

Subject: Review of the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery, Moderna Museet
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We all looked up expectantly as the machinery murmured into life. With a magnetic click one of the white screens glided out and momentarily hung in the air before slowly descending and coming to rest in front of us. On it was written: 'In the future everybody will be world famous for fifteen minutes'.

Someone who has been famous for considerably longer than that is Pontus Hultén. Shortly before his death in 2006 he met up with his old friend Renzo Piano to discuss the feasibility of designing a sort of 'user-friendly warehouse' – a place to both store and display his collection of art. This vision has now been realised at Sweden's national museum of modern and contemporary art – Moderna Museet – the institution that Hultén had himself led with such aplomb from 1960 until 1973.

Hultén's bequest to Moderna Museet came with but one proviso: the works should be accessible, even when not on show. This precondition was characteristic of a man who treated museums as meeting places. Yet Hultén refused to accept that accessibility and popularity meant playing it safe. 'The public come when there is good quality', he once remarked, adding that a trusted museum will always succeed in introducing people to the unfamiliar and new. A case in point was 'Five New York Evenings' of 1964. It featured the late American artist Robert Rauschenberg and a cow in a performance that gives a flavour of what Moderna Museet must have been like under Hultén's leadership. A permanent legacy of this is *Monogram* (1955-9), Rauschenberg's iconic stuffed angora goat with a car tyre around its midriff which the museum dared to acquire at this time.

And it was thanks to Hultén that the Swedish public got an early taste of Andy Warhol in 1968. Some of his cows, clouds and Chelsea girls made a return exactly forty years later when the museum mounted an anniversary show that was as much a homage to Hultén as Warhol. The accompanying catalogue even suggested that it was Hultén who coined the 'fifteen minutes of fame' phrase. Warhol would no doubt have found this amusing – as he would the recent hoo-ha over the 'authenticity' of some Brillo boxes Hultén gave to Moderna Museet in 1995.

The similarities between the private collection of Pontus Hultén and the public holdings of Moderna Museet testify to the profound influence he exerted on the museum. He 'set the tone for the collection' and 'laid down the agenda for the future' concedes its current director, Lars Nittve. That agenda can be summed up in two words: accessibility and acquisition.

And agenda-setting is very much in the air given that 2008 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Moderna Museet's founding. It is also a decade since the inauguration of Rafael Moneo's superbly subdued building on the island of Skeppsholmen in Stockholm. These anniversaries have put the museum in a self-reflective mood. This will culminate in a symposium in October timed to coincide with the publication of a new book about Moderna Museet's past, present and future. The fact that the 'Pontus Hultén Study Gallery' has been inaugurated in such a propitious year indicates that Hultén's role as the institution's touchstone has outlived his death.

The former director's generosity means that Moderna Museet's already impressive holdings have been swelled by 800 additional paintings, sculptures, films and posters. The latter includes advertisements for the Warhol exhibition of 1968 bearing

such aphorisms as: 'I never read, I just look at pictures' and 'Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?' These thoughts are lent an extra dimension courtesy of their new location. Designed by Renzo Piano, the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery fills a double-height space in a part of the museum once occupied by the photography collection. Suspended from the ceiling are thirty screens. These are a neat reminder of a much earlier experiment in accessibility when, in the 1970s, Hultén introduced a series of moveable panels for paintings. The conservation problems of those days have found a technological solution. Instead of being moved by hand, they are today accessed by touch-screen computer.

Watching the paintings slide into view reminded me of the anthropomorphic machines for manufacturing cars that one can see perform at Thinktank in Birmingham. This is no coincidence. Equipment normally used for engineering has been put to artistic purposes at Moderna Museet. The novel use of such machinery is doubly significant, recalling as it does Hultén's pioneering exhibitions *Movement in Art* (1961) and *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968) as well as his involvement with Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.).

