping to revitalize ~~and~~ an American tradition, compounded of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, that had seemed exhausted. Julian Schnabel is another, rather more problematic case. Eric Fischl and Cindy Sherman are two other artists doing important work. How lasting these new energies will be I cannot predict, but for the present America has national artists again--whether America wants them or not. The four artists I have named are passionately resented by many.

How might a resurrection of national identity occur in the art of one of the Scandinavian countries? In ~~the~~ describing such identity as something that enters art ~~unintentionally~~ unexpectedly--and therefore cannot be anticipated--I have come close to ~~suggesting~~ suggesting that it cannot be consciously aspired to, but that would be going too far. One works at developing a personal identity as one grows up, after all. How does one do that? Through recognition and emulation, ~~and~~ trial and error. The adolescent recognizes in an adult, his hero of the moment, the mysterious

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pressure of a fulfilled consciousness. He confuses this pressure with the adult's surface mannerisms, which he invests with charisma. "Maybe if I hold my fork ~~in~~ the way he does," the adolescent reasons, "I will be a hero, too." This is the beginning, in a necessary mistake, of a process that will lead through many disappointments, bewilderments, and moments of fear to the glimmer of something very near to hand, the <sup>unsuspected</sup> self that was always there.

Similarly, a national culture locked in provincialism proceeds toward identity through a maze of projections. The process is carried forward by individuals who can withstand its contradictions. Arshile Gorky, the Armenian who <sup>became</sup> ~~was~~ a pivotal figure in the birth of Abstract Expressionism and thus of an American-identified modernism, was regarded as something of a clown in New York during the 1930s, because he so slavishly imitated Picasso. An extravagant and dogmatic man, Gorky at one time declared it a sin to let paint drip or run, because Picasso kept his color areas neat. In <sup>1937,</sup> ~~1938,~~ a consignment of new Picassos <sup>arrived in New York, and</sup> ~~was shipped to the Museum of Modern Art~~ it was immediately apparent that the paint dripped. Gorky's friends gleefully anticipated his embarrassment. Gorky <sup>looked hard at the</sup> ~~examined the~~ paintings and said, "If he drips, I drip."

My point in telling this story is that the demystification of a dominant culture, like the adolescent's demystification of the adult, is accomplished only through an initial surrender to its mystery. Only by trying, and failing, to be one's

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hero does one become oneself. If I were a young Scandinavian artist right now, I think I would have German, ~~and~~ <sup>and American</sup> Italian, ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~heroes~~ heroes. I would bore my friends to death with raving about my heroes, and I would arouse the ~~disgust~~ <sup>disgust</sup> of my countrymen with my loud contempt for everything Scandinavian. And through me, perhaps, something authentically ~~and~~ Scandinavian would eventually find form.

I have been developing an extended metaphor of the nation as a maturing person. This is a treacherous metaphor, I realize. Nationalism is nothing else than a habit of attributing to a nation, which is an abstraction, the ego needs and instinctive drives of a concrete individual. Thus we speak of a nation aspiring or feeling joy or being humiliated. The ominous aspect of this projection is that it does not include the senses of doubt and responsibility typical of personal life. It can lead, and has led, to the grossest follies and crimes, things of which no individual member of the nation could conceive on his own.

~~Discontinued - the extended metaphor, however, the metaphor of functionalism is still valid~~

The return of nationality as a useful, even an unavoidable, term of reference for present high culture undoubtedly marks a historic regression. Much as the smoking earth of apocalyptic Germany comes back to haunt in the paintings of Kiefer, the bloody ghosts of tribal politics arise again everywhere. We thought we had gotten over all of that. Artistic modernism seemed to promise an inexorable



refinement upward of the primitive and the local. But now we feel ourselves being sucked back down, because our ideas of internationalism and progress had too little of the truth in them. In flattering us, the ideas failed to take account of what we ~~are~~ humanly are. This is a frightening moment, characterized by terrible loss of faith, hope, and security. Yet it may turn out to have been a wonderful moment for art.

To avoid misunderstanding, it seems necessary to insist on a distinction ~~between~~ between artistic and political expressions of nationality. The first corrects the fantasy of national identity by grounding it in a life. The second carries the fantasy to ever more irresponsible levels of abstraction. The first is healthy, the second is dangerous. The fact remains, however, that the rise of the one is often linked to the rise of the other. They are rising together today.