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**Interview with Søren Engblom**  
Curator at Moderna Museet

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**What is a museum for you?**

Well, it's a place where I like to go in first, I mean the museum is not only a place for the art. The rooms there, they have an atmosphere that has something to do with freedom. The art for me is a question of freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of speech and it's a certain something that you experience, it's both entertainment and research, it's both being very surprised sometimes and also meet something you know very well. So, it's a social context, a lot of people are around you when you are there, so it's a place where you meet, but it's also a place where you go alone to meet the art and to meet the art that you recognize and the art that you don't, you haven't seen it before. So, what's important is that you find the space where you like to stay and where you feel easy to use your eyes and to bring about your feet.

**So, you think it's a place of contemplation and a place of debate?**

It should be both, absolutely, especially if you have a large museum: there are rooms for both of them, so you can have contemplation, you can have debate, or you can just meet good people, so, of course good cafeteria, good restaurant. You can move around from one part of the building where perhaps you are alone looking, into another part where you do things together with friends, where debate could take place and you must have also some place where you can go eat or have a coffee and to relax and of course the bookshop is very interesting and very important because especially contemporary art needs a lot of reading and a lot of research, so good library and a place where find information not only in books but also in art magazines, I think is very important. But something about the atmosphere it's very important, I think.

**How do light and colours affect contemporary art dedicated spaces, and in particular here?**

The more modern the art and the more contemporary the art is, the less in fact, because it probably doesn't need any light at all and very little colours too, that's why so much of the contemporary art is take in case in old industrial buildings where you don't have these things very much. I mean, it's paintings that are dependent on careful lightening, and also if you work with art on paper, you need a dark room and also in the older the art and the more valuable the more there is the question of collecting the art then you have to be very careful about what you collect, you must have a house which is very carefully climatized, conserving temperature and humidity and all that. Colours are always so difficult because art consists of colours very much. We paint the walls sometimes if that is good for the art, which is done downstairs now in the Munch exhibition. Normally colours should be a sort of background. The walls provided inside the part of this museum where the collection is, is not actually white, we have avoided the white cube, we have a sort of "beige cube"

instead. That of course is very smart, because you can hang old white paintings on these walls and they still look new, if the wall were white the old white paintings probably look dirty!

**Donald Judd said: “museums have become, distorted and idle expression for their architects, most of whom are incapable of ‘expression’”, and he posed the question: “why are artists and sculptor not asked how to construct this type of building?”.**

**What do you think about that?**

Oh yes, I read that question, well Don Judd uses to say things very clearly and he really puts his finger, that's very good! But, well, the Tate Modern: they asked the people, I think 200 artists or something, what have you seen that was the best building for the art and they got a majority that wanted the old industrial building because contemporary art is often work in those rooms and they like very much free feeling around these spaces, there's no expectation inside that sort of architecture. But now it's different because so many art spaces are old industrial places and the feel of expectation has grown also there, I think. In this special example the artists were actually asked where they wanted to have their things and they got an answer they wanted, of course. So, I mean architects are architects and they should be educated for a job where they could create something that is new, fantastic, never seen before, but that doesn't mean they should create a monument of themselves. The first thing for an architect should be create a space that is a good service for what the building is built for, of course he has a strong idea what it wants to look like, but it's a challenge to make it work for what is meant for.

**So, should the architecture be at the service of the art?**

Yes, it must be, very much. That doesn't say that the building can't be personal or especial or unique, of course it can. But you must speak to the people that will work inside the museum: there are the curators, there are the technicians, there is a lot of social life going on the museum and it's very important that the building is constructed to house this social life, including children, yes.

**We saw a lot of mums with babies.**

We have a long tradition, since the 60, to have museums for the children. We have been very much inspired by the kinder garden in Reggio Emilia which we met and we have been there 20 years ago, many exhibitions in R. E. kindergarten, I've been there and I was very impressed.

**On what do you think artist clash with architects most?**

What happens sometimes is that the artists normally would like to have an environment which is more informal and the architects sometimes would build a beautiful building and if the building is too beautiful it competes with the art, so the architecture must accept to stand in the background of the art, because it's the house of the art.

