

## Museum Landscapes: Zoning in on A Complex Cultural Field

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This article takes up Lars Nittve's assertion that museums are akin to 'zones' and operate as 'hub[s] in a complex cultural field'. The paper begins with Tate Modern, the museum Nittve led before moving to his current post as director of Moderna Museet. This, Sweden's national collection of contemporary art, is discussed in the light of current cultural politics in Sweden and Norway. The main focus of the paper is an analysis of the exhibition 'Robert Rauschenberg: Combines', which toured New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art; Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Centre Pompidou, Paris before concluding at Moderna Museet in May 2007. One of its key works was Rauschenberg's seminal composition, *Monogram* (1955–1959). This particular 'Combine' is used as a means of constructing an 'institutional critique' of Moderna Museet. In addition to the role of Lars Nittve, particular attention is paid to his predecessor, Pontus Hultén (1924–2006). Hultén was responsible for acquiring Rauschenberg's *Monogram* for Moderna Museet in 1964. That this most 'American' of artworks has, it is argued, become a Swedish icon says much about the societal function of museums as well as the mutability of national identity and cultural heritage.

All views expressed in this article are the author's alone and are not endorsed by any of the people or institutions mentioned. Any errors of fact are solely the responsibility of the author. Finally, it is instructive to point out that this text was completed without prior knowledge of a special double issue of *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* (*Journal of Art History*) published in early 2007 (vol. 76, nos. 1–2). Entitled 'Rauschenberg and Sweden' it contains a wealth of information of direct relevance to the present work. The interested reader is therefore strongly recommended to consult this important publication.

## Introduction

During the recent past many artists have moved from the production of objects and images to exploring what perhaps can be called a *zone* or *field*, within which a variety of activities... produce and reveal meanings, power systems and values. This process does not mean that the museum now has a less important role, only that its role has shifted and expanded into that of being a central operator or, perhaps, *hub in a complex cultural field* (Nittve in Morris 2001, p. 7) (my italics).

Lars Nittve made this statement during his tenure as director of Tate Modern in London (1998-2001). It formed part of his preface to a catalogue entitled *Capital: A Project by Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska* (2001). This, the first ‘exhibition’ in the museum’s Contemporary Interventions series, explored the surprisingly extensive network of relationships that exist between Tate Modern and the Bank of England. Such a project is indicative of Cummings’ and Lewandowska’s practice. Since 1995 they have collaborated on a number of initiatives which might be categorised as ‘institutional critiques’.

This term – institutional critique – has been used to describe a genre of art that gained particular currency in the late 1980s and continues to have relevance today. It encompasses an eclectic array of practitioners who, operating in the spirit of the Situationists, work to appraise ‘the structures through which art is produced, promoted, distributed and “consumed”’ (Cummings & Lewandowska 2005, p. 25). Such artists often take the museum itself as their muse (cf. McShine 1999). Any lingering notion, therefore, that museums are impartial, isolated or impervious to outside influence has been dispelled by what is now a well-established canon of institutional critiques.

This sustained interest in, and critical focus on, the museum helps explains why Nittve should refer to such institutions as ‘zones’ or ‘cultural fields’. In the following article this conceptualisation is used in a slightly different way than Nittve perhaps intended. It does not attempt an analysis of the work of such artists as Cummings and Lewandowska, nor does it analyse a given museum through the lens of their practice. Instead it attempts a sort of ‘institutional critique’ of its own. It starts by picking up on Nittve’s ‘hub in a complex cultural field’ hypothesis and takes it to its natural conclusion: namely by treating the museum as a ‘landscape’. The article then goes on to explore what might be construed as a challenge to the notion of the museum as some sort of ‘expanded field’ by seeking out ‘barriers’ – of both the physical and conceptual kind. It aims to ask how, and with what consequences, museological landscapes become defined and disrupted.

My device for addressing these issues is a single artwork displayed in a specific exhibition at a particular institution. The choice was motivated by three factors. First and foremost was the exhibition’s topicality. The second consideration was because it linked back to Lars Nittve, thus allowing me to apply his ‘museum as zone’ concept to another institution for which he has responsibility. The third reason is because the topic quickly emerged as a suitable candidate for an ‘exploratory case study’ which will, I hope, serve as a ‘vehicle for examining other cases’ (Yin 2003, pp. 22 & 38). Many of the specific facts and features are necessarily unique to the matter in hand. However, in the process of researching them I found myself reflecting on a number of longstanding questions and issues about museums in general. It is this wider relevance that has encouraged me to pursue the following, very particular line of enquiry – and to present my thoughts and findings in the form of this paper.

And so, before addressing broader notions of museal landscapes, here is some essential information about the case study. The institution is Sweden’s museum of contemporary art – Moderna Museet – which has been led by Lars Nittve since his departure from Tate Modern in 2001. The exhibition in question is ‘Robert Rauschenberg: Combines’, an international

touring show which ended its run in Stockholm in May 2007 (the same month that this article was completed). And the specific artwork is Rauschenberg's *Monogram*, made in the years 1955-9 and bought by Moderna Museet in 1964.

## Landscape

Recent European scholarship into the study and understanding of the term 'landscape' reveals a discernable shift away 'from a definition of landscape as scenery to a notion of landscape as polity and place' (Olwig 2005, p. 293). Rather than discrete, static and purely material entities, landscapes are increasingly seen as 'open works', 'multiple systems' and 'complex constructions' in which 'every reading and assessment constitutes a *process*' (Scazzosi 2004, pp. 338, 341-2, 344). Landscapes are thus analogous to 'documents' and, as such, constitute

a huge *archive* (a living one as it changes continuously), full of material and immaterial traces... They are a *palimpsest* (not a mere stratification of historical evidences), that is a single text where the remaining traces of all eras have been following each other and have intertwined with the ones gradually left by the present and that continually modify it (ibid, p. 339).

A palimpsest can be understood as 'a multi-layered record', or something which, 'having been reused or altered', still retains 'traces of its earlier form' (OED). Museums can, then, be perceived as 'living archives' or 'living palimpsests' in which 'past permanencies are to be seen in the present features of the architecture of places under different forms' (Scazzosi 2004, pp. 320 & 342). For our purposes this can be understood as the reconfiguration of museum collections. Take, for instance, a text inscribed on to the gallery walls of Tate Modern's current (2007) Surrealism display:

Tate and UBS share a vision to open up art. Together we have created UBS Openings... The programme features the complete rehang of Tate Modern's permanent (sic) Collection including a selection of works from The UBS Art Collection... By working together, we believe that our unique partnership will enable us to reach out to wider audiences than ever before.

