

*Historieboken om Moderna Museet 1958-2008*

*The History Book: On Moderna Museet 1958-2008*

Editor: Anna Tellgren

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Heavy. That word more than any other sums up this book. Running to 500 pages and weighing in at 2.5kg it is physically hefty. And it is weighty in the sense of being a serious piece of scholarship. This is evident from the 1170 endnotes that underpin the twelve chapters; the encyclopaedic chronicling of exhibitions and museum publications; and the copious illustrations that suffuse the text. All this combines to make this an awesomely authoritative publication. This is not just any old history of Moderna Museet. This is *The History Book*.

Appropriately enough, given its subject, it is also an aesthetic object; a testimony to the museum's fruitful collaboration with the publishers Steidl and the design firm BrittonBritton. The protective slipcase emphasises the sculptural quality of the book. This is graced by a close up photograph of lush impasto oil paint, streaked over the nose of a hairy mammal.

That nose belongs, needless to say, to Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram*. It reappears inside at almost the dead centre of the book (pp. 218-9), the tyre around its midriff running down the book's spine. As with its temporary relocation to Skåne to endorse Moderna Museet Malmö, this promotion of the work reinforces its standing as the museum's most iconic object. *Monogram* is a synecdoche for the museum: a part that references the whole. It accords this status to *The History Book* such that it too becomes an analogue of the museum. The slipcase is akin to its architecture; the book is the equivalent of its collection. That both have mutated and multiplied since its inauguration in 1958 is expertly demonstrated by Maria Görts, Eva Eriksson and Martin Gustavsson. Their opening chapters relate the genesis of the museum; its culturo-political correlations; and its changing architectural guises.

*The History Book* slips easily into Moderna Museet's 'set narrative structure' (to borrow a phrase from Hans Hayden's chapter, p. 181). Its authority and magnitude make it easy to simply accept it as both 'natural' and comprehensive. But that, of course, is not so. That much becomes immediately apparent if one places it alongside *Moderna Museet – The Book* of 2006, an action that makes the latter look remarkably dated and insubstantial. And, at first glance at least, *The History Book*, timed to coincide with the museum's fiftieth anniversary, looks strikingly different from *Moderna Museet 1958-1983*, published to mark its quarter-century.

In reality, however, the two have much in common. One seemingly perennial 'hallmark' (p. 259) of Moderna Museet is its engagement with its audience, especially children. This is something that comes across particularly strongly in Karin Malmquist's evocatively titled 'La Cour des miracles' and Annette Göthlund's contribution on education. The latter echoes Birgitta Arvas' chapter 'Barn på Moderna Museet' in the earlier 'history book' of 1983. Another shared trope across two-and-a-half decades is the mantra of 'movement in art'. That this has been 'a key concept... from the start' (p. 116) is well articulated in Magnus af Petersens and Martin Sundberg's account of 'Happenings and moving images'. Again, this resonates with Billy Klüver and Robert Rauschenberg's 'combined recollection' of the 1961 exhibition 'Movement in Art' that appears in the 1983 publication.

Klüver also features prominently in *The History Book*, thanks to Marianne Hultman's extended interview with Moderna Museet's 'man in New York'. However, whilst Klüver is granted a whole chapter, Moderna Museet's 'man in Stockholm' is not. Indeed, throughout the book there is a palpable sense of what one might term 'the Pontus problem'. *The History Book* struggles valiantly to avoid turning into yet another heralding of the 'mythical' era of Pontus Hultén (p. 99). Anna Tellgren, the book's editor, justifies the decision to marginalise Hultén by arguing that, through an indirect approach, 'a more profound understanding of this legendary museum figure emerges' (p. 6). Some contributors even go as far as daring to criticise "da capo's" 'capacity for amassing other people's ideas and utterances only then to make use of them for his own ends' (p. 158 & p. 175, n. 11). Nevertheless, *The History Book* tends to accord with Jeff Werner's analysis of 'Moderna Museet in the foreign press'. He found himself obliged to conclude that it is still seen as 'a museum whose heyday was synonymous with Hultén. Not vice versa. He progressed, but the museum did not' (p. 344). The spectre of this 'magician, deftly conjuring up one incomparable exhibition after another to the inexhaustible delight of the public' (p. 235) continues beyond the grave thanks to the interactive Pontus Hultén Study Gallery which has now displaced the Photography Library 'at the very centre of the building' (p. 148).

This casts a revelatory light on the decision to invite Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska 'to contribute an artistic intervention' (p.8) to *The History Book*. The invitation came, we are told, directly from Lars Nittve (pp. 7-8). This is the third time that this duo have been asked to cast their critical eyes over an institution led by Nittve. One of these was *Errata* at Denmark's Louisiana. In 1996 they compiled an alternative guide to the museum and slipped it between the two-volumed catalogue. They do something similar within the pages of *The History Book*. Adopting the title *Museum Futures* they imagine that, rather than being published to mark Moderna Museet's fiftieth anniversary, *The History Book* is in fact appearing as part of its *centenary* celebrations. The book thus begins with a foreword by one Ayan Lindquist, the museum's director in 2058. This is followed by a timeline of events running up to that year plus an interview with Lindquist in which she reflects on her past (and our future). This achieves two things: it lifts the focus away from the 'heroic image of the 1960s' (p. 184) and serves to project the ideologies of the present into the future.

