

The Visibility Zone

Laila Skjøthaug

Department of Art and Cultural Studies,
University of Copenhagen Denmark

lskhaug@yahoo.dk

The visibility zone is a concept useful for analyzing national galleries (or national museums in general) in relation to contemporary challenges of globalisation.

First of all the impact of the concept will be made clear and the visibility zone of national galleries will be related to the global museum culture. In the second half of this paper a couple of examples will follow. These are narratives found in the visibility zone of national galleries. They will illustrate general, potential narrative problems. And they will be a short outline of which kind of challenges contemporary national galleries face in the visibility zone. This second half is a brief introduction illustrating how national galleries today compete with each other in the visibility zone to invent the future national gallery concept.

The Space for Global Recognition

This paper responds to NaMu's call by stressing a public (physical or virtual) space outside of the national gallery's own building. This is the space in which a national gallery makes itself become visible to us, previous to we (maybe) visit.

It is not only politicians – and many more – who negotiate the national museum concept different in different countries. “*Publicity materials*” and “*websites*” created by national galleries leave no doubt that these museums each has a very individual institutional self confidence. The National Gallery in London, Nasjonalgalleriet in Oslo (Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design since 2003), Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen have kindly offered their materials for analysis.

The “*publicity materials*” and “*websites*” show that the strategies chosen to improve on the visibility has become more various, if making a comparison of the four national galleries. The difference among the national galleries increases to a conspicuous degree from around 1996 and onwards. The challenge from the globalisation discourse and a globalising artscene makes the national galleries create themselves a more individual profile. In their materials each national gallery has created a compound of different new narratives in companionship with some well known narratives which traditionally have been representing the local institutional self confidence. The individual narratives profile competes on visitors locally and nationally. And further the profile competes globally (not literally globally though, but world wide) to extend the visibility zone. Not only “*websites*” but also “*publicity materials*” are condensed narrations on this matter.

The national galleries are linked in an international network of museums. They cooperate. But the competition to invent the future national gallery as concept, prevent national galleries from homogenising the idea of national galleries. From a competitive point of view they are not, as they were in the 1980s, trying to do the same kind of thing – just better than the other ones. Now they all seek out different possibilities.

Visual Appearance

The visibility zone is to be understood as every public space in which the individual national gallery appears to us, either as an electronic interface, by distributed “*publicity materials*” on paper, by works of art (or every kind of collection object) on loan for and exhibited by another institution, and so forth.

Please keep in mind that there are several possible media for national galleries to appear to a number of spheres in society. When I silence for example interviews in TV or newspapers of national museums professionals it is a matter of a well defined project. In my analysis it has been important that no journalist had been involved as a co-producer. But that the national galleries may be held as responsible for the product as possible. The institutional self confidence was a main concern in the analysis.

The national galleries' narrations in the visibility zone are very important – not to forget those many people who are not visitors; important for how people locally and nationally may define a national museum.

Also tourists are important as potential visitors. National galleries today are to introduce themselves to every single potential visitor world wide. And to do so just as convincing as they have introduced themselves to tour organizers and travel agencies since the early years of mass tourism around 1960. Tourism has changed in recent decades. Travel has had a more individual character; people are more often travelling on their own. (Urry 2005: 59) This is an individualisation which unfolds easily when more and more people have the possibility to search information on the Internet. People buy their tickets for airplanes and make reservations for hotel rooms electronically. And the importance of the information from the national

galleries in the visibility zone increase in the sense, that they are supposed to motivate every single potential visitor on a world wide scale and make him/her move him-/herself corporally to visit the national gallery in question.

During the last decade or so the institutional self confidence of the individual national gallery has become even more decisive as the narrator. While the tourists own local travel agency or tour organizer, who has been a figure who translates cultural values, has had proportional decreasing influence.

But this should not be taken to say that the visibility zone is a new phenomenon. Ever since the national galleries were established as public museums newspapers and magazines have been occupied with these institutions and their exhibitions. So the case is rather that national galleries are dependent on and occupy themselves with the possibilities in the visibility zone in new ways. This dependency materialised e.g., when the national galleries from around 1970 began consecutively to create and distribute "*publicity materials*".