The interaction between this national art museum, its sponsor, their collections and the (expanded) audience represents a noteworthy modification to the 'past permanencies' of this museological landscape. What differences are wrought by this additional layer of the museum-palimpsest? Does it really succeed in 'open[ing] up art' and, if so, how? How and why does this differ from previous arrangements? What has triggered the change? If Tate is, as this example suggests, a multiple, mutating plane, how does it mould, mirror and modify notions of national identity and canons of art?

By drawing on the museum/landscape synergy it becomes possible to identify these issues, before embarking on a historically informed 'institutional critique' of an environment that is characterised as much by dynamism as it is by change. This runs counter to those still lingering doubts about the 'mausoleum' effect of the museum (cf. Adorno 1967, p. 175). Instead, one recent publication rightly highlights an increasing tendency for national museums to become 'centralised superstructures' in which their 'influence', 'autonomy' and 'working conditions' are 'constantly in flux' (Möntmann 2006, p. 13). This is set against 'the building, the physical space of an institution, [which] seems to be the constant factor in institutional work' (ibid). However – as the Tate Modern example testifies – a close reading of the museum-as-palimpsest also reveals physical change: sometimes overt, often subtle, but always worthy of scrutiny and speculation.

A particularly clear evocation of this has of late been evident in Norway, which has witnessed the creation of a new National Museum ‘in its making’ (Nordgren in Bringager 2005, p. 3). In July 2003 the Norwegian government instituted a major reform when a series of previously autonomous arts institutions amalgamated in the hope of forming ‘a leading art arena in northern Europe’ – a ‘powerhouse’ – to mediate Norwegian culture (Nergaard 2004, pp. 10-13). Its first director was the Swedish curator and entrepreneur, Sune Nordgren. We have here a clear instance of radical change in structure, influence, autonomy and operation. This, it might be argued, is set against the ‘constant’ backdrop of the unchanged museum architecture. But this would be a mistaken conclusion for there have been just as many meaningful alterations to the displays, the wall colourings, the juxtaposition of works, the labelling, the lighting and all manner of other facets of the ‘physical space’.

As such, any analysis of the conceptual framework of national museums needs to take into consideration ‘the microstructure of the gallery space’ (Tzortzi 2003). For it is this which enables one to draw conclusions about such matters as the aesthetic or pedagogical environment of the museum as well as the shifting nature of national canons – a factor that was especially redolent in the public response to the rehanging of one constituent part of Norway’s National Museum in 2005 (Burch 2006b). This concerned the highly controversial rearrangement of Nasjonalgalleriet (Norway’s National Gallery). The new layout juxtaposed ‘old masters’ with works of contemporary art; partially substituted the conventional chronological hang with one based on theme; interspersed ‘foreign’ works amongst compositions by Norwegian artists; and dismantled the monographical Edvard Munch room at the heart of the museum. These changes were as controversial as they were short-lived. So too was the directorship of Sune Nordgren. He had, for many, become synonymous with a failing institution and therefore came under a sustained and unremitting media bombardment (Burch 2007). By the time he resigned his post in late 2006 the Munch room had been reinstated and, by early 2007, the hang he had overseen had been abandoned.

These events provide a persuasive justification for treating national museums as landscapes: complex, historically-loaded documents where the tangible meets the intangible; the collection interacts with both its audience and its management; and where *what* is displayed, *where* and *how* are as important as what is *not* shown and *why*. This was foregrounded by Lars Nittve in his foreword to Tate Modern’s first guidebook:

*Tate Modern: The Handbook*, like Tate Modern, the gallery, emphasises that nothing surrounding a work of art is neutral; that everything has an impact on the way we interpret what we see – from the way a collection is displayed, its narrative structure and physical rhythm, the character and even the location of the building, the place where we, the visitors, find ourselves. Every museum is unique (Nittve in Blazwick & Wilson 2000, p. 10).

It is for these reasons that museums – especially national museums – epitomise Pierre Nora’s oft-cited concept of ‘realms of memory’ (*lieux de mémoire*). This he has defined as ‘any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element in the memorial heritage of any community’ (Nora 1996, p. xvii). Combining this well-established paradigm with the range of techniques, theories and tests in current landscape research (see e.g. Scazzosi 2004, pp. 342ff) seems to be peculiarly apposite to a study of national museums, not least when it is averred that ‘landscape is a means to contemplate our own history and to build our future, being fully aware of the past’ (*ibid*). This also explains why social identity formation and consolidation plays such a pivotal role in the European Landscape Convention (2000). Finally, the notion that ‘landscape literacy’ can contribute to ‘the constitution of a just democratic society’ (Olwig 2005, p. 296) is appealing when it comes to the study of national museums given their overtly communal role.

## Barrier

Just what that communal role is and how it might best be realised has of late come to the fore across the museological landscape of Sweden. In January 2007 the incoming centre-right majority government withdrew free entrance to the permanent collections of nineteen state museums. This policy had been implemented in 2005 by the previous administration (a parliamentary alliance led by the Social Democrats). A report published the following year revealed a large increase in visitor numbers, especially among first-time attendees and those with comparatively low levels of education (Kulturrådet 2006; cf. Torgny 2007).

The decision therefore to revoke what, to many, appeared to be an entirely positive undertaking provoked considerable criticism. This was not entirely unwelcome for it served to mark a clear ideological shift away from a Social Democratic model of Sweden. This is evident from the following statement by the new minister of culture, Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth: ‘We [the centre-right majority government] have made reducing taxes a priority so that people can themselves decide how best to use their own money’ (Liljeroth in Cato 2007). It is not the intention of this paper to address this wider perspective, nor will it embark on a discussion setting out the arguments for and against free entrance to museums, or the impact of charging in Sweden and elsewhere. That said, it does seem appropriate to raise two points of interest in the context of this paper. Firstly, from my research into the recent debates in Norway surrounding Nasjonalgalleriet, it seems fair to conclude that the level of public engagement would have been markedly reduced if the museum had not been free (Burch 2007). Secondly, the argument over entrance fees would suggest that, in addition to being ‘hub[s] in a complex *cultural field*’, museums can constitute focal points in a contested *political field* as well.

