

National Museums Becoming Woman

Henrik Holm

Statens Museum for Kunst, Denmark

Henrik.Holm@smk.dk

This paper is a shot cut analysis of the past, present and future of National Museums, seen from a Deleuzian point of view.¹ 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 it's 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.

1 For an excellent introduction to Deleuzian thought see: Claire Colebrook: *Gilles Deleuze*, Routledge Critical Thinkers, Routledge, London and New York, 2002.

Questioning Power – the Oedipal Way – Finding Founding Fathers

National museums were built in the era of Freud to work on Oedipal premises. In order to execute its powers men of honour and public influence took it to their heart to build up structures able to fuel the imagination of the public, by nursing and displaying art working instantly and in tune with the expectations of a crowd amused when provoked to sentiments of loss or gain. Right under the surface made up of the instruments of structuring the past and the present with the instruments of periodization, stylistic criticism, iconography, historicism, and ethical evaluation, everyone possibly could feel the arousal of deeper feelings of anguish and desire triggered by the arts themselves.

What the critics and art historians did, was rising the phallus by naming fathers and promoting the legitimate sons of him, turning museums into a silent battlefield for the selection of the chosen people, and even for the killing of founding Fathers.

In Denmark the name of the “Father of Danish Painting” is C. W. Eckersberg (1783-1914). He was given the title posthumously in 1925. This naming of the Father marked the high point after years of struggle against the success of the breakthrough of modern, European thought in the eighteen fifties. The title seems to stick to him. It was used at the anniversary exhibition in 2005 in The National Gallery of Art in Washington. Eckersberg was again made sacrosanct in the recent canonization of twelve works of art being part of a larger compilation of canonical works of art, presented by the Danish Government in 2006, where the work shown here appeared on it, prominently figuring as the first oil-on-canvas painting on the list.



C. W. Eckersberg, Danish, 1783–1853.

View through Three of the Northwestern Arches of the Third Storey of the Colosseum. A Thunderstorm is Brewing over the City. 1815. Oil on canvas. 32x49.5 cm. Purchased 1911. Inv. no.: KMS3123



Nicolai Abildgaard, Danish, 1743–1809.

The Wounded Philoctetes. (1775). Oil on canvas. 123x175.5 cm. Purchased 1849. Inv. no.: KMS58

The promotion of C. W. Eckersberg throughout the last half of the eighteenth century was followed by loud and violent 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 recognized painting made of a Danish painter.

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, if you recognize Oedipal structures in your local histories of building up an imagined, national community based on the arts?

Questioning power – the Deleuzian Way – Undoing Identity (and Finding Cows)

Deleuze offers a counter image to the oedipal one, perhaps opening up 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 once oedipally conceived national museums.



Wilhelm Marstrand, Danish, 1810–1873.
The Art Historian N. L. Høyen. 1868. Oil on canvas. 129x98 cm. Gift 1870. Inv. no.: KMS870.

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.²

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.



Johan Thomas Lundbye, Danish, 1818–1848.

A Cowshed on a Farm. 1844. Oil on canvas. 62x95 cm. Purchased 1844. Inv. no.: KMS446.

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 it’s own identity.

But the notion of identity has changed since a national museum lay at the heart of desires. When the notion of Identity changed, and why, 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 the collections. In Denmark, the bourgeois Director of the National Gallery N. L. Høyen (1798–1870) fought it out with the King Christian VIII both having the privilege of acquiring new works of art, but having opposite views of what

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.²

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 fighting over cows, it makes 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, now living in the city. The audience of those days were both anxious and thrilled by modern life bringing abrupt changes, more money and more dangers. The melancholic longing for a lost, rural life had it’s own secular church for prayer, anger and redemption to go to, the new National Collections of Art.

2 See Britta Tøndborg: Hanging the Danes: Danish olden Age art in a nineteenth century museum context, SMK Art Journal, Statens Museum for Kunst, 2005 pp. 119.



[Johan Thomas Lundbye](#), Danish, 1818–1848.

A Danish Coast. View from Kitnæs by the Roskilde Fjord. 1843. Oil on canvas. 188.5x255.5 cm. Purchased 1843. Inv. no.: KMS412.

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

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 recognition of 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 national Gallery of Art in Copenhagen had the entry fee expelled after a period of approximately ten years, people has come to see the collections re-installed, making the National Gallery the most visited museum in Denmark in the year 2006. It's for the first time ever, since numbers started to matter the most.

The special exhibitions get less attention because of the entrance fee to be paid. They get even lesser 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, in a clever way. Museums are usually polite in their offerings of history since long forgotten. Even when putting hot, contemporary, ethical or political problems to be dealt with on stage, it's kind of nice. But "nice" is to be done away with.

Museums are starting to let the audience direct their activities more, as we do in Copenhagen by inviting teenagers to facilitate our new educational services. In the U.K. museums play an active role in engaging with the lower classes, the foreigners, and the illiterate. 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 all the same attention as do 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 being going through Becoming. A museum is made to be the ground or institutional foundation for the structuralization of the proper language and point of view of experience.

But now the imminence of the coming and going of Being has differentiated into numerous ways of revealing itself. 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.

Not Identity, But Creativity and Diversity. The Museum as an Unstable Community

So, now *Creativity* is more important than *Identity*. If the Museum allow for *Creativity* to take place, then it's a place to go. Human creativity allows for such ideas as Art, Genius, Identity and Subject, to emerge. Identity and so forth are all ideas 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 of working 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, it's fit for survival. In this sense, museums should be no different from handling 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 as desiring being unreliable, bringing surprise, being radical, or being so "old school", it breaks through Modernity.

Doing, Spectacle, Surveillance, Simulacrum

If the Museum once was a homo-social community reproducing the clichés of manhood, the ideals and metaphors for the museum invoked by Deleuzian thought, as those of Becoming though being aware of what you *do* and not who you *are*, are "Female" through and through. Speaking of becoming as making something new, it's 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 one before. Second, it should not repeat then masculine, one-eyed focus on the artworks. Then the new, national museum can try to be a small "society of the spectacle" (Guy Debord) in a larger "society of surveillance" (Michel Foucault), where the spontaneity of lived experience has degenerated into effects of pure simulation.³ 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 be able to problematize and question the spectacle, of surveillance, of control of normality, and Becoming.

3 For a splendid comparison between the thoughts of Guy Debord and Michel Foucault see: Martin Jay: *From the Empire of the Gaze to the Society of the Spectacle: Foucault and Debord*, in *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1994.