So far "*publicity materials*" have been overlooked as materials for research and analysis. When they are mentioned it is regretted that these materials used to be created by people in the lowest level of hierarchy within the museums organisation. (McLean 2006: 3) The smaller the museum is, the truer is also this regret. While the first time a curator was appointed to take education as the field of responsibility, including the responsibility to create "*publicity materials*", was in the single case of Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen in 1974. Since then an expanding field of work has taken place in the department of education which were established next, and the marketing department which followed.

It is important to bear in mind that the pure appearance in the visibility zone, like an electronic interface is, will not be transformed into true visibility until it receives someone's attention. The visual design and the conceptual narratives are to make this desire become fulfilled. Adrian Forty's essay on the remarkable impact a well made design policy has had on the London Transport System since the 1920s (Forty 1992: 222–238) illustrates the importance of the purely visual level of an institution and its appearance. Despite London Transport System is an example far off from the national galleries, the existence of a design policy in both cases has to do with how they address themselves to society.

The Museum-Society Relationship

Theory on museum-society relationships has primary been occupied with the visitor experience (or missing experience) in the museum, for example as mapped out in visitor studies. (Bourdieu 1969) This theory is a basis for the concept of the visibility zone as far as the focus of research is moved away from the museum object to the social space in which values and meanings are created. But the visibility zone as point of departure for an analysis also differs from the manifold visitor studies, when the focus is on a public space outside of the national gallery's own building(s). In the visibility zone the national galleries communicate their institutional self confidence, their plans, their intentions and visions. This is a space reserved less for what a national gallery does, then for what it says that it will be doing, or what it wants to underline as particularly good about what was already done. No experiences but only information and the expectations they create for future experiences are possible.

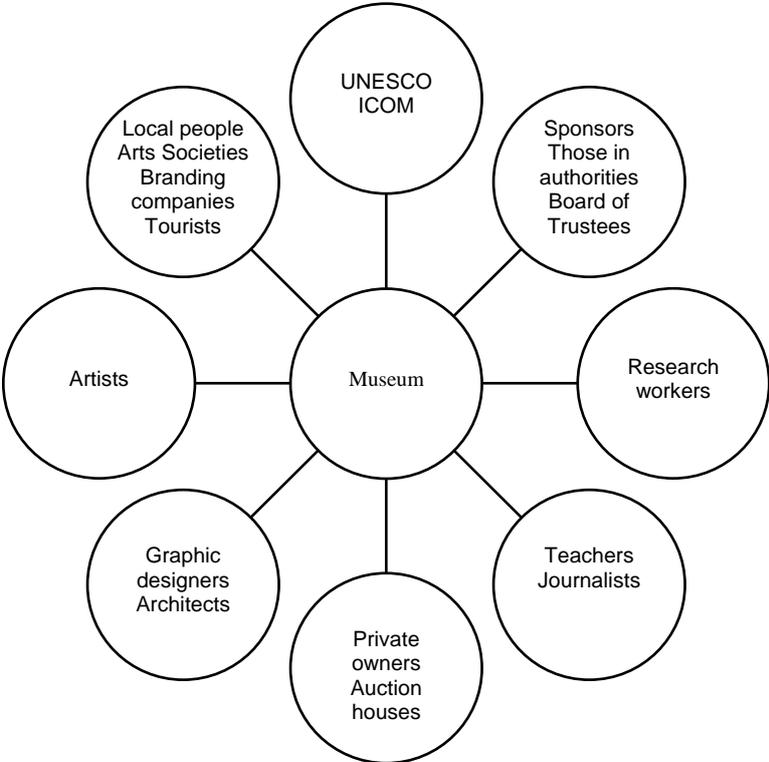
Pierre Bourdieu in *L'amour de l'art: Les musées d'art européens et leur public* systemised his visitors within the social class system of Marxism. Similarly, when the national galleries were established they were a political means supposed to diminish social conflicts between poor and rich citizens and to improve their feeling of being a homogenous "people". While in recent years authors on museological texts have asked whether it is the most important mission of museums today to gather these segments in the population. (Prior 2003: 6) The globalisation discourse reference to migration gives occasion to ask.

But what the right answer to this question is will probably not be the same in different countries. In Scandinavia we are used to our so-called “flexsecurity” model. If compared to for example USA, in economical terms it causes less difference between the richest and the poorest within the population. The “flexsecurity”-model means that the working force is flexible in the sense that it is easy to discharge people. But there is a system securing those who are unemployed with a minimum of economy. In this paper the “flexsecurity”-model is to underline, that the contemporary social problem which seems to us to be the most urgent one, must influence of how we rank our priorities.