This was confirmed by the alacrity with which the Swedish media responded to the charging debate. A number of newspapers conducted their own polls into the early repercussions of restored entrance fees. This showed a marked reduction in visitor numbers. On average the audience attending the state museums in early 2007 had declined by one third compared with the same period for 2006 (Cato 2007; Treijs 2007). The worst affected institution was the museum of architecture, which experienced a drop of 85%. This museum – Arkitekturmuseet – shares its building with Moderna Museet. This too felt the impact of charging, with numbers down from 45,613 in January 2006 to 29,603 in January 2007 (Cato 2007).

The most vociferous critics of the government’s actions were motivated by a strong belief in the societal role of state museums. The notion that people should have to pay to access this shared heritage was therefore an anathema:

The government and, especially, its minister of culture are to be congratulated for succeeding in keeping us from our property. For the publicly-owned museums are ours, and hold in trust our cultural heritage. This is a utility that should not be ransomed (Hedvall 2007).

This impassioned vindication as to why the people of Sweden should have unfettered recourse to ‘their’ shared heritage accords with the idea of ‘landscape literacy’ mentioned above. Seen in this context the ‘landscape’ of the museum is closely implicated in ‘the constitution of a just democratic society’ (see Olwig 2005 above).

Readers of *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper were invited to respond to this debate by posting messages to an online forum (DN 2007). Some disliked the idea of paying, even if their reasons were somewhat more prosaic:

We really used to like going to all the museums when they were free and then have a coffee. But the idea of paying 60 crowns x 2 to visit a little museum where you’ve seen nearly everything... no way! (Lee 2007).

A more nuanced picture soon emerges from such public reactions than that gleaned from the leader writers and opinion formers. One person voiced the belief that this was a matter principally affecting foreign tourists or people living in the capital given that most of the state museums are situated in Stockholm. Others felt that visitor numbers were not the only means of gauging the success of a museum, and that an entrance fee would ensure that only those with a genuine interest would attend. These people felt that, rather than a ‘playground’, a museum ought to be a place for quiet (adult) contemplation, adding that it was far better that one intellectually engaged person visit than fifty others intent merely on ‘rushing around’ (or drinking coffee perhaps). Only one respondent shared the columnist’s point of view and lamented the fact that Swedish museums were now confronted by a ‘culturally hostile’ government. Another commentator, in contrast, pointed out that it was far too early to ascertain the actual effect of charging.

What became most notable about this forum was the mismatch between the rhetoric of the journalists and the reaction of the public. For a start only eight people took part. This leads one to question the degree to which the Swedish people shared the disquiet of the media. Another factor, as suggested by the comments of one of the participants, was the extent to which this was a national concern or one that impacted primarily on the metropolitan bourgeoisie. With this in mind, it is surely legitimate to treat with a fair degree of scepticism Lars Nittve’s inflated assertion that museums function as ‘hubs’ in society. That said, it is hardly surprising for a director of an important national museum to make such a statement. And it is undoubtedly true that these institutions have a significant social role – as recent events in Norway have forcefully indicated (Burch 2006b; Burch 2007). Yet one must be very careful not to overstate this function. In addition, even if the substance of Nittve’s theory about hubs and fields can be dismissed as mere speechifying, it nevertheless has both ideological motive and pragmatic purpose. For it is surely necessary to make such universalising assertions in order to bolster the museum’s claims for intellectual legitimacy and a shared mandate on the one hand, whilst ensuring financial subsidy and non-partisan governmental support on the other.

What was indubitable about this dispute was the manner in which it drew attention to the role of the museum as a framing device, a container. The ‘frame’ of the museum is in the main invisible unless attention is drawn to it during moments of controversy, change or malfunction (cf. Rowland & Rojas 2006). The media debate over the reintroduction of entrance charges in Sweden during 2007 provides an interesting slant on Goffman’s seminal book *Frame analysis*, especially the section on ‘frame disputes’ (Goffman 1975, pp. 321ff). The contested role of the museum and its status in society emerged in this particular ‘frame dispute’. This was most emphatically expressed in the title of a lead editorial in the populist newspaper *Expressen* (Nilsson 2007). It read: ‘Open the gates!’ – a clear allusion to the previously overlooked or (apparently) innocuous boundary between the landscape of the museum and the landscape of the nation.

Museums are particularly concerned with ‘barriers’ of all sorts. This was evident through a number of other events that impacted on the landscape of Swedish museums at this time. In February 2007, for example, it was announced that the government had instituted a ‘museum coordinator’ (*museikoordinator*) to increase collaboration between museums, in the hope that this would improve efficiency, increasing money for core activities in the process (Ullberg 2007). The same month saw the launch of a web-based project at Sweden’s history museum (Historiska museet). Its aim was to set out parts of the collection on-line in order to realise, in the words of its director Lars Amréus, ‘a 24-hour museum for the whole country’ (Ingelman-Sundberg 2007). The emphasis on being accessible nationwide represents an important retort to accusations that the state museums are too Stockholm-focused (a charge that was made by at least one discussant in the debate over entrance charges).

This web-based project was part of *Access*, a state-funded initiative to improve the preservation and presentation of museum collections. Until the end of 2007 there were twenty-seven project staff employed at Historiska museet involved in schemes aimed at rendering its collections accessible to ‘outsiders’ (*‘att göra museets samlingar tillgängliga för utomstående’*) (ibid). This is a good example of a museum striving to remove all barriers – be they physical or conceptual – between objects, collections and the public. *Access* is tasked with taking care of, preserving and making available collections, objects and documents (*‘Access... går ut på att stärka arbetet med att värda, bevara och tillgängliggöra samlingar, föremål och arkivalier’*) (ibid). These objectives are, to a degree, mutually exclusive: the process of physically placing an artwork or artefact on display opens it up to all sorts of conservation threats, be it light pollution, the risk of theft or the pawing hands of visitors. A digitalisation project is therefore an excellent way of realising the goals of *Access*. Historiska museet’s initiative is also significant in that it demonstrates how museums are making increasing use of technology to transcend the physical constraints of their building. The virtual collection is therefore a practical example of how the ‘role [of museums] has shifted and expanded’ (Nittve in Morris 2001, p. 7).

## Access

‘Access’ was one of the two words (in English) that Lars Nittve used when he addressed the assembled media at the reopening of Moderna Museet in February 2004. The other was ‘excellence’ (Poellinger 2004). This combination – ‘excellence and access’ – was very deliberate. It can be understood as encapsulating what Nittve sees as two museal traditions: one is prevalent in English-speaking countries and can be characterised as ‘public service’ (i.e. ‘access’); the German-speaking museological world meanwhile apparently prefers to ‘champion... the artist’ (i.e. excellence) (Nittve n.d.). Nittve was therefore seeking to situate Moderna Museet in the space in between.

