

Collection Strategies: Some Thoughts on How European Museums Deal with Gender Imbalance

By Martin Sundberg

Annie Warhol, Jacqueline Pollock, Miss van der Rohe, and Joséphine Beuys are only some of the names the visitor encounters at the entrance of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Except for Louis Bourgeois, there are only women represented.

Obviously there is something wrong with the first impression, and without doubt the visitor is facing a work of art. The French artist Agnès Thurnauer has created a series of circular name labels, *Portraits Grandeur Nature*, where the artist's gender has been changed. The agenda of the exhibition *elles@centrepompidou* is set out already in the entrance hall, in an exhibition spanning from modernistic pioneers to contemporary art and where the criteria for inclusion is the female gender.

The exhibition is vast and divided into more or less traditional themes like pioneers, the body, and immateriality.¹ Since it opened in May 2009 it has been partially re-hung several times and the exhibition will change continuously until it closes in spring 2011. Initially the exhibition was to be on view for a year only, but the major public success has prolonged it for another year.² The changing installation, accompanied by the ambitious website, provide for a flexible situation that can easily be adjusted according to circumstances.³ The general ambition is to present unknown works from the collection, to present women artists who have been neglected by museums and art historians during the 20th century, and, not least, to show that these artists don't have to be hidden away in favour of established, canonised male artists. The presentation of the collection can also be seen as an experiment. Is it possible, limited to the collection, to present a thematically oriented exhibition with only women artists?

In France, like in many other Western countries, feminist art history and museological work still has to struggle against the male mainstream. After forty years of work by feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Germaine Greer to name but a few distinguished examples has changed academic writing, the situation at the museums has hardly changed at all. Male modernist artists are shown in lavish retrospectives; Andy Warhol, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dalí are succeeding each other now as well as during the 1960s--before the feminist wave.⁴ Centre Pompidou is no exception. Large retrospective exhibitions, for instance with Pierre Soulages--one of the established French abstract artists after World War II--Lucian Freud and Wassily Kandinsky, are shown parallel to *elles*.⁵

¹ In the catalogue and on the website, all the themes are presented: Pionnières, Feu à volonté, Corps slogan, Eccentric abstraction, "Une chambre à soi", Le mot à l'oeuvre, Immatérielles, Autour de l'exposition.

² The exhibition opened on May 29, 2009, and was to be on show for a year. Now it will close February 21, 2011.

³ For the homepage see: <http://www.ina.fr/fresques/elles-centrepompidou/Html/PrincipaleAccueil.php> (April 26, 2010).

⁴ It is quite astounding that Warhol, Ernst, and Dalí were shown during 2008–09 at Moderna in large exhibitions, and that the same artists were shown at Moderna in the late 1960s and early '70s. Time does not seem to have changed.

⁵ Soulages was on view October 14, 2009–March 8, 2010, Lucian Freud March 10–uly 19, 2010, and Wassily Kandinsky April 8–August 10, 2009.

Because of this situation, it is liberating that *elles@centrepompidou* embraces such a free form. Some of the galleries in *elles* have changed parallel to the Soulages exhibition and the curator responsible for *elles*, Camille Morineau, has chosen to highlight one of the participating artists with some additional works. Judit Reigl, born in 1923 in Hungary and living in France, is hardly a big prolific name even though she has been working as long as Soulages and embraces similar ideas. Why haven't I seen her poetic, informal compositions before? Soulages' darkness suddenly fades away in comparison with these low-key paintings and forceful drawings.⁶

Centre Pompidou has chosen an interesting strategy in order to present their collection. *Elles* is not only a welcomed opportunity to see what usually is hidden away, but also, according to Camille Morineau, an opportunity to declare what so often is missing.⁷ In order to see the missing parts, the collection's blind spots, the visitor has to be well acquainted with art history. That might be asking a lot since those artists normally not on display are also those women artists neglected by art history and less exposed anyway. Nevertheless, this choice has proven to be fruitful in order to persuade collectors and galleries about the necessity of certain artists' works. The exhibition has led to several donations, such as *Untitled (Room 101)* by Rachel Whiteread, and not least to a massive public interest. So the exhibition has led to an expansion of the collection, facilitating future improvements.

