

*The role of the museum of Modern Art: Priests? Educators? Iconoclasts?*

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Museum as a configuration of interests.

For a long time I thought the question of the role of the museum of (modern) art is easy to answer. Now, having worked in a museum, as a part of a big institution, I've come to realize that the museum means different things to different people, that the expectations and interests in what the museum is and does are indeed very different if not contradictory seen from different positions.

I will use the latter part of the session's title *Priests? Educators? Iconoclasts?* to structure my approach of describing the different interests and expectations that shape the museum. I'm using the keywords in my own manner, probably in a completely different way than meant by the person who wrote the title. My material and examples come from Kiasma.

*Priests*

= the museum is about communion, about prestige

The state is an important, if not the most important interest holder when it comes to the history of the public museum institution. We know how the creation of nation states and national cultures has been a decisive factor in the development of art collections opened to the public in the 19th century. In Finland the connection of the art and the museum to the nation state is clear and strong still in the 20th century.

The Finnish National Gallery has had and still has a function of manifesting the culture and civilization of the Finnish people. For Kiasma (as a part of the National Gallery) the national prestige continues to play an important part in its existence. The birth and the meaning of the Contemporary Art Museum has been grounded with arguments along these lines, e.g. comparing Finland to Albania, the only other country in Europe without a contemporary art museum: To be a civilized country the state has to have its own museum for contemporary art. And that is what we got, Albania was left behind.

The request of prestige applies not only to countries but to e.g. cities as well. The museum owned by a city have been subjected to the same kind of debates. The existence and financing of museums is justified by the added value that the museum brings to the image of the city. (And this, in turn, has meaning in the way the city e.g. attracts inhabitants and taxpayers.)

In this sense the museum can be regarded as a communion, an institution that connects people in the name of an idea or a belief. The museum has some higher purpose or meaning that we all have to share and believe in.

In addition to the state and nationalism another 'clerical' interest group is without any doubt

the professional art field. The professionals (our) common faith (instead of national prestige) is art: the museum people, curators, critics, artists, etc. all share the belief in the meaning and importance of art. At the same time they also form the clergy who defines what is worshipped in art and how. Their task is to spread the gospel of art and convert others to it. The art professionals have a vested interest in reinforcing the status of art - the and their living depend on it. So it's worth preaching the art and museums.

The problem is the heterogeneous art forms and art concepts living side by side - the sects. So the professional actors in the art world have their own expectations towards the museum: it should represent the right kind of faith and gods - the right art form and artists. That is why the museums, Kiasma among others, is criticized for making "wrong choices". In the case of Kiasma and the Museum of Contemporary Art it has gone as far as putting its existence into question - apparently it didn't live up to the expectations of advocating the right kind of art.

#### *Educators*

= the museum is about education, about making a change

To see the museum as an educational institution is, of course, a logical consequence of the previous concept: others have to be convinced of the promoted ideas and the most effective way to do this is undoubtedly education (if we consider converting by force out of question). This view about the museum is, like the previous one, also in the heart of the birth of the public museum institution.

When the purpose of the museum is educational, we have to ask who are to be educated, how and for what. The above two interest holders, the state and the professional circles, have different answers. The state educates citizens/nationals; the art professionals aim for getting art users, audience. The debates about curating and displaying art belong to this How? and For what? section (ref. Iwona Blaswick & Tate Modern) - What is the story to be told in an exhibition, what is to be learnt, what is the art used for?

Another way of looking at museum visitors is, of course, to consider them self-educating life-long learners who know themselves what they are looking for. This makes the audience / audiences a third interest group which evaluates the museum and its services from their own point of view: How the museum supports their project of self-education, be they individuals or groups of people. I would like to think of this need as being the most important one to be satisfied by museum education.

The museum education work itself can also have varying meaning seen from different interests. In the eyes of the professionals of the art world education seems to have an ambiguous or even contradictory meaning. On the one hand, while striving for making art more meaningful and familiar to the audience, it gives more importance to art and culture thus also to the professional field. On the other hand, in professional circles education can also be met with suspicion, because it may contribute to the demystification of the esoteric world of art and diminish the distance between those who know and those who don't. In this way it lowers the prestige of the professionals. The accusations to education of

populism, of simplifying complex issues, can be seen to rise from this anguish.

From the state's side, an institution funded by public money, like Kiasma, has to be an institution of public service, a place for everyone. It is not enough to satisfy the taste and habits of an elite, but it has to cater for a larger and wider audience. (This political interest has an economic side, as well: There has to be a return for taxpayers' money.) The ideal is to make art and the museum a part of peoples' everyday life. Education is called for help. In this sense, educational activities are supported in the name of democracy. Discussions about access, new audiences, outreach programs, activities for families, community work etc. follow this policy.

It is another question whether, or to what extent, the museum and education really have the means to act as an organ of democracy, in practice. There are things that make it difficult despite the good intentions. Think, for instance, of the academic background of the museum professionals or the unspoken conventions of how and what to do/see in the museum. One colleague even sees that one of the functions of the museum education is actually to camouflage the contradiction that exists between supporting the culture of the educated and spreading the public good to all: Education softens the academic tone of the museum.

#### *Iconoclasts?*

= the museum is about profit, about entertainment

This last section includes groups with interests that are relatively new in the history of the museum institution but today most powerful. These groups and attitudes look upon cultural institutions as productive and – in order to be productive – as entertaining units.

Private money has come to stay in the art world also in Europe. For sponsors, supporting culture or education adds to the 'good will'- effect. Museum education and other kinds of activities may also be seen as something that brings 'added value' to the museum, they are making the museum more attractive and giving it a positive image. It is important also for the private investor that the audience finds the museum interesting and pays attention to it – no one would sponsor a product that doesn't have a market. Whether this has an effect on the museum's artistic program has been a disputed topic in many places, not least in Finland and around Kiasma. Anyway, the museum has to provide some return for the sponsors' money.

Another market-oriented sector may be found, oddly enough, inside the museum: the administration. They have to account for the economy and the results of 'the company'. Often this happens according to the logic of consumption: The museum provides services and the customer pays and gets the good: an art experience. The museum has to prove that its products have a market, a demand – be it in terms of money or visitor numbers. This leads to the rhetoric of experience industry, cultural consumption or "accountability for profit". The museum has to compete with other leisure industries (sic) for peoples' spare time. Museum education is seen as a part of the marketing, contributing to the steady growth in attendance figures.

The importance of education is recognized by the museum administration. Partly it is seen to fulfil the demands of the government (which represents the public community). Partly, the existence of education and the investments in it are justified with economical arguments. For instance, investment in school groups (which don't pay for entrance or for guided tours) is profitable because in the long run it will contribute to educating new paying customers and increasing or, at least, maintaining their number in the future.

Expectations of entertaining and commercial features also come from the public. All people are not ready to invest time and effort in contemplating or studying art. What is looked for, instead, is easy and quickly consumable experiences. This is clearly reflected/conditioned by the media. They look for the surprising, the new, the action, and for what can be obtained from the museum quickly and without too much investment. The way the media treat museums gives the visitor the role of a consumer. You pay your ticket and you get an experience in return. Thank you, good bye. Museum education is seen to be there for packing art experiences into marketable products. In the Finnish National Gallery administration this goes as far as classifying education work as a part of the "target area of producing experiences".

As a commercial and entertaining enterprise Kiasma has been a success. A market research shows that Kiasma as a brand is as well known as Pepsodent. For tourists, Kiasma is a part of a sightseeing tour in Helsinki alongside with the Finlandia Hall, the Orthodox Uspensky Cathedral and the Market Place.