Moderna Museet’s director has been preoccupied with barriers ever since he took up his post in 2001, as can be appreciated from his many statements on the subject:

All unnecessary obstacles, anything that makes the visitor feel excluded, must be removed (Nittve n.d.).

It is a question of reducing the distance between art and visitor (Nittve in RACA 2005).

Everything that prevents visitors from feeling free and open in their encounter with the work of art must be removed. The museum should be the optimal site for an encounter between art and people (Nittve in RACA 2005).

With 600 – 700 thousand visitors per year, and “low thresholds”, its status of being a national museum for modern art, and its central location in Stockholm, Moderna Museet has the optimum conditions for contributing to a closer contact and more encounters between artists and the public (Nittve in Malm & Nilsson 2006, p. 7).

Tangible evidence of this strive for accessibility became clear when, as has just been mentioned, Moderna Museet was reinaugurated in 2004. The Rafael Moneo-designed building, constructed from 1989 to 1998 on the island of Skeppsholmen in central Stockholm, was soon bedevilled by damp. Reconditioning work led to an enforced absence during 2002 and 2003, which in turn gave the newly appointed Nittve the perfect opportunity to implement change. He sought ‘to improve some of the spaces, partly to make it easier for visitors to

move through the museum, and partly to utilise the upper entrance space more adequately' (Moderna Museet: history n.d.). As well as simplifying the interior layout and bringing what one journalist described as 'a new openness' (Poellinger 2004), Nittve altered the way people accessed the building. He introduced large arrows to the landscape outside pointing to the way in. He was clearly aware that the 'frame' of the building, like so much contemporary museum architecture, can all too often be both confusing and intimidating. Another strategy for improving access was the introduction of 'museum hosts' rather than security guards. This was a concept that Nittve brought with him from his time at Tate Modern. Rather than mere sentinels, these hosts are described as 'people who have a variety of skills, from life-saving to being able to tell visitors about the works of art in both the permanent and temporary exhibitions' (Moderna Museet: history n.d.). Their role is to generate a dialogue with the public, who are in turn solicited for their 'comments or suggestions' about the museum ('Museivärddar' in Moderna Museet 2006).

This is very much in keeping with the ideology espoused by the aforementioned *Access* scheme. But there was another reason for introducing hosts. They were brought in 'to cater for the large increase in visitor numbers since the admission fee was abolished' (*ibid*). This was a reference to the fact that Moderna Museet had rescinded entrance charges to their permanent collection before their wholesale removal in 2005. This pilot project ushered in a record number of visitors: 681,639 in 2004 compared to just 318,809 the previous year (Moderna Museet: visitor). Numbers have exceeded 600,000 in both 2005 and 2006. Any drop is likely to see a concomitant reduction in the number of 'hosts'. Indeed, in order to meet its financial commitments Moderna Museet needs to boost its audience by some 80,000 more than was the average annual amount before the introduction of free entry (Cato 2007). Today (2007) a cordon has been introduced to gently ensure that people head for the cash desk – and pay. It remains to be seen if this most subtle of barriers jeopardises Nittve's goal of removing all 'unnecessary obstacles' and 'reducing the distance between art and visitor'.

In addition to the fabric of the building and the status of the front-of-house team, Nittve has shown himself to be equally interested in barriers relating to the museum's collection. Following its reinauguration he oversaw an interesting reversion of the hang: the room nearest the entrance became entitled 'Now'. Visitors were therefore exposed to the most recent art before moving back in time to the start of the twentieth-century. This had the effect of not only historicising the present, but also underscoring the inscriptive power of the museum: it exists to define not only the past, but the present (and future) as well, shaping the canon of today and (perhaps) defining the canon of tomorrow in the process.

This draws attention to the crucial issue of collecting practice and the availability of funds to grow the collection. All institutions primarily dependent on state funding find it difficult if not impossible to compete in the market for contemporary art. As a result, any collection, no matter how 'comprehensive', is inevitably constricted. Moreover, museum collections are palimpsests. Decisions made by previous curators and collectors – with their limited budgets, aesthetic preferences and cultural prejudices – shape and define the collection of today. Nittve was explicit about this when, in April 2006, he launched a bold call for SEK 50 million to fund the purchase of a 'canon' of work by female artists, pointing out in the process that there are roughly nine times as many works by men as by women in the 250,000 strong collection. Nittve urged that his appeal would represent the perfect way to mark Moderna Museet's fiftieth anniversary in 2008 (Nittve 2006b).

Alongside barriers of class, education and gender, Lars Nittve's Moderna Museet similarly strives to negate any 'geographical barriers' to its collecting and curating activities. In its efforts to act globally it has established a series of international 'networks and partners' (Nittve n.d.).

Yet Moderna Museet is a *national* institution and, as a result, has a self-confessed duty to articulate Swedish art. The clearest example of this is the four-yearly ‘Moderna Exhibition’. Initiated by Nittve in 2006 it is ‘aimed at surveying and interpreting the contemporary Swedish art scene and presenting it to a wider public’ (Moderna Museet 2006). The first manifestation of this endeavour filled most of the museum and featured forty-nine artists. The exhibition, together with the 300-page catalogue (which was included with the special entrance price), were meant as ‘a definitive documentation of art in Sweden – one of the creative hubs of contemporary art’ (Nittve in Malm & Nilsson 2006, p. 7). But Nittve sought to go beyond its artistic remit by using it to draw wider conclusions about ‘life in Sweden today’. This national dimension led him to stress that the exhibition – like Moderna Museet as a whole – was for the whole country, ‘not just for Stockholmers’ (*ibid*). This underscores the patent national dimension to the museum and its activities, something that Nittve is clearly aware of:

Moderna Museet is located in Sweden, and it is, in the final analysis, for a Swedish audience that we host our exhibitions. Each selection of exhibitors must have a local relevance (Nittve, n.d.).

