

Tensta Museum: six moves towards a methodology

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Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden started in 2013 as a group exhibition at Tensta Konsthall and developed into a six-year-long adventure; some parts are still alive and kicking to this very day. The small and fragile art center in the late modernist Stockholm suburb of Tensta “played museum” by dealing with both history and memory in the area, through both the physical location and the people living and working there. The backdrop was the reality of Sweden’s capital being segregated between a largely white and wealthy city center and a number of suburbs in which the inhabitants are considerably poorer and also racialized. Another backdrop was the dismantling of the social welfare state and the aggressive introduction of neo-liberal policies resulting in Sweden turning into a country with rapidly increasing differences in both income and living conditions in the new millennium. In the midst of this “new Sweden”, Tensta Museum’s self-institutionalization was realized thanks to art works, archival material, new research, architecture, lectures, seminars, workshops, thematic walks, film screenings, and much more. A context-sensitive curatorial methodology took shape along the way.¹ In addition to self-institutionalization, the central parts of this methodology became displacement, art-centricity, embeddedness, pervasive eclecticism, and the proximity principle.²

Self-institutionalization had certainly been practiced by artists and subordinate institutions long before Tensta Museum. Marcel Broodthaers’ *Museum of Modern Art* and its *Department of Eagles* or Goran Dordevic’s *Museum of American Art* are just two artistic examples. Among curatorial projects, the physically modest Artists’ Institute in a small storefront in New York and Konsthall C in one half of a public laundry room in Stockholm might also be mentioned. As

¹ Context sensitivity is used here to distinguish it from the more academic site-specificity. See Maria Lind: *The Discursive Sculpture*, p. 54.

² See Maria Lind (Ed.): *Tensta Museum*.

a private foundation, without regular funding and successful applications for public support only ever making up fifty percent of the budget, the move by Tensta konsthall to pretend to be a museum, even if only temporarily so, was a clear gesture of claiming authority. The authority to speak from, and about, a socially demonized area and to call for more stable conditions, in order to make an institution which is more or less run like a project, became a proper institution with the kind of solidity that a museum typically has. Self-institutionalization took yet another shape; namely, by toying with the idea of a collection. Obviously, Tensta Museum lacked a traditional collection. However, as the researcher Christina Zetterlund has pointed out, the district of Tensta functioned as both a collection and an archive for this unorthodox museum.³

Tensta Museum was divided into two parts, the Fall Department and the Spring Department, even though it was originally conceived of as an evolving, heterogeneous exhibition with contributions by more than forty artists, local associations, musicians, architects, sociologists, activists, and others. About half of the exhibits were exchanged and new ones were installed after three months and further events took place in a structure that played with traditional museum categories – the dimension of time took over from organizing principles, such as material and provenance, production and geography. Hence, one of the most strictly observed routines in the museum world, the dichotomy between permanent displays and temporary exhibitions, was also tampered with. In other words, self-institutionalization did not exclude experimentation, playfulness, and a certain amount of cheekiness – on the contrary, it aimed at challenging received truths about institutional work while attempting to strengthen the position of the institution/project in question.⁴

This breaking of the routine was one in a series of conscious displacements in Tensta Museum, in this case from the realm of materiality to immateriality, from space to time, and nevertheless involved a palpable displacement. Tampering with time did not end with the Fall and Spring Departments, but continued with the decision to continue with the project after the stated end date. This is how Tensta Museum Continues was born. Like a ball set in motion, it was rolling in Tensta and far beyond to other areas in Stockholm, such

3 Christina Zetterlund: *A Radical Proposal*, p. 119–138.

4 In 2018–2019, the Summer and Winter Departments took place at Arkdes in Stockholm. See *Tensta Museum Time Line 2019–2013*, p. 33–42.

as to Riga and to Zagreb.⁵ In this way, numerous physical displacements were enacted. They pertained not only to the exhibits and the various activities undertaken in Tensta Museum, but also to the team: once a month, the necessary weekly staff meeting would be located at a different place in the district. Such a displacement allowed for internal requirements to deal with current institutional affairs, and also made it possible to learn about the character and activities of schools, associations, the local city administration, etc. Reciprocating their hospitality by inviting them to the konsthall for a visit, a guided tour, and to use the konsthall's premises for their own meetings led to important relationships and to many new visitors to the art center.