Anyway, the critical question opens the opportunity for other ideas, such as the concept of the museum culture. This concept works out well in companionship with the concept of the visibility zone. The museum culture is not a new concept. But several authors, who use the museum culture concept leaves it quite open though (Sherman 2004: ix – xx; Fyfe 1996: 206), free for the readers own association.

In my case, first of all the museum culture is a conceptualisation of the museum/society relationship in the same sense, as Gordon Fyfe has occupied himself with this subject. (Fyfe 1996: 203) In my case the museum culture always holds the museum at the centre. This is illustrated by the diagram of the museum culture below. The museum culture is a culture of loose connections, where the manifold spheres surrounding the museum in the diagram, each have a specific interest in the museum as institution. One example would be the expectation from the researching art historian to the national gallery (or simply a museum professional from another museum), which differs from the expectations of a company where they intend to create a brand for themselves.

Figure 1: Global museum culture.



On the other hand this should not be taken to mean that none in that branded company possibly could have an interest in the artistic phenomenon similar to a researching art historian. It means that I keep to the level of the institution.

It would be another possibility to leave the institution level, for the level of the collection. On this level one would take departure in peoples manifold interests in the objects instead, and work with spheres of interest in that which is exhibited.

Further, the diagram also illustrates how the national gallery and its institutional self confidence are created in a discourse with a society “below” as well as a society “above”. Every kind of citizen is part of the public discourse. And in the diagram people are also included who do not visit, but who have faced the visibility zone of the national gallery.

This diagram of the museum culture represents a very dynamic model. It illustrates how there is not a matter of polarity only; not a simple relation of the museum to “the visitor” imagined as a single figure that represents all of society. It is the manifold interests in the museum culture that are stressed here. A phenomenon important to keep in mind when analysing narrations in the visibility zone.

“The Nation”-narration

In NaMu’s call every kind of national museums are regarded as challenged by globalisation. And how are national galleries to be understood as particularly national in a globalising world? It seems evident to look for narrations of the institutional self confidence relating to “the nation”-concept. But in which way is this issue a main issue, when national galleries compete with each other to invent the future national gallery concept in the visibility zone? Is it possible to characterize the situation today, as a matter of prominence of new narratives on “the nation”-concept?

This question indirectly leads on to says, that when the narratives may not be classified as strategies that seem to act in offensive they are opposite a tradition: strategies being on the defensive.

The over all impression from the “*publicity materials*” created in the last decade is that less attention has been given to review and renew the narratives relating to “the nation”-concept, if compared to the sometimes impressing attention given to incorporate and intensify narrations of an international museum network.

If a strategy is said to be most on the defensive when it has not been renewed since the earliest years of the national galleries, then this is a strategy to be found among the various “nation”-narratives. In the “*publicity materials*” from Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen this is the national gallery “*being a narrative about us and our ancestors.*” This narrative makes “the people” appear to us in very much the same sense as when the national gallery was created in the 1800s. This is “the people” being like a big family, linked to each other by tie of kinship; “the nation” narrated as a matter of biology.

When “the people” is supposed to be the most successful narrative to create attention in the visibility zone a few questions appear: a) what are the national gallery’s national obligations more precisely? b) for whom are the national obligations intended and who not? c) how do this narrative contribute to the meanings of and to the definition of the national gallery? And likewise d) to which spheres in the museum culture is this narrative supposed to be the most successful to create attention?

From four national galleries one has chosen “the people”-narrative, while three prefer a -territorial (nation-state territory) “nation”-narrative. And the variety in all the four “nation”-narratives makes it possible to conclude that the four national galleries narratives relate to the social space in which we live to a highly diverse degree.

The narrative of “the people” represents a strategy on the defensive. But it is accompanied by a an offensive strategy to expand the international professional network. When the two narratives are held together, the impression is that considerations on the “nation”-narration has been left behind somehow, while the national gallery struggle to create a super highway to globalisation.