In Moderna Museet’s permanent hang this ‘local relevance’ is achieved not by hiving off the ‘Swedish’ from the ‘foreign’ but by opting for a strategy in which ‘Swedish art is largely integrated with the international works, and Swedish artists such as Vera Nilsson and Siri Derkert are featured alongside Kokoschka and Braque’ (Moderna Museet 2007a, #01). Even so, Frans Josef Petersson is surely correct when he says that ‘national branding is still the undeniable heritage of institutions like Moderna Museet’ (Petersson 2006). In this, Petersson was referring to the overtly Sweden-focused ‘Moderna Exhibition’ of 2006. But there are other implications inherent in ‘national branding’ when it comes to state museums. It is this that is the subject of the following section, which picks up on some of the already mentioned issues relating to Moderna Museet and should be read in the context of the debates over charging to see the permanent collections of state museums in Sweden. All this has, I hope, set the scene for what follows; namely an analysis of the monographical display of works by the American artist, Robert Rauschenberg (born 1925).

## Excellence

It’s here at last! The exhibition that has been on a victory tour [*segertåg*] around the USA and to Paris and has been seen by hundreds of thousands of visitors, has landed in Stockholm for one of its four exclusive shows. *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* is the red-hot core of the American 1950s – a period of optimism and breakthrough. Robert Rauschenberg was breathtakingly accurate in capturing the atmosphere and tendencies of the time. In art history there is a before and an after his Combines (Moderna Museet 2007b).

This was how Moderna Museet’s website announced the arrival of the exhibition ‘Robert Rauschenberg: Combines’ (17 February – 6 May 2007). It was on its final leg of a four date tour that started at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art before moving on to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Pompidou Centre, Paris. Why should this ‘exclusive’ tour have ended up in Stockholm rather than, say, London where rather more people might have seen it? How does this exhibition ‘capturing the atmosphere and tendencies’ of 1950s America accord with Nittve’s comment about Moderna Museet’s exhibitions having ‘local relevance’ in Sweden?

At first sight there seems little to connect Rauschenberg to Sweden. Instead the display of his work would appear to have another form of legitimacy – of an art historical kind. The exhibition took as its focus a selection of the approximately 162 ‘Combine’ works he produced

between 1954 and 1964. This canon, it is argued, ‘demonstrate his [Rauschenberg’s] influence on later isms and genres, such as pop art, neo-dada, assemblage, fluxus, Viennese actionism, arte povera and performance art’ (Moderna Museet 2007b). Rauschenberg is therefore an iconic artist, one who has a place in, and transformative effect on, the history of art (‘there is a before and an after his Combines’). The Combines exhibition is, it would seem, an example of Moderna Museet ‘champion[ing]... the artist’ in the pursuit of a German-style ‘excellence’ rather than ‘access’ (to recall Nittve’s formulation).

If there is any ‘local relevance’ to Rauschenberg’s work it must surely be because he was responsible for ‘creating a vital shift in the prevailing insular American art climate of the 1950s, while forging links with European surrealism’ (Tellgren 2007a). This was then turned back on to the world when Rauschenberg became a sort of ‘unofficial ambassador of American art’ through his ROCI initiative – or ‘Rauschenberg overseas culture interchange’ (Kimmelman 2005; cf. Kotz 2004, p. 37; Yakush 1991). On these grounds Rauschenberg would appear to be an excellent example of ‘national branding’ and the patriotic purposes to which art can be put. Confirmation of this came from a review of the Combines exhibition at New York’s Metropolitan Museum in which Jerry Saltz, taking his lead from Jasper Johns, described Rauschenberg as ‘our Picasso’ (Saltz 2006). That he is the embodiment of American culture is literally true from the everyday elements he incorporated into his Combines. They are a direct product of the landscape from which they originated, namely ‘the particular environment of New York City’ (Mattison 2003, p. 69). Combines are often characterised by a vivid use of colour and collage. The latter includes everything from newspaper cuttings and magazine features to mundane, utilitarian objects and the detritus of an industrialised, mass consumption society – encapsulated by the Coca-Cola logo. Fittingly enough his iconic piece *Coca Cola Plan* (1958, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) took a prominent place in the Combines exhibition (see Moderna Museet 2007a, #02).

There are two general categories of Combines – those that are freestanding and those that bear a closer resemblance to paintings. This reflects the sense that Combines are a crossover of painting and sculpture, as well as the way in which they combine so many sorts of disparate things and found objects (Kotz 2004, p. 85). There is no better example of a freestanding Rauschenberg Combine than ‘perhaps his best known work’ (Kotz 2004, p. 90), *Monogram* (1955-9, 106.68 x 160.66 x 163.83 cm). It consists of a montage of very diverse materials. The base is made up of a wooden platform mounted on four casters. This is covered by various things including paper, fabric, printed reproductions, metal, wood, a rubber shoe heel and a tennis ball on canvas. At the centre is a stuffed Angora goat (the nose of which is marked with oil paint) encircled by a rubber car tyre.

One may or may not agree that Rauschenberg’s ‘Combines occupy a mythic place in art history’ (Saltz 2006). But what seems indisputable is the fact that no other work by him is in receipt of more accolades than *Monogram*. The piece inspires hyperbole, adulation and frenetic interpretation in equal measure. It is, it seems, a ‘bold canonical work’ (Metropolitan Museum 2006) that has ‘altered the course of modern art’ (PBS 1999). *Monogram* has a claim to be amongst ‘the most outlandish and barbarous works of art ever made’ (Saltz 2006). The Pop artist, Roy Lichtenstein positions it as an era-defining composition, marking the end of Abstract Expressionism (Kotz 2004, p. 91). ‘It is Rauschenberg carving his monogram into art history’ (Saltz 2006), so much so that ‘*Monogram* gradually became fixed in the public imagination along with Warhol’s Marilyns and Jasper Johns’ flags as [one of] the classic symbols of what’s American in American art’ (Kimmelman 2005).

It is not the intention of this paper to contribute to this peon of praise or add another iconographical analysis to an already burgeoning body of divergent interpretation (cf. Bendiner 2006; Kimmelman 2005; Kotz 2004, pp. 90-91; Steinberg 2000, pp. 54-61). This is not surprising given that Rauschenberg’s Combines are ‘saturated with autobiographical, art

historical and mass media references' (Hopps & Davidson 1997, p. 100). The artist himself gave by far the best (non-)explanation of *Monogram* when he, in a typically matter-of-fact manner, stated that his aim was 'to see if the goat could be related to anything else' (cited in Mattison 2003, p. 72). This is just what the remainder of this article seeks to do.