At the heart of the entire adventure was both art and a desire to place it center stage, thereby allowing as much of its potential to be realized as possible. A highlight in the Fall Department was a dozen water colors by the self-taught artist Josabeth Sjöberg (1812–1882), an unmarried woman who depicted herself in her many different rental rooms in the working class area of that time, Södermalm. Belonging to the Stockholm City Museum, the water colors were shown outside of the city center for the first ever time and this resonated with yet another housing crisis, a hundred and fifty years after the one which forced Sjöberg to move more than ten times.⁶ In the 2000s, Tensta was often been described as a “problem area” and a “ghetto”, one dominated by a population of around twenty thousand people with trans-local backgrounds, mainly from the Middle East and East Africa. Unemployment, low income, increased gun violence, and overcrowding in the area are a stark reality; however, civil society, numerous associations, and a plethora of other activities exist there in the midst of a historically and socially rich place.

Sjöberg's delicate and detailed paintings meant that a renowned art gem from the city's own museum was brought to its outskirts, which are as much a part of the municipality as any other neighborhood, even though it is one that is rarely identified with art gems. While “playing museum”, the project also enacted another displacement by moving to the city center, to the “home” of Sjöberg's works, and into the Stockholm City Museum itself. Tensta Museum opened a branch in the premises of the city museum on Södermalm, just as any other museum with a certain amount of self-confidence, strength, and ambi-

5 More about Tensta Museum Continues in Tensta Museum Time Line 2019–2013, p. 20 and p. 94–95.

6 Hans Eklund at al.: Josabeth Sjöberg.

tion.⁷ As part of the Spring Department, the artist Katarina Lundgren showed photographs and other elements from her commissioned work *Stockholm's Tips and Tops* in one of museum's rooms. In another move between the center and the peripheries of the city, she had studied the artificial hills strewn around the suburbs that had been made of the rubble from the old central parts that had been torn down in the 1950s and 1960s. Thought of as large outdoor sculptures by the city gardener at the time – land art before land art – Lundgren paid special attention in her project to the one in Tensta, Granholmstoppen in the neighboring natural reserve of the Järva Field.⁸

Complex narratives like the ones above were woven throughout Tensta Museum, thereby taking art as a starting point and creating a movement back and forth between the middle of the city and its fringes. Art was, at the end of the day, the fundament, given that the hosting institution, Tensta konsthall, was an art center. In this manner, the focus was shifted so that the positions of power and prestige were destabilized and, to some degree, shifted. Art centricity went hand in hand with self-insitutionalization: a small kunsthalle with a weak budget and an insecure future took upon itself the authority to speak about, and to explore, the history and memory not only of the area in which it was located but also, to some extent, of the capital itself. All of this rested on a tradition of performative curating with roots in the theoretical work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and the more dynamic sociological and subject critical applications by Judith Butler and Erika Fischer-Lichte.⁹ Here, meaning is created through the performative, through stage-setting processes like celebrations, markets, rituals and, not least, events within sports and politics. In this understanding, culture becomes a mega-performance, with a variety of processes and procedures. While this had been tested previously, together with the various teams during my tenure at Kunstverein München, Iaspis and the Center for Curatorial Studies, it became more intense and consistent at Tensta konsthall in general, and with Tensta Museum in particular.¹⁰

Along these lines, initiatives that were part of Tensta Museum were made and took the place at the art center and the art center's activities happened

⁷ Another branch was opened at the Medieval Museum of Stockholm, with an art project by Bernd Krauss and Nina Svensson, see Tensta Museum Time Line 2019–2013, p. 105–106.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Katharina Schlieben: Curating Per-Form.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger: New Institutionalism Revisited.

across the local geography, in a curatorial “fort-da-game” of sorts. For example, micro exhibitions of contemporary art were organized at local schools, while the public art works belonging to the municipal collection and usually on display at those very schools, were assembled and shown together as part of Tensta Museum as an exhibition of 20th-century art in *Art Treasures: Grains of Gold from the Public Schools in Tensta*. In this fashion, the artists Mats Adelman and Ylva Westerlund, who both live and work in Tensta, presented a series of paintings and drawings pertaining to symptoms of the Anthropocene at the Järva Field, in the corridors, offices, and the nurse’s waiting room of the Gullinge School and Spånga Upper Secondary School, in a fruitful displacement that was accompanied by seminars on art history and tours of the current exhibitions.