This large, visual manifestation of absence in the collection can be compared with Moderna Museet's (in the following: Moderna) project *The Second Museum of Our Wishes*. The aim of the project at the Swedish museum of modern art was to acquire works by female modernist and modern artists and it was grounded in the curators' opinion that there were certain artists lacking and that the museum should try to acquire works by them. Timely, in connection with the museum's 50th anniversary celebrated in 2008, the museum asked for support in order to be able to acquire works. The curators, especially some of the female curators, had since long been discussing the necessity of including women artists' works in the collection, and these thoughts were developed by the director Lars Nittve into the initiative that was publicly announced in an article and a letter to the government in spring 2006.⁸ Nittve referred to the exhibition *The Museum of Our Wishes* that took place in the early 1960s, an initiative of the Friends of Moderna (Moderna Museets Vänner), and which had the effect that the museum could acquire some thirty works of art—all key works in the collection today and all made by men.⁹ This so-called mistake was to be rectified through new purchases of women modernist artists. The new project did very well. Several works of art and roughly 40 million Swedish crowns were donated to the museum, mainly by private donors, but also by the government. New works were then incorporated into the collection—by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Tora Vega Holmström, Anna Kagan, Lee Lozano, Carolee Schneemann, and Monica Sjöö to name just a few.¹⁰

⁶ This room dominated by the works of Reigl was on view as I visited the museum in December 2009.

⁷ Interview with Camille Morineau by the author, Paris, December 18, 2009.

⁸ Lars Nittve, "Slentrianmässig prioritering av manliga konstnärskap", *Dagens Nyheter*, April 18, 2006.

⁹ On the exhibition, see Maria Görts, "Routine and Selection. The Genesis of the Moderna Museet Collection" in *The History Book. On Moderna Museet 1958–2008*, Anna Tellgren (ed.), Stockholm/Göttingen, Moderna Museet/Steidl 2008, pp. 11–32.

¹⁰ Works by the following artists were acquired: Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Susan Hiller, Tora Vega Holmström, Anna-Chaja Abelevna Kagan, Hilma af Klint (through an agreement on a loan), Mary

Compared to an exhibition like *elles*, this Swedish project was invisible at first, an abstract plan that initially left no traces. But in the course of time new works were purchased and the list of names that was presented in the beginning became more and more real. The project was never turned into an exhibition per se, something that hardly could have been done with such differing works irrespective of their quality. On the other hand, the new works have been included in the galleries reserved for the collection as well as in temporary exhibitions.¹¹ To work with the art on a daily basis is a more subtle and maybe more effective intervention than to present all at once and then to stow it away in a storage again. The goal, to present another art history and to nuance the picture heretofore introduced by Moderna in Sweden, has been achieved, at least in part. And, importantly, some works have led to solo exhibitions. It is for instance hard to believe that an exhibition like the Lee Lozano retrospective in spring 2010 would have come about without the purchase of the painting *Punch, Peek & Feel*.¹² The project *The Second Museum of Our Wishes* functions in the first place as a reminder. Yet it is a process that needs continuous attention and development in order to achieve lasting results, a point to which I will return.

Some few works don't make a difference in a collection where the gender imbalance already is great. If for example the collection of Swedish 20th century art is scrutinised, approximately 25 per cent of the works are made by women artists.¹³ Then, looking at the statistics, two works by Tora Vega Holmström and Monica Sjöö are only drops in the ocean. Nevertheless, the important thing is not to count the number of works, but to see to the possibilities that are generated. A single work might have a greater potential than a comprehensive group of works.

The imbalance is of course not only due to the exhibition *The Museum of Our Wishes* on display in 1966--i.e. five years after the opening of the museum--that is made the scapegoat. Nittve's choice of title for the project--*The Second Museum of Our Wishes*--might be smart, but it is problematic all the same for at least two reasons. Firstly, the exhibition organised by then-director Pontus Hultén and critic/curator Ulf Linde, which itself was a good initiative, is presented as a failure.¹⁴ This judgement is based on today's knowledge and the possibility to look back on the 20th century with a certain distance through the feminist theories developed afterwards--but how will future generations judge *The Second Museum of Our Wishes*? Secondly, the new project is placed in the shadow of the museum's famous 1960s. Instead of developing a new idea, an old and successful one is recycled that goes hand in hand

Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Lee Lozano, Alice Neel, Lioubov Popova, Carolee Schneemann, Monica Sjöö, and Dorothea Tanning.

¹¹ To name just one example, Judy Chicago's work *Car Hood* (1963–64) was shown in the exhibition *Time & place: Los Angeles 1957–1968*, Moderna Museet, October 4, 2008, until January 6, 2009.

¹² Lee Lozano's work was shown in a retrospective exhibition from February 13 until April 25, 2010. The show was presented in the major gallery for temporary exhibitions and was one of the first in that space dedicated to a female artist. The curator was female.

¹³ These statistics are based on my own research, looking into the database of Moderna, and the results are preliminary. They will be developed in a future research project on the representation of women artists in the collection purchased during the 20th century.