## Combine

*Monogram* takes centre stage in this debate about museum landscapes and cultural fields for a number of reasons. The first is because it represents something of a witty riposte to Lars Nittve's talk of fields and zones. Rauschenberg is fond of puns in his work, with *Monogram* being the 'supreme example' (apparently the 'sexual innuendo of the goat and tyre is hard to miss') (Hughes 1976; Kimmelman 2005). But, for us, the joke is that the goat occupies a landscape of its very own. It is variously described as being on a 'pasture' (Kotz 2004, p. 90) or 'on the street' (Mattison 2003, p. 72). This makes for an interesting play on talk of landscapes and zones. Moreover, the wheels attached to the wooden platform – echoing the tyre around the midriff of the goat – 'imply that the work can easily change locations in the gallery' (Mattison 2003, p. 75). With each shift the meaning will alter. *Monogram* thus confirms Nittve's previously cited comment 'that nothing surrounding a work of art is neutral' in that every time the goat is wheeled into a new position, the changed context will 'impact on the way we interpret what we see' (Nittve in Blazwick & Wilson 2000, p. 10). In a similar vein, what *Monogram* "means" 'depends on the baggage you bring' (Steinberg 2000, p. 60). Although somewhat of a cultural truism, this stands out with especial clarity in the case of this particular stuffed goat. The red, white and green nose paint might be deeply significant to an Italian. The fact that the goat appears to be 'pilloried' by the car tyre is likely to be picked up by a Colonial New Englander. Meanwhile a 'modern Haitian' might well perceive the goat as being 'necklaced' by the rubber tyre. All these possible readings have been suggested by Leo Steinberg, prompting him to describe *Monogram* as a very 'international icon' (Steinberg 2000, pp. 59-60).

In spite of this universalism, *Monogram* conversely remains, as has been noted, '[one of] the classic symbols of what's American in American art'. This is doubly remarkable given that, apart from brief loan spells, its place of domicile since 1964 has been Stockholm. It has become an emblem of Sweden. This explains the sense of triumph apparent on Moderna Museet's website when *Monogram* reappeared, temporarily surrounded by other Combines:

As in the previous venues in New York, Los Angeles and Paris, Moderna Museet's work *Monogram* (1955-59) again brilliantly holds centre stage among the almost fifty works in this unique exhibition (Moderna Museet 2007a, #02).

Taking pride of place in an exhibition that has been 'seen by hundreds of thousands of visitors' in the United States and France is Moderna Museet's signature work – the 'cornerstone of the museum's collection' (Trollbäck 2004). So, despite the fact that '*Monogram* is Rauschenberg's credo, a line drawn in the psychic sands of American sexual and cultural values' (Saltz 2006) it is also a Swedish icon. Since its acquisition in 1964, *Monogram* 'has featured in the museum's permanent collection exhibitions and has been seen by generations of visitors to the museum' (Tellgren 2007b). Given that Moderna Museet's exhibitions are 'in the final analysis, for a Swedish audience' (Nittve), this unusual piece of art must have entered the shared consciousness and collective psyche of many Swedes. It is frequently referred to as simply 'The Goat' (*Geten*) rather than by its official name. In 2005 it was voted the 'No. 1 most popular artwork' in Moderna Museet (RACA 2005). Following its return to Stockholm in 2007 there was a sense that it was 'at home again' (Slöör 2007).

Moderna Museet is a Swedish *lieu de mémoire*. One layer in this palimpsest is *Monogram*. And *Monogram* is in turn both a *lieu de mémoire* and a palimpsest. The layers of collage that cover its base form a plethora of signs and symbols, memories and motivations, reflecting as much the landscape of Rauschenberg's mind as the physical landscape from which they derive. *Monogram* evolved through three 'states' during the period 1955-59. In the first (1955-6) the goat stood on a shelf alongside a Combine painting that would later be entitled *Rhyme* (1956) (Hopps & Davidson 1997, p. 554). These earlier manifestations exist in a number of sketches and photographs (see Hopps & Davidson 1997, p. 554, figs. 146 & 147; Kotz 2004, p. 94).

The palimpsest that is *Monogram* goes on, even if the work itself appears to be unchanged since 1964. The Combines exhibition of 2006-7 is a demonstration of this: the display was ephemeral but it lives on in the catalogue that documents it; the 'hundreds of thousands of visitors' that saw it; and the critics that reviewed it. One such commentator was led to contemplate his personal relationship with Rauschenberg's Combines. He mused that, once upon a time, one could interact with the works as the artist had intended: inviting buttons could be pressed; lamps turned on and off; electric fans set in motion. He then turned his attention to *Monogram*, nostalgically recalling that, as a boy, he used to 'run his hand through the goat's hair and across the rubber tyre; now it lives in its Plexiglas vitrine, a gaze's object of adoration' ('*Så kunde man i min ungdom röra vid getens päls och gummidäck; numera bor den i sin plexilåda, ett blickarnas tillbedda objekt*') (Malmberg 2007).

And this brings us back to a previous discussion of barriers and boundaries in museums. No longer do the wheels under the wooden platform invite movement. A necessary obstacle has been introduced to protect the work, namely a 'Plexiglas vitrine'. The age and fragility of *Monogram* (plus its tremendous financial value) prevents the interactivity of former times. But this has the effect of increasing the sense of sacred perfection. Rauschenberg's work is akin to alchemy: the transformation of 'the most junky stuff possible' into art (Hultén 2005). The Swedish art critic inspired by *Monogram* to muse on his youth was matched by his equivalent in New York:

I happened to be in the galleries when *Monogram* was solemnly uncrated: swaddled in its custom-made shroud, it was gingerly unwrapped, inspected and primped before being slid into its protective vitrine. But even enshrined, the Combines still manage to seem incredibly fresh and odd, almost otherworldly. I thought of a medieval treasury – all the rich colours and lights and intricate details (Kimmelman 2005).

This is further confirmation that *Monogram* is a veritable icon – and Moderna Museet is its reliquary.

By referring to Moderna Museet in this manner, we are returned to our earlier discussion relating to the framing function of the museum. Indeed, as has been shown, Rauschenberg's *Monogram* is particularly revelatory when it comes to all sorts of boundaries and frames. It helps 'counter the tendency of the frame to invisibility with respect to the artwork' (Duro 1996, p. 1). Firstly because the wheels on the platform encourage the sense that it could be repositioned in the gallery. Secondly given that the vitrine that today encases the work reifies the work. And thirdly because 'the goat stands on a work of art' (Steinberg 2000, p. 54) – i.e. the collage on the base constitutes the "painting" and the goat-and-tyre the "sculpture" in this literal Combine.