Like art-centricity, embeddedness in the Tensta area – which entailed the art center becoming a normalized element of the neighborhood – was practiced at all points in time during my term at Tensta konsthall, not just in Tensta Museum. Nevertheless, it was intensified during Tensta Museum through the increased and multiple daily contacts with individuals and organizations that its various components triggered; these included everything from the Kurdish Association and the Lebanese Parent’s Association to thematic art camps during school holidays and architecture walks with architects and local inhabitants. In an open call for images, texts, and sound from and about Tensta, as part of the Fall Department, Mila Iwanov, an amateur painter and Järva resident since the 1970s, not only showed a selection of her paintings both at the Women’s Center and the konsthall, but she also celebrated her 100th birthday at the latter.¹¹

At the same time, this is an example of Tensta Museum’s pervasive eclecticism; art works displayed in atypical contexts as well as at the art center, and then together with archival material from the Kurdish Association, political satirical illustrations by the exiled Somali artist Amin Amir, a commissioned soundtrack by the nationally famous Tensta hip-hop artist Adam Tensta, symposia on cultural heritage, and the planning and architecture history of the neighborhood, activist meetings, etc. This pervasive eclecticism also involved radical layering, adding unexpected components to one another. If we restrict ourselves for a moment to the Spring Department, what went on inside the exhibition space included a mini-branch of the local library, a housing convention, and a bi-weekly language café that took place there. Several of these ventures came about on the initiative of people and organizations outside the

11 See Tensta Museum Time Line 2019–2013, p. 90.

konsthall. The language café became something like a backbone for the Tensta Museum, running throughout its entire period, and still going strong today.

Notably, the language café is an iteration of the artist Ahmet Ögut's independent educational platform *The Silent University*, which has been organized in a number of cities since 2012 and always in collaboration with local partners.¹² The driving force is to make silent knowledge palpable and to make learning possible for people who do not have the legal rights to study or teach, or in other ways that do not fit into the existing educational structures. The Tensta Museum version became a language café for those who want to practice Swedish with native Swedish speaking volunteers, led by the konsthall's receptionist Fahyma Alnablsi. Originally from Damascus and a Tensta resident since the early 1990s, Alnablsi has added monthly excursions to other parts of Stockholm to the project, in order to practice a different vocabulary and to collectively learn about the new hometown and has also founded an allotment garden. The rest of the time, the language café serves as a meeting place at the art center, often in the middle of an exhibition.

Defying traditional hierarchies of high and low culture, and yet acknowledging the importance of both, was part and parcel of the pervasive eclecticism. Renowned artists like Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Marion von Osten contributed to Tensta Museum, as did emerging ones like Marwa Arsanios and Ingela Ihrman. Photographs from when Tensta was a farmland and from the construction of the housing estate in 1967–1972 were borrowed from the local heritage association, who were in charge of how to display them. In addition, its members then led a series of talks about local history and the modernist housing estate as part of modern cultural heritage. The photographs were shown alongside the New York-based artist Terence Gower's photograph and model of Tlatelolcona in Mexico City. On the other side of this inquiry, into late modernist housing in a radically different context, was an art work whose main component was an endangered species of fish, usually living in a creek in the neighboring natural reserve, the Järva Field. There were many such unexpected, even hilarious, juxtapositions in Tensta Museum in which associative connections co-existed with straightforward ones.¹³

While the above was happening, or rather being performed, the proximity principle permitted profoundly different entities and activities to sit alongside one another, in close proximity, not in order to blur the boundaries between