¹⁴ That the priorities behind the acquisitions were routine like is Nittve's expression, see the above mentioned article. *Dagens Nyheter*, April 18, 2006.

with a nostalgic view on the 1960s as the decade when Moderna still was an institution to count on.¹⁵

Both Centre Pompidou's display of the collection and Moderna's project strive to visualise problems connected with a gender-oriented examination of the collection. Where the one museum shows what is there, the other museum chooses to point at what is not. Yet the aim is the same: to increase the collection and at least to some extent be able to alter the current circumstances. Thinking of the public, it is of course grateful to present an exhibition, but to display the absences, as pointed out, is not easily done. However, another effect of knowledge production is achieved. The public encounters works seldom seen, they can discover new artists, and they can grasp the collection more comprehensively--which in future allows them to pose specific questions like why Judit Reigl hasn't received a retrospective exhibition or why Joan Mitchell isn't represented through more works in the collection of the Centre Pompidou. Exactly these possibilities that arise through the generation of new knowledge are paramount in order to develop a future feminist discourse. There is definitely a need to further increase an awareness of these issues in the consciousness of the general public and at the museums themselves. Moderna continues to hide the women artists that are present in the collection. Through the project the public has been made aware of who is missing, at least some names have become more commonly recognised, but that there are women artists in the collection whose works are rarely shown is a fact that is kept quiet.¹⁶ Naturally it generates less press publicity to show works on paper and photography by lesser-known Swedish women artists than to present a list of world-famous, established artists. It should also be acknowledged that the quality can differ a lot between works in the collection. Since Moderna has a national responsibility to collect Swedish art, it also means, and this is particularly relevant for the early decades, that acquisitions were made on a broad basis. Here lies another problem: the works Moderna wished to incorporate into the collection were made by already established artists. They were already part of an historical art canon. It is no coincidence that the only female artist Agnès Thurnauer mentions, and in fact turns into a male, is Louise Bourgeois--one of the artists selected by Nittve. Unfamiliar artists, who presumably also are lacking in the collection, are bypassed once again. The list does not only imply new possibilities, in a way it also functions as exclusion.

Both these museums place their finger on a problematic area and open up for further discussions. It is a difficult situation to solve and a disadvantage is that both museums only acknowledge the situation of women artists when there are many other neglected areas, for instance seen geographically. An important task for the future is to create an awareness of the problems and a wish for a dialogue with various participants so that the situation might be changed over time. That calls for an open mind and a desire really to cause a change. The projects show that the ambition is there; nevertheless, both require an active follow-up--a workload the museums alone cannot answer to. The public as well as the art historians have to

¹⁵ See articles by Marianne Hultman, "Our Man in New York. An Interview with Billy Klüver on his Collaboration with Moderna Museet", Magnus af Petersens and Martin Sundberg, "Art on Stage. Happenings and Moving Images at Moderna Museet", both in: *The History Book. On Moderna Museet 1958-2008*, Anna Tellgren (ed.), Stockholm/Göttingen, Moderna Museet/Steidl 2008.

¹⁶ In the original article by Nittve, the list included Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo, and Hannah Höch to name just a few, artists whose works haven't been purchased.

grasp this chance to demand more of the museums that after all are public places. The processes have been initiated, but the projects must not be seen as concluded once Moderna celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2008, or once the Centre Pompidou changes the display of the collection again. These projects must not be seen as short-lived campaigns, but as starting points for continued work, thought and debate.

The demands that have to be made shall also emphasise the interest of the public and encourage critical self-reflection on behalf of the museums, both in terms of time and place. The process of critical thinking must be kept alive. One positive initiative at Moderna is a research project on the newly acquired works of art.¹⁷ This might challenge the museum's own comfort--some new acquisitions are certainly not enough. In other words, these projects are great opportunities to make a halt in daily business and reflect on the criteria for the choice of acquisitions as well as to what kind of art histories the museums want to present. But this also goes for the public: what kind of exhibitions do they want to encounter in these public spaces? Attention and awareness can lead to many diverse collections and exhibitions that rise beyond the momentary spectacle.¹⁸

¹⁷ The project "In the shadow of. Women modernists from a gender-oriented art history perspective, in connection with Moderna Museet's project The Second Museum of our Wishes" is a three-year-project financed by the Swedish Arts Council. It was initiated by Anna Tellgren, curator of photography, and the author in 2008.

¹⁸ An earlier Swedish version of this article has been published as: "Centre Pompidou synliggör det som inte finns", *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 23rd, 2010.