At this point I will conclude, that it does not seem as if "the nation"- concept is a main issue in the competition among national galleries to invent the national gallery concept of the future. This statement is also based on the fact, that the three national galleries which prefer the territorial model, has kept this model as a basic structure within the period of thirty years or so, when they have been creating "*publicity materials*". The "nation"-narratives are not renewed in a striking way within this period.

But on the other hand "the nation"-narration is anyway a main issue. In the materials form all four national galleries we face "nation"-narrations. Not to renew a narrative is as prominent a choice to make, as to renew it in part or even totally to transform it. No matter how much on the defensive a narrative is, it is just as prominent a part of the national gallery profile as the strategies that act most in offensive.

When the context in which the meaning of the local/national is constructed has changed, as it has along the globalising discourse, we become aware of new aspects and questions. This also influence on how we face the profile of the individual national gallery. No national gallery can escape this changed awareness. But they may regard this matter to be a problem or as well, to be a new potential.

As example it has become possible to imagine that a national obligation to national galleries would be to create a discourse which develops our imagination and understanding of the "nation" concept.

A Potential Problem in National – Global Narratives

In the materials it is even more striking, how the global dimension sometimes appears as if it is a narration which has been put on top of the already existing narratives. There is often an "inside"-connotation attached to the "nation"-narration and a different "outside"- connotation, attached to the "global"-narration – as if it were something separate.

If globalisation is characterized as differing from that which is international by neglecting and crossing nation-state frontiers unimpeded, this is what information on the Internet do. This means that the global also is something "inside" the frontiers and not something only going on "outside". But national-global narratives do not always appear this way in the materials from the national galleries.

The impression is that the national galleries find it to be a most challenging matter to -combine narratives of "the nation" on the one hand, and narratives of how the national gallery at the same time is globalising like every modern institution. It is a new potential narrative problem to national galleries, to create a narrative successfully including both. I already mentioned an example, where a major focus is on narrating the prestigious, international museums network. The consequence in this case is that the national professional network has been silenced in the recent decade. While I found another solution in Stocholm; Nationalmuseum has created a half-and-half strategy. This means, literarily to create one paragraph with "nation"-narratives when a paragraph has been created with "international" narratives – or the opposite way around. This strategy is even visible in the layout and possibly makes just as much sense to the brief reader, who maybe just looks through the folder or "*website*" more than carefully reads.

These two different strategies are to exemplify, how it is to a highly diverse degree the narratives in the materials give priority to that which is the local space, the national space and the world wide global space. The choices of narratives made by each national gallery emphasize how an increasing variety among national gallery profiles has appeared within the last decade. And these examples illustrate how the national galleries create individual profiles becoming competitors in the visibility zone; how national galleries compete to invent the future national gallery as concept.

In the materials, it is not always possible to understand the narratives of the local, the national and the global as articulation of one world. They appear as were they separate, parallel worlds, if the national gallery for example happens to introduce a different national gallery profile to the local society then the strategies available in the global visibility zone. Consequently narrative conflicts easily occur, when the two different profiles are inclined to face each other but do not successfully melt together.

The world which (as narrative) has fallen into pieces is a single, particular example which illustrates a more general problem in the materials. I will refer to this as a weakened narrative coherence. This is a general problem which occurs in the materials at about the same time as the competition to invent the future national gallery becomes visible, about 1996. The weakened narrative coherence is a phenomenon that is symptomatic for how the institutional self confidence of the national galleries has become destabilised within the last decade.

Every narrative is similarly important and will influence on what it is possible to imagine as a national gallery's obligations and similarly to imagine, what global opportunities are offering to the same national gallery. The link or missing link between the local, national and global narratives also offers an institutional interpretation to the globalisation discourse of what globalisation is supposed to be. For example: is globalisation primarily a demanding new phenomenon, or are there just as many similarities with what we did or knew for long?

Contradicting Cultural Forces

From a political sphere in the museum culture, "those in authorities" (fig. 1), the national galleries are to be modern institutions, they are to globalise. At the same time the political sphere needs to keep the imagination of "the nation" alive.

The nation as culture does not occupy a specific space but is always a matter of "inside"/"outside" – of hybridity. (Bhabha 2004: 1–7) A "nation" defined as a nation-state territory faces a major problem historically, due to the lack of stableness of state frontiers. A "nation" defined as "a people" face a major problem in migration.