Beyond the production of this specific work, Robert Rauschenberg is a good example of 'breaking boundaries' (Mattison 2003). Throughout his career he has gained creative advantage from risk taking and crossing over disciplines – be it in his performance art; his use of technology; or blurring divisions between painting and sculpture or art and audience (Kotz 2004, p. 125).

An early instance of Rauschenberg's performance pieces is *Elgin Tie* made in conjunction with the Judson Theater group. It consisted of a rope coming down from a skylight. Attached to it were various items of clothing which, as Rauschenberg descended, he put on. When he reached the end of the rope he submerged himself into a can of water positioned on a platform. One version of this took place at Moderna Museet in 1964. As the assembled crowd watched this unfold, a cow wandered around the gallery (Kotz 2004, p. 122; Mattison 2003, p. 169). This performance, despite its transience, is inscribed into the memory of the palimpsest that is Moderna Museet. The cow of *Elgin Tie* is long gone, but the goat of *Monogram* remains. It still moves (albeit not by its own volition) in the gallery and on loan to museums in the United States, France and elsewhere.

*Monogram* entered the collection of Moderna Museet in the same year as the performance of *Elgin Tie*. It was acquired shortly after Rauschenberg had won the 'Grand Prize' at the thirty-second Venice Biennale. It cost '\$30,000, then an enormous sum for the work of a young, living artist' (Kotz 2004, p. 110). The man willing to take this risk was Pontus Hultén (1924-2006), Moderna Museet's director from 1960-1973. Shortly after his death in 2006, the writer and art critic Carl-Johan Malmberg said of Hultén that he 'understood what was good art long before others did and thus was way ahead of his time' (Malmberg in Haraldsson 2006). Rauschenberg's *Monogram* exists as a testament to Hultén's farsightedness.

Pontus Hultén's imprint on Moderna Museet endures in a myriad of ways. He has been credited with defining the institution 'as an elastic and open space' (Obrist 1997, p. 75). This was the verdict of Hans-Ulrich Obrist, who interviewed the curator for the April 1997 edition of *Artforum*. Many of Hultén's statements are germane to the themes of this article, not least the following comment:

A museum director's first task is to create a public – not just to do great shows, but to create an audience that trusts the institution. People don't come just because it's Robert Rauschenberg, but because what's in the museum is usually interesting (Hultén in Obrist 1997, p. 77).

Hultén recalled the 1960s when the fledgling Moderna Museet had 'something on every night' making it 'a meeting ground for an entire generation' (Obrist 1997, p. 77). The Hultén ethos was summed up by two words: 'documentation and participation'. His successor, Lars Nittve, favours the synonyms 'excellence and access'. When Nittve saw to it that the first 'Moderna Exhibition' of Swedish art included a 300-page catalogue as 'a definitive documentation of art in Sweden' he was clearly working in a tradition set down by Hultén. And when Nittve called for funds to buy a new canon of female artists for Moderna Museet the link with his predecessor was even more explicit. He called it 'The second museum of our wishes', referring in the process to the near legendary exhibition of the winter of 1963-4 (Nittve 2006a). This was the original 'museum of our wishes' (*Önskemuseet*) which Hultén had mounted to mark the fifth anniversary of Moderna Museet. He used it to persuade the Swedish government to agree to an exceptional grant of 5 million kronor to make a series of key purchases for the collection. A 'miracle' had been realised (Moderna Museet: history). This was the context in which Rauschenberg's *Monogram* entered Moderna Museet.

Obrist referred to Hultén's tendency to mix genres and art forms in his exhibitions: e.g. 'dance, theatre, film, painting, and so on. This was Hultén creating so-called "in-between spaces"' (Obrist 1997, p. 77). It is tempting to link this to Rauschenberg's oft-cited desire to 'operate in the gap between art and life' (Kotz 2004, p. 7). This is embodied in the Combine. The survey of this artistic form in the shape of the 2006-7 Combines exhibition can and should be seen as much as a homage to Hultén as it is to Rauschenberg. Its venue prior to coming to Sweden was the Pompidou centre – the museum that Hultén led after his departure from Moderna Museet in 1973, remaining its director until 1981. Hultén was also linked to

the two other venues: he had curated an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1968 entitled 'The museum as seen at the end of the mechanical age', and helped establish Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in the early 1980s (Obrist 1997).

The Combines exhibition testifies to the friendship between Rauschenberg and Hultén. In 1962 Moderna Museet mounted the exhibition *4 Americans: Jasper Johns, Alfred Leslie, Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Stankiewicz*. Pontus Hultén's introduction to this show connects to his postscript he wrote for what became (for Hultén) the posthumous exhibition catalogue of 2007 (Hultén 2005). Rauschenberg's Combines *Charlene* (1954), *Odalisque* (1955–58) and *Pilgrim* (1960) were all shown in Stockholm in 1962. They made their return in 2007, as its curator noted: 'All these are now back at Moderna Museet' (Tellgren 2007b). These are examples of the historical memory of the museum – the museum as palimpsest and *lieu de mémoire*.

Another layer in this palimpsest connects with Robert Rauschenberg. He is literally inscribed into Moderna Museet. In the spring of 1982, the museum organised an exhibition of photography by Robert Frank, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. The following year Rauschenberg designed the cover for the anniversary catalogue *Moderna Museet 1958–1983* (Granath & Nieckels 1983). This collage subsequently became the impetus for Moderna Museet's logo when Rauschenberg's "signature" was rediscovered during the development of the museum's new identity in 2004 by Björn Kusoffsky at Stockholm Design Lab' (Moderna Museet: shop n.d.). Moderna Museet's expressive typeface is therefore a Rauschenberg artwork in itself. This confirms the fact that his 'best known work' is an intrinsic part of Sweden's cultural heritage. It is linked to Sweden's most famous museum director and is the signature piece of Sweden's national collection of contemporary art.

