

ESTETISK RENSNING

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By Dan Jönsson

Is it possible to combine a veneration for that which is holy with a belief in tolerance and other similar values? Logically, probably not. But culture and art aren't necessarily about logic, and that the secularism of the West is so keen to use Muslim fundamentalism as a mirror is not a coincidence. In short, it's a matter of recognition. In absolute religious faith one finds the overt lack of compromise that is presupposed by secular tolerance but seldom openly discussed. What is a fundamental opposition becomes a question of cultural difference.

When Gothenburg's Museum of World Culture decides to remove a painting by Algerian Louzla Darabi from the exhibition "No Name Fever" in February 2005, they inadvertently enter into the most infected cultural conflict of the new millenium. The sequence of events is deeply ironic: the new museum, recently inaugurated, is built to be a venue for a new, more open and more problematizing way of exhibiting and discussing "world culture". That is, the museum is intended to showcase a view of culture that differs from the Eurocentric perspective formerly adhered to by ethnography: a postmodern, post-colonial idea about a world of equal, conjoined, mixed and malleable cultures.

This ideological renewal is first manifested in the inaugural exhibition "No Name Fever", an exhibition about "AIDS in the time of globalization" where works by current authors from different parts of the world forms the basis of the discussion. But soon it becomes clear that one of these works, the erotic painting "Scène d'amour" by Algerian artist Louzla Darabi, provokes strong and upset reactions in the local Muslim opinion. Darabi's painting, an expressive image of an act of intercourse between a man and a woman, also includes a line in Arabic from the opening sura of the Qu'ran. For the artist, this was a way of seeing sexuality as a spiritual energy, a path to holiness. For some Muslims, it was an insult.

Weeks after the opening, the museum receives around 700 protests: emails or phone calls, most upset or disappointed, some more overtly threatening. After a few weeks of agonizing, Jette Sandahl, the director of the museum, decides to remove Darabi's work and replace it with another. Without text.

The decision immediately fuels a new protest storm. The debate surrounding the retreat of the museum hastily falls into the established rhetorical pattern of the present: one one side, we have freedom of speech and the unquestionable right of art to provoke, on the other hand, the threat of

a growing intolerant Muslim fundamentalism. A largely unified public opinion accuses the museum of betraying its own principles, as expressed on the website: "a place [...] where many voices are allowed to speak and where controversial subjects can be brought up" – and there are demands for the resignation of Jette Sandahl.

How do you explain this strange, political snowballing effect? On one level, it comes down to a lack of professional experience."No Name Fever" was one of the first larger Swedish exhibitions where contemporary art was fully brought into an aware, critical exhibition. As a whole, this worked as envisioned, with the artwork serving as subjective, strengthening commentary on the documentary material. In most cases, the works referred directly to the AIDS epidemic. A few very clear examples are Brazilian Adriana Bertini and her condom dress – or Pascale Marthine Tayou from Camerun, who switched the bottle caps of the beer bottles in his erotic "X-bar" for black penis models.

In the case of Louzla Darabi, the association with AIDS was considerably more vague. The function of the Qu'ran verse as a link between spiritual and sexual ecstasy was entirely lost in the way the museum presented the work, lacking both a translation and further information about what kind of text it was. Instead, the verse remained a nonsensical decorative cultural fringe on the top edge of the painting. Without this exotic vagueness, it is difficult to see how to relate the painting to the general theme of illness. But the connection between Arabic writing and erotica, evidently a speculative train of thought arrived at AIDS via religious oppression of women and breaking norms and unsafe sex.

Prejudice or ignorance? It is a fair question. Certainly, this whole business was concerned with far more than institutional or artistic integrity from the start. It is clear that the museum was ill prepared for what happens to an Algerian painting when it becomes part of "world culture" in a Swedish museum, or, for that matter, for what happens when a Swedish museum means to practice multicultural values. When world culture and multiculturalism suddenly collided, it came as a chock to everyone involved.