

100 Years of Kunstmuseum Winterthur

City Hall, Winterthur, 20 May 2016

Dear Friends of Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Kunstmuseum Winterthur, very close to where we are now, has been in existence for a full hundred years now and has been through a lot in that time. But I don't want to focus on its history or on ideas today, I would like to talk about what the museum's well-kent façade and grand entrance represent, about all that the museum stands for.



A drawing I first saw ten years ago in a Thomas Schütte exhibition in Baden-Baden has never faded in my mind's eye. It is a succinct representation of a building: a museum, as the writing above the doorway tells us. The dome looks more like a simple handle, the imposing staircase is a black void ominously expanding in front of the building, and, underneath it, the question Why? Museum – Why? In German this rhymes (Museum – Warum?), creating an additional sense of unease or perhaps of bewilderment at the sight of this mighty edifice. It's true, many people are seemingly bewildered by the sight of the museums that house drawings of this kind and are afraid to step into that darkness.

Museums today do all sorts of things to counteract that response; sometimes they even behave as though they weren't museums at all, as though they wanted

to be something else as a way of justifying their existence. It seems they would often rather be coffee houses, crèches, forums for social debate, fairgrounds, and – hoping to find favour with the public – they publish the amounts they contribute to the municipal coffers. They shy away from just being a museum and that provides a ready answer to the “Why?” – because museums are useful.



There may be a misunderstanding here, because a museum is not supposed to fill needs that are already catered for elsewhere – it can't be all those things I just listed. If it were, it would soon make itself redundant. The museum, as an institution, is not intended as a means to alleviate society's bad conscience; it is a place for something that exists nowhere else. With my museum director's hat on, I would say that the museum is a place for collecting, preserving and mediating works of art. That is its traditional remit. But there is something more, which relates to these activities but which is generally not mentioned. A watercolour by Otto Meyer-Amden – a study of a bowed figure – goes to the heart of this.

A boy is seated amidst other seated figures yet he is also all on his own, bending towards the book he is holding in his hand; at the same time he is turning, with his book, to his only partially visible neighbour. It need not be a book – it could equally be a picture or some other object that has caught his attention, for the reading figure is a metaphor for anyone who has ascended those wide steps leading into the museum and who is contemplating a work of art, engrossed and keen to discover what he or she might find in it.



Whenever we approach a painting or a sculpture the chances are we will not immediately see anything of what we expected to see. There's something missing; we can't see it. Art history is filled with stories of thwarted expectations, of disappointment and rejection. But it has to be like that, because it is the unfamiliar, the unprecedented – not the familiar – that makes art what it is, that provides its uniqueness.

What was it the painter Franz Kline said when someone came to him, in some distress, and exclaimed that he had just been to a Barnett Newman exhibition but there was nothing there?

'Nothing? ... How many canvases were in the show?'

'Oh, maybe ten or twelve – all exactly the same – just one stripe down the centre.'

'All the same size?'

'Well no. They were different sizes.'

'Same colours?'

'Different colours – each canvas painted one flat colour ... then there was this stripe down the centre.'

'All the stripes the same colour ... the same width?'

'Let's see. No. I guess not.'

'Was the stripe painted on top of the background colour, or was the background colour painted around the stripe?'

'I'm not sure ... I guess it could have been done either way.'

'Well, I don't know', said Kline, 'It all sounds damn complicated to me.'

Instead of paintings with stripes, it could have been pieces of cardboard hung on the museum wall. The fact is that whenever one looks at a work of art, it initially appears as though there is nothing to see. It is a silent, alien object that doesn't explain itself; it is incomprehensible in its uniqueness but precisely that is the condition of its existence and the condition of our interest in it: we seek to understand its uniqueness, that which distinguishes this work from all other objects in the world. Our interest in it requires us to engage with the work, to observe it with our full attention, perceiving variations, differentiating it from others, coming to conclusions and mulling these over – a never-ending process of contemplation and rumination.

The boy bending over his book is with others yet alone, just as we are in a museum; even if someone is telling us about a work of art, trying to explain it, in the end we are on our own with it. Nevertheless, the presence of that other viewer is important. Engaging with a work also means wanting to pass on what one has discovered, describing the differences one has observed, or at least pointing towards what can barely be put into words. By engaging with the work we make contact with our fellow human beings, because we want to share that experience with others. It's not that exhibition-goers suddenly burst into applause like members of a concert audience; but the work of art does create a community that ripples out from that initial moment of contemplation.

Differentiation rather than generalisation is a factor to be prized, and that there is a place designed for this – the museum – is of inestimable value. Towns, regions, societies have to decide for themselves whether they want to have places of this kind, and they will be judged by their decisions. Something would be missing if the museum were to be swamped in the grey noise of communication. Museum – Why? That question will surely continue to preoccupy us for at least the next one hundred years.

Dieter Schwarz

[Translation: Fiona Elliott]