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## THE COMMUNICATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF CONTEMPORARY ART WITHIN THE FRAME OF ART EDUCATION

### KOMUNIKACIJSKE MOGUĆNOSTI SUVREMENE UMJETNOSTI U OKVIRU LIKOVNO-PEDAGOŠKOG RADA

*Matjaž Duh, Tomaž Zupančič*

Faculty of Education, University of Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia

Pedagoški fakultet, Sveučilište u Mariboru, Maribor, Slovenija

#### *Abstract*

This article introduces the communicative possibilities that contemporary art offers within art education. The introduction deals with the relevant theoretical starting points and goes on to develop and explain the term "communicational paradox of contemporary art". The continuation of the article presents some possibilities for transcending this paradox. We then present some of our findings, based on a methodologically examined empirical follow up to this problem. We concentrated on the peripheral characteristics of contemporary art work that allow quality communication with the pupils. We emphasized visually interesting characteristics; united incompatibilities and used objects in an unusual way and with interesting ideas (concepts).

#### *Sažetak*

U članku su predstavljene komunikacijske mogućnosti koje suvremena umjetnost nudi unutar likovno-pedagoškog rada. U uvodnom su dijelu predstavljena relevantna teorijska polazišta. Zatim je termin »komunikacijski paradoks suvremene umjetnosti« razvijen i obrazložen. U nastavku su iznesene i mogućnosti za njegovo prekoračenje. Na osnovu metodološki provjerene i empirijski popraćene problematike navodimo do čega smo došli. Usredotočili smo se na vanjske karakteristike suvremenih likovnih umjetničkih djela, koje omogućavaju kvalitetnu komunikaciju s učenicima. Ustanovili smo nadalje vizualnu zanimljivost, udruživanje neudruživog, upotrebu objekata na neobičan način te zanimljivost same ideje (koncepta).

#### **1 Introduction**

Contemporary art education in practice, at institutions with art education, works in two directions. The first is directed toward the development of art – the creative abilities of pupils, and the second tries to establish a suitable relationship to works of art and culture. The role of understanding our contemporary cultural environment as one of the most important aspects of the contemporary postmodern curriculum is the opinion of Efland, who wrote: "Given the crises in culture, what is the purpose of art and hence, the purpose of art education in a postmodern era? In my view the function of the arts continues to be "reality construction." And hence we teach art to widen and deepen our understanding of the cultural landscape we inhabit." /1/.

The curriculum for primary school education comes from the tendency to fulfill the development

of the human personality. It includes mental development, critical thinking, imagination, the ability to communicate, and experience and expression in different art fields./2/ The educational goals of art education are realized with (1) pupils' artwork, done directly and creatively and (2) establishing a relationship to artistic work by evaluating art. In practice these two activities are not separated. They form a whole educational activity. Art evaluation is an element of art education that includes the development of the capability to evaluate art works and esthetic phenomena in the environment. Art evaluation contains emotional (it appeals to me) and rational (why it appeals to me) means of establishing a relation to cultural objects.

In the field of art appreciation we can perceive a gap between the subject of evaluation and the time we live in. Evaluation subjects in primary school are mainly artworks that come from traditional origins,

while works of art chosen for teachers during their training are either mimetic or come from the era of art history that extends up to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The art works are based on the research of formal artistic principles. The problem is general and is not limited to individual curricular systems.

Cole wrote: "The practice of art education in schools and colleges developed from a form of modernist values and ideas adopted in the early years of this /Twentieth © T. V./ century. The world proposed by Modernism was one untroubled by the discourses of other disciplines or views. This now seems anachronistic but much art teaching still measures and defines itself in relation to the particular practices and materials which are thought to be intrinsic to it. Largely dissociated from everyday life, art can seem both mystifying and irrelevant to many young people, who see little or no relation between it and the things that are important to them"/3/. A lack of esthetic evaluation can be seen in later years because the development of this quality relies on special knowledge in different art fields. It develops into a general non-interest for contemporary art, which, to the average art viewer, must seem incomprehensible, meaningless and needless.

Knowledge and evaluation of contemporary art practices is as important as the observation and evaluation of traditional works of art, which are also based on the development of subtle perceptions of artwork. Educational elements and a combination of spontaneous emotional and conscious rational components must also be accounted for.

## 2 Presentation and enrichment of contemporary works of art

While developing their perception, pupils get to know problems that occur in art and are learning to see the artwork, and understand and enjoy it. While the process of art creativity introduces a gradual inclusion of conscious and rational components together with emotional and spontaneous components, it also develops the process of art appreciation./4/ "Experiencing dimension, when observing art works, is often narrative for primary school students, therefore it is important that teachers systematically introduce the artworks and gradually proceed from mimetic artwork to abstract and further on to contemporary art solutions" /5/. When choosing artwork from the rich treasury of contemporary art, we go by the principle of quality. This goes for the artwork itself as well as for the media used to project the art to pupils if the original is not accessible /6/.

Mimetic artworks are easier to comprehend, while contemporary artworks demand different methods of observing. We have to learn and get used to this. Teachers have to evaluate the subject as well as the medium being used while projecting an artistic message that is suited to the proper pupil level. Attention should also be directed to art syntax and the artistic organization of concrete elements that are poly-functionally structured.