A further reminder of Hultén's interest in kinetic sculpture comes in the form of *Fiesta Bar* (1975) by his great friend, Jean Tinguely. It has here been decked with bottles of alcohol (sadly empty). Alongside are surrealistic food pieces by Claes Oldenburg. Hanging nearby are Warhol's *Dance diagram (Foxtrot)* (1961) and Robert Rauschenberg and Niki de Saint Phalle's 'action painting' made by the feet of unwitting dancers at the opening of *Movement in Art*. Dining, drinking and dancing plus Hultén's favourite art all combine to produce a touching tribute to the benefactor.

A visit to the Hultén bequest is a decidedly performative experience. The public is as much on show as the art – they are visible both through a glass wall and a series of windows that look down from the museum's entrance hall. Adding to this theatricality are the noises made by the screens as they move to and fro. Renzo Piano loves this rumpus, sensing that the factory-floor atmosphere would have been very much to Hultén's liking. Furthermore, the slight delay before the sought-after painting hones into view contributes to the desired sense of drama and ritual.

In the light of all this, the decision to foreground a sculpture by the American artist, Thomas Shannon at the opening of the gallery becomes particularly evocative. It features a rectangular form that is kept perpetually afloat with the help of concealed magnets. The piece is entitled *Slumber* (1986). The manner of its display here transforms it into something approaching a representation of Hultén. He is not dead. He instead lives on via the artistic life-support system that is the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery.

The enduring spectre of the late benefactor and the thrill of watching the collection unfold are reminiscent of the excitement experienced at London's Sir John Soane's Museum – not least when the neatly dressed attendant reveals that a seemingly unremarkable gallery space is actually made up of moveable screens, each concealing hitherto invisible paintings. The Pontus Hultén Study Gallery is like a 21st century version of this – spliced with another recent act of benevolence: namely the art dealer Anthony d'Offay's offer of 725 works of contemporary art to the British nation. D'Offay, in a very Hulténesque act, stipulated that the collection should be housed in a series of fifty 'Artist Rooms' to be shown in various museums across the country.

The d'Offay and Hultén bequests are instances of a general drive to bring art to the people. Strategies to achieve this take many forms. They invariably start with the

digitalising of collections. In the case of Hultén's art collection plus an associated archive and library, this has been achieved thanks to support from 'the access project' (*Accessprojektet*), a state sponsored fund for preserving and documenting collections – and making them accessible.

Measures to increase the use and accessibility of storerooms can be as straightforward as the inclusion of mobile spotlights – as in the painting store of the Centro de Arte Moderna, Lisbon (*Museum Practice*, Summer 2006, p.70). Other undertakings are more ambitious. Take, for example, the Luce Foundation Center for American Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington. This 'open storage' was inaugurated in 2006 and features 3,400 objects spread over three floors. Another Luce Center for American Art – this time at Brooklyn Museum – has a similarly impressive visible storage area, including hundreds of paintings on racks that are periodically rotated to show different works.

The Hultén gallery might be on a far smaller scale, but it is superior in two important respects: the paintings are not trapped behind glass and it is the visitor that actively selects the works. This makes it the artistic equivalent of 'Search Engine' – the National Railway Museum at York's attempt 'to bring the secrets of the archives out into the public domain' (*Museums Journal*, April 2008, pp.54-55). Both it and the Hultén bequest turn the museum into a library: an institution that catalogues a collection but leaves it up to the visitor to determine what to 'borrow'.

With this in mind it will be interesting to see how the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery develops. The curators have said that it will not be a static homage to Hultén. This is just as well because it runs the risk of becoming a high-tech mausoleum. It is therefore pleasing to see that the museum has from the very outset chosen to include works acquired from other sources – even if many of them are inevitably connected to Hultén. Warhol's *Dance diagram (Foxtrot)*, for instance, entered the museum as part of the *New York Collection for Stockholm* of 1973. This proved to be Hultén's audacious swansong as director of Moderna Museet before he left to take charge of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. He used the show to secure an array of works by leading artists active on the 1960s New York scene. Hultén's networking and fundraising skills from the public and private sectors at both home and abroad secured a canon of works the value of which must far outstrip the museum's present acquisition budget. The *New York Collection for Stockholm* was in effect a bequest in its own right – the successes of which still carry lessons for leaders of today's museums.