But of course, when you enter a museum, you must feel welcome and it doesn't have to put a lot of art around the entrance, the architecture make feel the visitor welcome. So, the hall is not only service, it's also to make the visitor feel comfortable and that's talent and intelligence of the architect.

**What about the hall of Moderna Museet?**

I think it could be a very good place, but I don't think we have reached what we want yet, we still experiment it.

**Do you think should a museum be a closed structure or should it be a very open and flexible structure?**

You see, it's not always true that the most open place is the most flexible. So I would say that a mixture of open spaces and also several floors where you can sometimes, like in the Guggenheim in Bilbao, stay higher and look down, (which is wonderful if you have contemporary art, it's not so important if you have paintings), and then you should combine this with a lot of small rooms because you also need to make a sort of chapters in art history inside small rooms. We have a lot of great small rooms here, I love them. I think it's a beautiful idea that we have rooms that are big enough for the collection, so you can move in with ensemble of musicians, for example, you can make concert alongside the artworks. And also, the acoustics is very important, not only for creating music, but if you talk, if you guide a group...

**The atmosphere is important...**

Absolutely, it gives an atmosphere, light, sound and acoustic, give atmosphere very much, you know. So, you have to be careful, looking forward. A delicate question.

**Is it better to guide the visitor to a prearranged itinerary or leave them the freedom to move around? Do you prefer strictness or, on the other hand, the risk of confusion?**

That's an interesting question. We had a few proposals for other buildings when we choose this one, where you actually had to move certain parts and you have to go back certain way, etc. We want to avoid that very much. The visitors must have many choices to choose between when they walk around, so you should guide them by the architecture, I think you should just use your own fantasy to walk around the museum, very much. But I know people that are not very frequent visitors and like very much to have a guide and guided tours, that's something different of course.

**When you enter a museum do you focus on the content, the art, or are you also seduced by the building itself?**

Well, "seduced" is all right, "raped" is not. So, if you just carefully are seduced, then you will probably have a chance to look around and find the contents as well, but of course, the more seduced you are, the more manipulated you are, I mean that's not so fun, you maybe find the first time but you don't want come back. It has something to do with the openness and certain atmosphere, it's not easy to say, some building has it.

**Richard Serra points out, "If a work is not completely robbed.." so what destination should have these artworks, what are artists allowed to expect?**

That's very difficult because I don't think many artists create for certain museum spaces, they create for a place where the art piece can meet the viewers, it could be in public, it could be in a private gallery, it could be an open space, it could be just anywhere. We originally started to create museums to take care of art that did already exist, that's how it's

started, I mean, so it's never started "hey, let's build a museum so the artists can put their things some place!", no it was completely in the other way. So there's always a sort of mild violation, many artists, at least, think so. When their things are put into the context of a museum, they gain a sort of museum identity and they want to avoid the museum identity, of course, because that is against what the art work to speak itself, but I think if you have an open atmosphere and a free spirit inside the museum then it can be a nice place also for the artist and the art. Why not invite for example the artists to do things, to say take care of this room, I mean change it whatever. I think that is one of the basic facts of how installation started, the artists wanted to create not only the art piece, but all the scene, that's you have the installation.

**Have you ever invited here some artist to work?**

Yes sure, we do all the time, we have a special program called "Moderna Museum Project" and the artists are welcome to work inside the museum, they are equally welcome to work outside the museum and we would give them some means for the artistic production. This is a sort of going a bit across the usual, conventional traditional border, because usually art museum will take care of existing art pieces, it's not a normal thing that an art piece is create inside the museum, but we do in fact.

**And the artists are glad.**

Yes. I think is great to have this production also to work with. e even have art students creating spaces inside the museum.

**Richard serra is sure that, in a museum, an artwork takes on other meanings.**

It does.

**Perhaps this is the purpose of the museum. The comparisons encourage mental debate rather than the contemplation of the single artwork...**

There isn't a neutral room, any room you choose influence the art piece in some way, if you put it in a shop or on a square, in a public space, always there is an interaction with what surround it. Of course, the museum has a "museum" label, whatever you put in a museum becomes a museum piece, but that depends a bit on what kind of atmosphere you create inside the museum, and keeps very much on people working there, because people have a strong influence on the rooms where they stay.