This makes *The History Book* an intensely political pronouncement, confirming in the process Hans Hayden's assertion that '[e]very selection, every extract, every interpretation, and every presentation of the contemporary... is... always, in a sense, political as well' (p. 184).

This and the decision to inject Cummings and Lewandowska as 'a complicating factor' (Nittve cited p. 3) invites a critical response to this most authoritative of past/present/future institutional biographies. Indeed, alternative points of view are essential because otherwise the effect of *The History Book* will be stultifying, serving merely as the 'last word' on Moderna Museet. In doing so the weight of this book will have alternative repercussions: it will act like a tombstone sealing the museum as if it was a mausoleum.

There remains, for example, much more to be said about Moderna Museet's role as an active agent shaping and not just reflecting 'an established canon' (p. 180). Consider, for instance, Hans Hayden's observation: 'Ultimately, a sanctioned aesthetic value can always be exchanged for hard cash' (p. 198). This could be spliced with Martin Sundberg's excellent overview of Moderna Museet's catalogues. He speculates that '[t]he museum's publications probably play a minor role in international terms' (p. 323). But is this really true? Take the catalogue published to accompany Karin Mamma Andersson's solo exhibition of 2007. In its foreword Lars Nittve makes the remarkably bold assertion: 'Her work holds everything you could ask of painting'. A year later a key work from that display – *Heimat land*

(2004) – sold at auction in London for £517,250, the highest amount ever paid for a living Swedish artist. How much of that ‘hard cash’ had been aesthetically sanctioned by Moderna Museet’s promotion of artworks described by Ann-Sofi Noring as ‘live classics’?

*The History Book* remains silent on what is perhaps the most talked about issue of the museum’s recent past: the Holocaust restitution claim for Emil Nolde’s *Blumengarten (Utenwarf)* (1917). An agreement to (eventually) return the painting to the heirs of the original owner was not reached until after *The History Book* was published. Yet the matter first arose in 2002. The fact that the museum rather than the government was tasked with resolving the issue – and the manner in which the matter was handled – get to the heart not only of Moderna Museet’s management style and societal role but its entire ‘*sign economy*’ as well (p. 198).

When it comes to the opposite of deaccessioning – acquisition – a degree of obfuscation is detectable in *The History Book*. Collecting practices are either buried in the endnotes (p.31, n. 42 & 45) or mentioned but not rigorously described, as when Maria Görts tells us that a ‘policy document’ setting criteria for collecting was established in 2002 and published in *Moderna Museets Vänners tidskrift* the following year. It is loosely recounted (p. 20), but exactly how decisions are actually reached and who has the power over the purse strings is not explained.

In the main, *The History Book* resembles Annika Gunnarsson’s account of the hitherto infallible reputation that history has accorded Pontus Hultén: ‘A positive selection mechanism has meant that only particular aspects have been considered, and these have subsequently been treated exclusively as a success story’ (p. 168). Yes, Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* was captured triumphantly and ‘for far too little money’ (p. 243). But it is the gaps and omissions that need to garner more attention: those lacunae in the collection such as its gender blindspots (pp. 28-9). At a recent conference on ‘Museums and Biographies’, the director of London’s National Gallery, Nicholas Penny averred that one learns more about a museum’s acquisition policies from what its personnel wanted to acquire but were unable to, due to a variety of political, financial or managerial reasons. This is what makes the account of Billy Klüver’s time in New York so fascinating. Transcripts of his letters from the 1960s capture the sense of competition to acquire works, wrangles over money and Klüver’s frustration when he realised that the shelves of Claes Oldenburg’s *Store* were bare: ‘There are 2-3 GOOD things left... Wonderful things have been sold!’ (p. 254, n. 46).

Other such ‘paths not taken’ are discernible, such as Otte Sköld’s original idea of utilising Moderna Museet as an aesthetic, canonical ‘filter’ for Nationalmuseum (p. 167). It is just such cul-de-sacs and reversals that merit closer examination. These, plus more critical readings of the present, need to be set alongside this authorised version of its history. Because, despite its title and its gravitas, it is just a history after all. A subtle and perhaps unwitting confirmation of this comes with the image that enfolds *The History Book*. Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* is open to all sorts of interpretations, something that Leo Steinberg points out in his *Encounters with Rauschenberg* (University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 60). What it “means”, says Steinberg, ‘depends on the baggage you bring’. And Moderna Museet, as *The History Book* makes crystal clear, comes with all sorts of ‘baggage’ – not least its supposed Hulténian ‘golden age’. The museum should not become bogged down by this baggage, even if the official account of its history weighs a tonne. Post-*History Book* scholarship will be helped immeasurably by the foundations that it lays. But Cummings and Lewandowska placed *Museum Futures* in the plural tense for a very good reason: because that which is to come is as multiple and varied as are our versions of the past.