12 See Florian Malzacher, Pelin Tan and Ahmet Ögut (Eds): *The Silent University*.

13 See Tensta Museum Time Line 2019–2013, p. 113.

them but to let them come closer, to be able to rub off on each other, and even to gently contaminate each other. In this way, familiarity and occasionally intimacy could also develop, and make the other entity feel less strange and threatening. Things that are considered prestigious, which are taken to be complex and difficult, can be de-dramatized in this manner. Avoiding exoticization, extractivism, and victimization is crucial because they tend to loom large when working in a context like Tensta, not least due to the expectations of the funders, the media, and some visitors from beyond Tensta.

The adventure of Tensta Museum was only possible thanks to both a dedicated team, which was small and committed, and to a malleable institutional structure.¹⁴ Constituted as a private non-profit foundation, it is a structure in, and with which, it was possible to both improvise and to pledge time and to attend to tasks and troubles. A supportive board underwrote the overall program and did not interfere, and some larger applications for funding were even successful, thereby guaranteeing a decent budget. It became evident that the petite and fragile institution can be agile and resilient, sometimes turning disadvantages into advantages, thereby making its weakness a strength, even an asset.

One facet of Tensta Museum that facilitated this long-term engagement was the classroom, a space outfitted as a place in which to gather, to learn and unlearn. The artist Petra Bauer, who was part of the project “think tank”, was commissioned to make a new work, and the social researcher Sofia Wiberg wanted to delve into listening as a political act, together with members of the local women’s center and other colleagues.¹⁵ The one-year project *Rehearsals* was realized through a series of collective acts, or workshops, taking place in a separate room at the konsthall which they had furnished and decorated together.¹⁶ Parts of this were intended to move to the under-funded women’s center after the end of the Tensta Museum exhibition, which it also did. A guided tour of the exhibition with the local branch of Swedish for Migrants, a sta-

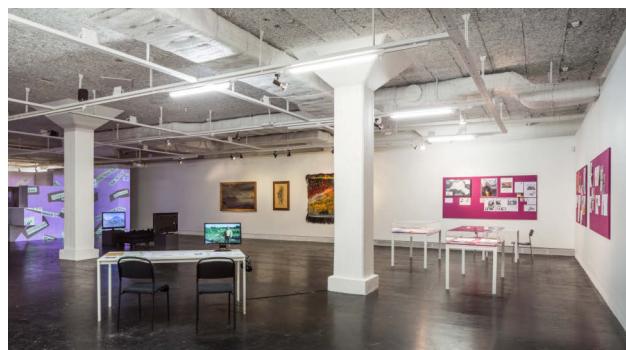
¹⁴ The team consisted of, amongst others, the following people at different points in time: Fahyma Alnablsi, Emily Fahlén, Ulrika Flink, Asrin Haidari, Asha Mohammed, Hanna Nordell, Laurel Ptak, Paulina Sokolow, Hedvig Wiezell, Didem Yildirim, and Giorgiana Zachia.

¹⁵ In addition to the Tensta konsthall team, the think tank consisted of Petra Bauer, Boris Buden, Thomas Elovsson and Peter Geschwind, Barakat Gebrawariat and Ricardo Oswaldo-Alvarado, amongst others.

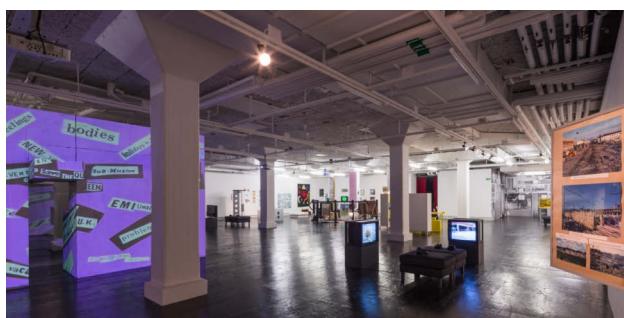
¹⁶ A film was commissioned by Swedish Television, SVT, as part of *Rehearsals* and was co-authored by Petra Bauer and the cinematographer Marius Dybwad Brandrud.

te school for people who have just arrived in Sweden and who have the correct documents, prompted them to ask if they could use the art center as the premises for their summer course which would benefit from taking place in a new environment. As the Spring Department came to an end, the team quickly decided to let Tensta Museum continue, and to take the cue from SFI and outfit a new classroom in which they could do their summer course. At the end of my tenure, there was at least one group per day using the classroom. There is still a classroom at Tensta konsthall, conceived and designed by a different artist every year, which is available to both local groups and initiatives as well as those from elsewhere.