The inclusion of Warhol's *Foxtrot* therefore constitutes an instructive pendant to the donation Hultén made at the end of his life. This, plus the fact that a number of the portable screens are currently themed around exhibitions curated by Hultén – not least his famous Centre Pompidou shows of the late 1970s focusing on Paris, New York, Berlin and Moscow – underscore Hultén's importance to the history of curation.

A deferential attitude towards Hultén is of course entirely justified and appropriate for the initial arrangement of his eponymous gallery. But a question arises for the future: should the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery be a 'curated' space at all? One of its key strengths is surely its potential to empower the visitor. It offers the prospect of allowing the audience to determine what it sees. This opens a world of possibilities: the computer terminal used to access the holdings could be programmed to log the number of times individual works are selected – thus helping to identify the museum's 'best sellers'. In a similar vein, profiles of the museum's 'customers' could be established and, by acting like an online retailer, the information could be used to flag up related works: 'people who searched for this item also looked at...' The

museum community would become akin to holders of high street loyalty cards – and their activities studied to reveal their likes and dislikes. The study gallery could, by extension, be used to allow groups or individuals to curate ‘their’ screen on a topic of their choice.

Of course the Study Gallery could also serve as an adjunct and accessory to exhibitions in the main galleries. It also provides the opportunity for ‘hot interpretation’ – a rapid response to a current crisis or topical news story, like the death of an artist.

The Study Gallery is therefore an undeniably tantalising resource. Yet there is a danger that it might become over-utilised or too prescriptive. So maybe it would be better if the employees of Moderna Museet kept their curatorial fingers off as far as possible? One means of ensuring this would be to follow Hultén’s own approach. In the 2004 catalogue of his collection he claimed that the works came together ‘by sheer coincidence’ and that ‘it would be pointless to look for a plan or a method.’ He therefore chose to arrange the pieces alphabetically by artist’s surname, ‘which does not express any rational order at all, but nevertheless represents order.’

Perhaps this should be adopted in the Study Gallery? It would allow for some interesting juxtapositions (driftwood collected by Richard Long washing up next to a silkscreen brushstroke by Roy Lichtenstein). And it would also result in whole screens being devoted to Hultén’s favourite artists – not least Niki de Saint Phalle. It is thanks to Hultén’s friendship with de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely that their wonderfully inane installation *The Fantastic Paradise* (1966) found a permanent home outside Moderna Museet in 1971. That this was very controversial at the time contributed to Hultén’s disillusionment with Sweden’s cultural politics of the early 1970s. This resulted in him resigning from Moderna Museet, moving to the Centre Pompidou and beginning a close collaboration with its architects, Richard Rogers and – especially – Renzo Piano.

It will be interesting to see how Hultén’s legacy interacts with the cultural politics of today’s Sweden. Will funds be ring-fenced to ensure that it is regularly open to visitors and researchers alike? And will people have to pay to see the collection? Entrance charges for Sweden’s state museums had been abolished when Hultén died. They have since been reintroduced and visitor numbers have plummeted. But the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery is fortunately a little distant from Moderna Museet’s cash tills and early indications are that it will not be so heavily ‘policed’ as the rest of the museum. This is just as well: the thought of people having to pay to see his collection would surely give rise to another ‘movement in art’ – as Pontus Hultén spins in his grave.

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Facts about the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery

Location	Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Opening hours	1:00-3:30 pm Tuesday to Sunday and by appointment
Architect	Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW): Morten Busk Petersen
Construction	Swedish National Property Board and White Arkitekter AB with Overhead Conveyor Systems (OCS), Borås
Funding	Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs (<i>Kulturrådet</i>); Friends of Moderna Museet (SEK 1 million)