## Conclusion

That a work of art made in New York in the 1950s can in some ways become 'Swedish' reveals a great deal about the mutability of both national identity and cultural heritage. One can think of numerous other examples that show this to be the case. Take, for instance, the events of 2003 when the National Gallery in London mounted a campaign to save 'for the nation' (the British nation that is) Raphael's *Madonna of the Pinks* (*La Madonna dei Garofani*) (c.1506–7, oil on yew, 27.9 x 22.4 cm, acc. no. NG6596). This had been on long-term loan to the National Gallery from the Trustees of the 10th Duke of Northumberland Wills Trust. However, after the work had been attributed to Raphael the legal owner tried to sell it to the J. Paul Getty Museum in California (National Gallery 2003a). The National Gallery mounted a campaign to raise some £21 million to retain the painting and solicited the support of the public as well as the trustees of the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). One justification for promoting 'the nationwide ownership' of this painting was that the gallery would, if successful, 'tour it to museums and galleries around the country to enable as many as possible of the British public to enjoy the beauty and tenderness of this great new acquisition' (National Gallery 2003b).

One can relate this seemingly divergent example to the foregoing discussion of Rauschenberg's *Monogram*. Consider my potentially contentious designation of *Monogram* as a Swedish icon. This is certainly no less absurd than the notion that a painting by Raphael somehow 'belongs' in Britain's National Gallery. That this London-based institution intended to tour its new sacred-secular icon around the provinces shows that Moderna Museet is not the only 'national' museum seeking to operate for the whole country, 'not just for Stockholmers' (or Londoners).

I have mentioned the National Gallery and its Raphael in order to establish the legitimacy and relevance of my contextual analysis of Moderna Museet and the claims made about both it and Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram*. Taking a similar methodological approach and con-

structing an ‘institutional critique’ of the National Gallery in relation to one of the ‘cornerstones’ of its collection would undoubtedly reveal a great deal about Britain’s heritage; the nature of its national collection of art; and the museological landscape of the United Kingdom. This, if true, confirms that my ‘exploratory case study’ can serve as a ‘vehicle for examining other cases’ (Yin 2003, pp. 22 & 38). An important consequence of this is the following claim: that by closely analysing one iconic work it becomes possible to unlock an entire collection.

This article forms part of a wider study analysing linkages between national identity and museums. Previous work on Kumu in Tallinn and Kiasma in Helsinki demonstrate that these institutions are implicated in all manner of debates about collective identity – from emphasising fissures in the canon of Estonian art (Burch 2006a), to revealing aspects of national identity in the Helsinki landscape (Burch 1997, pp. 30-35). One additional case study has already been mentioned; namely the recent and highly contentious history of Norway’s National Gallery. Its incorporation into a new National Museum was controversial, as was the role of its first director, Sune Nordgren (2003-6). He had become, as has been noted, synonymous with the institution for which he was responsible. Nordgren would have been wise to heed the advice of his fellow countryman, Pontus Hultén. The latter voiced his concern about the danger of an institution becoming identified with one individual: ‘it’s not good for the museum. When it breaks down, it breaks down completely’ (Hultén cited in Obrist 1997, p. 77).

And yet Hultén did not heed his own advice. Lars Nittve’s rhetoric about access, zones and cultural fields shows that Hultén’s vision of an ‘elastic and open space’ lives on. That Pontus Hultén is destined to be inextricably tied to the institution he once led was ensured shortly before his death. In 2005 he offered to donate some 700 artworks to Moderna Museet on the condition that ‘any works not shown in the permanent hanging exhibition be made available to the public in a user-friendly warehouse’ (Moderna Museet 2005). This sort of ‘art library’ will be designed by Renzo Piano, architect of the Centre Pompidou in Paris – the institution Hultén headed as its first director. This action, seen in the light of this article, triggers revelatory details about the nature of Moderna Museet’s holdings; the ideological and political aspects of the collection and its display; the myriad of interrelationships with other institutions; and the dynamic between the Moderna Museet of the past and the Moderna Museet of the present. And, finally, Hultén’s concern for the public accessibility of his bequest (to be stored ‘in a user-friendly warehouse’) needs to be understood in the context of the preceding debate on zones and barriers in the museum landscape.

Just as *Monogram* carved its creator’s own monogram into the history of art, so too has the acquisition of *Monogram* helped ensure Moderna Museet’s berth in the canon of international art museums and guaranteed Pontus Hultén’s reputation as a cultured virtuoso. To an international audience the farsighted acquisition of *Monogram* means good publicity both for Moderna Museet and for Sweden. Indeed, the late Pontus Hultén emerges out of all this as something of a hero for Nittve and his colleagues. He serves as a touchstone for museum directors, daring them to be bold and ambitious and to eschew insularity when it comes to either collecting policy or curatorial decisions. Hultén set the parameters for Nittve to navigate. He gave his successor the excuse he needed to be audacious in his call to buy a new female canon of art, in the knowledge that his forebear had done something similar – and with tangible results. The Hultén–Nittve dynamic that has been constructed in this article evinces that museums possess historical consciousnesses. Hultén is remembered as a model museum director: a visionary, establishing good relations with both artists and audiences alike, whilst at the same time maintaining high levels of funding from his sponsors – not least the government of the day. The continuing necessity of this has been revealed by the new challenges presented by

Sweden's centre-right administration, the policies of which threaten (for some at least) to undermine the open, accessible ethos of a museum like Moderna Museet.

And yet, as we have seen, 'access' needs to be balanced with 'excellence'. At least one critic has charged Nittve's Moderna Museet with 'increasingly... [letting] consumerist attitudes and mass appeal, rather than concerns inherent to artistic practice, guide its institutional agenda' (Petersson 2006). The rejoinder to such accusations is the sense of magic that Hultén ascribed to Robert Rauschenberg's Combines: they transform, after all, 'the most junky stuff possible' into art. This is exactly the sort of translation that all museums hope to convey to, and engender in, their visitors. Some argue that the entrance charges that have been reintroduced to Sweden's state museums threaten to restrict their transformative potential. But, in the case of Moderna Museet, even if this does occur, it will nonetheless serve as yet one further chapter in the course of 'constructing, reconstructing and even deconstructing history' – a mutable process that, as Nittve avers, lies at the very heart of the institution (Nittve n.d.). That Moderna Museet is indeed 'an arena for the contemporary, for contemporary art and the debates that surround it' (*ibid*) finds confirmation in the article you are just about, at last, to finish. It began with a quotation about fields and zones – and it ends with the negotiation of yet one more barrier. For, as this text was finally taking shape, it was reported that Lars Nittve had successfully overcome a personal hurdle. His six-year directorship of Moderna Museet was due to expire in October 2007. But in April of that year the Swedish government agreed to extend his contract for a further three years (Regeringskansliet 2007). This will give him the time he needs to try and realise 'The second museum of our wishes'. Pontus Hultén, had he lived to see it, would no doubt have been pleased.

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