But "the nation", as it appears as narratives in the visibility zone, are to keep the borders of "the nation" as culture alive, and define that which is considered of significance within the contemporary nation-state in question. At this point national galleries are just as disciplinary today, as they always were, in the way Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has shown them to be. (Hooper-Greenhill 2001: 167–190)

In the diagram of the museum culture (fig. 1), both the political sphere and the artist sphere are important indeed to the existence (or not existence) of the national galleries. But opposite the political sphere, the contemporary artist sphere may ascribe irrelevance to the matter of origin and the "nation"-narration in this sense. Contemporary artists might be born in one country, educated in another country, live in a third country and work in a fourth country. Néstor García Canclini critically asks what makes passports (which means nationality) so important. (Canclini 2004: 699–708) Canclini's text is one good argument for defining the museum culture in a way, which will not primarily restrict people's interests in the national galleries to something dependent on their nationality.

When focusing on these two spheres in museum culture, the "artist" and "those in authorities", it seems to be this second sphere who has the most prominent interest in letting national galleries create a "nation"-narration. But it has become possible to imagine that a national gallery which face such contradicting cultural forces would see it as a potential and create a discourse on the subject.

So far, narratives in the national galleries visibility zone draw the lines of "inside"/"outside" of culture very clear to us. The narratives in the materials analysed reflect the cultural space we live in to a highly diverse degree. And this is a particular important matter because these materials are created to invite people and to give them irresistible good

reasons to become visitors. Taken further, what I also say here is that the national galleries have very much influence on which their visitors actually are.

New Narratives

Which are the future obligations of galleries? They are destabilised. But are they to continue primary as disciplinary, national institutions in the sense of the 1800s? Are they for example to awaken the national feeling in, if not a “people”, then to those who reside in the nation-state? Do “the nation”- narratives work out as a strategy that is able to extend the visibility zone globally? Or how are “nation”-narratives interesting when seen from a global point of view? Each national gallery face so many questions!

In this paper I have focused on potential narrative problems. But on the basis of the materials offered for analysis it is possible to conclude that several new narratives already have appeared in the visibility zone. I will introduce you to one example.

It has become possible for every national gallery to choose whether they want to be a disciplinary space for a still ongoing one way flow of information to society, or to become a contact zone. James Clifford has had the experience in a museum, where “*.it became something more than a place for consultation or research; it became a contact zone.*” (Clifford 1997: 192) James Clifford’s interpretation of the museum potentially could help the national galleries change their self confidence to become a much more interactive space where the visitors are given a more active role.

And this is what already has happened, when The National Gallery in London announces “The Associate Artist Scheme” on their “*website*”. The electronic visitor is told that an artist has been appointed to work in the museum building with the museums international collection of old masters. The National Gallery invites us to visit the artist’s studio in a limited period of time at specific days. The National Gallery has created a narrative where the museum appears as a discreet but indispensable space where we are welcome to create an experience in company with the artist in the studio. We have the opportunity to meet an artist. The artist will meet some of his/hers audience face to face. The National Gallery is a kind of contact zone.

More precisely The National Gallery’s idea is cognate to a discipline also practised in the art academies, when the student is to introduce his/her work of art to an audience of fellow students and teachers and to receive feedback. But the National Gallery studio is more informal. The National Gallery seems a silent but an easy to access mediator for contact between different spheres in the museum culture.

Conclusion

How national galleries are defined develop within a discourse in the museum culture. In this discourse the national galleries have a specific authority to choose between strategies and navigate in the agenda. Globalisation is not something happening to them. But they certainly have to make up their mind about a lot of questions. From my point of view it is not decisive if the national galleries already are completely clarified on all the questions and problems, from which only a few are mentioned in this paper. Maybe they will never be. But it is important that the national galleries relate themselves to all of these questions in a reflective and well considered way, when they introduce themselves in the visibility zone to the spheres in the museum culture.

In the visibility zone the national galleries both confirm expectations and create new expectations in the museum culture. When a national gallery for example wants to introduce itself becoming a contact zone, first of all it must appear to us in the visibility zone. A national gallery needs our attention. With our attention the national gallery will have the opportunity to motivate us to move our body; we go to visit. A national gallery also needs attention, from all the national galleries world wide, to be able to participate in the competi-

tion to invent the future national gallery concept. In both cases well made narratives must make a difference.

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