In retrospect, the moves that were made to make Tensta Museum happen look a lot like “the curatorial” as I have described it in some texts written from 2009 onwards.¹⁷ Allowing art to unfold, engaging with several of its aspects, rather than honing-in on just one of them, and making art connect with other entities and contexts are part and parcel of this. Furthermore, the curatorial is a way of combining art works, practices, artists, contexts, and questions in ways that challenge the status quo regarding both curating and cultural production at large. We may very well start from the craft of curating, in the sense of working, of professionally selecting artists and/or art works, handling, and of displaying and mediating them correctly, but the curatorial would always move beyond that. It is art in situ, art at play, and art in action. With Tensta Museum, most importantly, art as well as Tensta itself were windows to the future and Tensta Museum was a tool to open this window. And to keep it open.

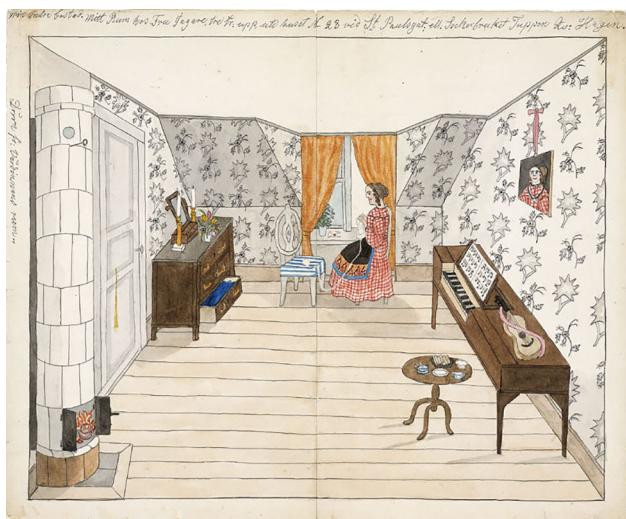


¹⁷ See, for example, Maria Lind: The Curatorial.









Figures

- 1) Tensta Museum Spring Department, installation view with works by Thomas Elovsson & Peter Geschwind, Fernando Garcia Dory, art works from Tensta Senior High School, and archival material from the Kurdish Association.
- 2) Katarina Lundgren, still from the video Stockholm's Tips and Tops shown at the Tensta Museum branch at the Stockholm City Museum.
- 3) The Silent University Language Café on an excursion to the local museum in Skebo bruk.
- 4) Tensta Museum Fall Department, installation view with works by Thomas Elovsson & Peter Geschwind, Pia Röncke, the open call Salong Tensta, and with photographic display based on the archive of Spånga Local Heritage Association.
- 5) Tensta Museum Summer Department, a branch at ArkDes, installation view with works by Ylva Westerlund and Lili Reynaud-Dewar.
- 6) The Silent University Language Café meeting in the Tensta konsthall classroom.
- 7) Artists showed contemporary work at the schools Ylva Westerlund at Spånga Senior High School while historical art works were borrowed from the public schools of Tensta for an exhibition in the classroom at Tensta konsthall.
- 8) Erik Stenberg, architect and Tensta resident, lent his private archive with material from and about Tensta's planning and architectural history.
- 9) Water colour by Josabeth Sjöberg (1812–1882) depicting herself in one of her many different rented rooms in Södermalm, Stockholm, the “Tensta of 19th century Stockholm”.
- 10) Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Parc Central (2006) with eleven short films from late modernist parks, urban landscapes, and beaches from Kyoto, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, and Paris among other places.

All photos: Jane-Baptiste Beranger.