**What do you think of alternative spaces for art?**

What is true is that every space creates his own meaning. It's very rare that you will find a space that give to complete your meaning.

Art life at the beginning of the '70 in America moved into alternative spaces, into nature, into abandoned areas, abandoned houses, industrial warehouses. There is a moment of freedom, I mean, when those who were here have moved out and none have moved in yet. Between that, an empty space, at this moment it becomes magic,

I've seen it and I've seen it here in Stockholm at the beginning of the 80, some industrial buildings were invaded by artists. But you get used everything, so you have to move on into other areas, into other concepts and so art did, art moved into social places, art moved into everyday shops, into hotels, into clubs or whatever. So art moved from those abandoned city areas into lively social areas and became more theatrical, from scenography to drama if you like, that's a movement that you can see in all the art world anywhere, also in Sweden.

**In fact, also the buildings change with the art.**

Yes, of course, art influences the building and the atmosphere in the rooms and the architecture very much, absolutely. But of course, there are places like the contemporary art museum in Oslo which is an old national bank and it's a beautiful house or it's a very impressive house, and the best thing you can put there is arte povera, which is raw stone and wires and things like that, because that really fights the environment, if you hang a beautiful little painting there it becomes very silent in this power architecture. It is very hard to find a place that is suitable for every kind of art.

**In Turin we have Castello di Rivoli, and the contrast there between the old architecture and the new art is good.**

I know it, that's great. There you have a sort of scenic situation, it's a sort of mise en scène anyway, it's beautiful, I like very much, great exhibitions there.

**So, the architectural space can be a scenography for the art and can generate a positive synergy?**

Yes, absolutely. They will always interfere in a way and depending on how much interference you want, you can choose different places of course. If you have an old castle it is always an old castle, but it depends on the type of castle too. I was in one in ??? which originally was built in 16th century and it was very nice proportions in that time castles, they weren't too big, so there was a sort of nice rooms to walk around, so it depends on the castle too, I mean, it would be very hazardous to put contemporary art in Versailles, for example.

**Which existing contemporary art museum do you like most and why?**

That's a good question. I've seen a few that I like very much. I think Tate Modern is wonderful, absolutely. And I like very much also the MACBA in Barcelona, which I think is very useful, very wide, but I wouldn't put it in Sweden because it would get lost in the snow.

I think that the Moderna Museet at length will find his way and be very good, you come back in 50 years, because it's so flexible, you can use it for many different things, and of course it has history and atmosphere, we are expanding what we are doing out into the city. And then, the Kiasma in Helsinki is very nice. Most of the museums I have seen are very nice. Well, I have to be very franc on one of these museums and that is the Art Museum in Copenhagen, which is funny and challenging building very well suited for installations and performance art, but don't think very easy to hang pictures in, so it's a big extreme and of course that has its limitations very much.

**Finally, how can you imagine a museum for the new millennium?**

Well, can I do it? Yes, I can, I can. I would like to have a museum that is working with the frame function, background function that this one has, but has some of the rooms from the Guggenheim Bilbao and also be situated like the beautiful Louisiana in Denmark, part of it, and has another part of it in the centre of the city, with the cafe where all the people moving, etc., as well as you do in your own life, you move in between different scenes, different moods of life: sometimes you are aggressive, energetic, sometimes you want to relax. You need this mixture, this breath between different atmospheres. So, the best museum is the place where you can move around and feel a little different depending on what corner you stop in.

**You are the first person to talk about the Guggenheim Bilbao in a good sense!**

Oh, am I? I wouldn't say it's bad at all, it's a great place really, but you can't place it in an environment like this one because it could destroy the architecture in the surroundings. I don't know if it's completely true, but I was told that Frank Gehry was invited to the competition and when he heard about the conditions, the old houses, he said sorry I don't want to do it because it's too limited, and I agree, I understand very much. I should say I haven't been to the museums in Japan and there are some few that I very much like to see.

Also, some of the German are great, but the Guggenheim is so special on the other hand, I mean you cannot say that is the best way of doing, it's simply just one very interesting spot, Tate Modern is an other.