Close Viewing and Critical Distance

It is an honor to edit the first digital edition of Kunst og Kultur, to focus this issue on the art of Edvard Munch, and to do so in collaboration with the “Munch, Modernism, and Modernity” research group in Oslo: Mai Britt Guleng and Øystein Ustvedt (National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design); Jon-Ove Steihaug and Ute Kuhlemann Falck (Munch Museum); and Øivind Storm Bjørke (University of Oslo). The “Munch, Modernism, and Modernity” group was constituted by formal agreement among the Munch Museum; the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design; and the University of Oslo. Its objectives are to build greater research partnerships within the international community of scholars; to identify and examine themes and entanglements shared by historical and contemporary artists and writers; to expand scholarship by exploring the social, cultural, philosophical, literary, material, and historical dimensions of the artist’s production; and to explore new questions about the dissemination, interpretive apparatus, economics, and reception of the artist’s work and identity.

Our group has organized international conferences since 2011. Each was designed to probe aspects of Munch’s work within wider circuits of production and exchange: “Staging Culture: Public Art and the Modern Audience” (2011); “New Visions: Edvard Munch and Modern Media Culture” (2012); “Between Art and Mass Communication: Munch and Printmaking” (2013); “Finito/Non-Finito: Intentionality and the Modern Fragment” (2014); “Revisiting the Surface” (2015); and “Modernisms Still Left on the Doorstep” (2016). We have also sponsored two graduate student conferences at the University of Oslo: “On and Around Munch: A Graduate Student Conference” (2013) and “Revisiting the Surface: A Graduate Student Conference” (2015); and we assisted with the organization of “Munch and/in Modernism” (2013), the conference that accompanied Munch 150, the retrospective at the Munch Museum and National Museum in celebration of Munch’s 150-year anniversary.

This issue is comprised of articles that were first offered as papers at our various conferences. Kunst og Kultur has previously published special volumes honoring Munch, the first in 1913 on the occasion of the artist’s 50th birthday; the second in 1946, a memorial to the artist following his death in 1944 (and first volume was issued after the end of the Second World War); the third, honoring the artist’s 100th birthday in 1963 and in...
celebration of the opening of the Munch Museum; the fourth in 2007 (when Gerd Woll's catalogue raisonné of Munch's paintings was published); and the fifth in 2013, marking the 150th anniversary of Munch's birth as well as the large Munch 150 retrospective. As the journal enters into its new digital format with wider international access, this issue looks at Munch through multiple close-up lenses, balancing micro-histories in materiality, self-staging, and reception, with the critical distance to re-evaluate those histories on fresh terms. Allison Morehead rereads the implications of a critical text written in 1905; Elin Kittelsen reconsiders the temporal context of Munch's Alpha and Omega; Reinhold Heller interprets the performative nature of photographs of Munch dating to 1938; Mille Stein reconsiders the material evidence of the “horse cure”; and Patricia Berman looks at and through the surface of a print by Munch. The authors, and the “Munch, Modernism, and Modernity” research group, wish to honor the memory of Tina Yarborough (d. 2016), an American scholar of Munch, whose dissertation, “Exhibition Strategies and Wartime Politics in the Art and Career of Edvard Munch” (U. Chicago) offered a model of close viewing of material evidence through the critical distance of finely wrought reception theory.