The presentation of chosen artworks must be done in a way so that the observation of the artwork can lead to an interaction between the pupils and the artwork. In this way, the sensual impulses attach directly to the pupils' memory, experiences, emotions and associations. These associations enable a connection between different imaginative processes and are based on common characteristics and similarities, such as shape, color, motif.... The associations are subjective and often biographically accepted. Interaction levels are personal from pupil to pupil, therefore the conditions in the classroom must enable them to feely express their personal opinions. Their own perspective in perceiving an artwork will enhance the experience of the other pupils. Teachers must know that different pupils will react differently to the same artwork, which was emphasized by Blohm in his famous thesis: »The next thesis emphasizes that it is strictly impossible to predict the results in the classroom when work is based on contemporary fine art practices. Because of that it is senseless to plan aims or predict the reactions of the pupils. Instead of this it is important to stimulate different, individual, unexpected reactions. « /7/.

Furthermore, it is important that individuals respond to the same artwork on different levels, such as: emotional associative and formal intellectual levels. The reaction types just mentioned can change because they depend on the observer and the artwork. Some immediately respond emotionally, while others respond on an intellectual level. Some artwork can arouse an immediate emotional response by most observers, while others awaken associations.

The observation and reception of a work of art goes through several phases. Different authors use different ways to present and interpret the individual phases of art appreciation, which is fundamental for an experienced emotional reaction./8/ This process goes through at least two phases. The first is directed toward giving the pupil the clearest perception of the artwork, which assumes the appearance of an appropriate esthetic experience. The second phase is directed toward the way in which the results of perception get verbalized and therefore become conscious and inward. For children to enjoy the

art forms and react to the introduced subjects, they must first observe them. Therefore it is important that children in art education learn the technique of observing esthetic objects. "In primary school we avoid intellectual evaluation that is based on defined esthetic principles and rules, which the students are just starting to learn. In school we persist with the perception of an artwork, but we do not deny the important components of appreciation, for example: affectivity, which is released while in the presence of a work of art and is the product of individual factors peculiar to every person." /9/. These starting points can be a good base for planning educational work in art for the purpose of developing a sensibility for contemporary art practice.

### **3 Communicative point of view of the evaluation of artwork**

When evaluating artwork, it is very important to use suitable work methods and to establish a creative climate that is based on relaxed two-way or mutual communication. Contemporary art education theory also emphasizes a communicational point of view. Zupančič for example, emphasizes the following to be essential: "the influence of the surroundings on the created work (pupil's artwork) and the influence of the created work on the surroundings. Artwork arouses responses in the classroom, in school and outside of school. It can have an influence on the relationship between the pupils and teacher, an influence on the pupil's relation to the art work in school, and an influence in the way they relate to contemporary art..." /10/. Regarding intention, it is important to have a general as well as special purpose of communication./11/ Communication, when evaluating artwork with pupils, demonstrates that there is an interactive connection between the teacher, pupils and the artwork. This is a sensitive process because there are many factors that have an influence on the success of transferring artistically esthetic and subject-based ecological messages.

When evaluating artwork, teachers should communicate through establishing mutual relations. Pupils should receive a message that should have an impact on the pupils in accordance with the intention of the message. "The subject of the message has to contain an inter-subjective meaning and has to be relevant to the pupils. In this view, all the interests of the participants are equal; priority is possible only by democratic consensus." /12/. The teacher's role in evaluating contemporary art practices is to lead communication activities. When pupils receive the esthetic message, the communication loop joins together. This enables the development and shaping

of the pupil's relation to the environment, to life and to themselves.

When evaluating artworks, messages must go through communication channels, between the sender and the receiver in both directions so that the role of the teacher and pupils can interchange. Communication within the communication loop has to go two ways, has to be mutual./6/ "Relationship is the micro-element of the educational process on which the success of the educational activity depends." /13/. Inter-personal communication in evaluating contemporary art is composed of the subject, its verbalization and its nonverbal, relational and personal communicative point of view. This gives the spoken word meaning and power to influence. "Sincere teachers can achieve congruent, harmonized and sincere communication when the intended message balances with the message of their nonverbal behavior, and when the subject conforms to the teacher's relation to it and to the receiver of the message." /14/. When evaluating artwork, teachers will be better understood if they speak simply, clearly, concisely and interestingly. Their messages must be recognizable and usable with clearly emphasized meanings. They have to address pupils directly and personally. For the evaluation of artwork, two methods are suitable: those that come from specific communication, and those that come from esthetic communication. It is sensible to use at least three channels when evaluating contemporary artwork. Besides the visual and audible channels, the nature of contemporary art demands a kinesthetic channel, and sometimes also a scenting and tasting channel./15/

In evaluating planned artwork of a contemporary nature, the teacher must find a way and method of communicating that is adjusted to the developmental level of the pupils and their abilities./16/ "Communication between the teacher and pupils is possible if at least part of the meaning of the teacher's symbol balances with the part of the meaning that the symbol represents to the pupils. This allows both communicational participants to consciously actualize the same meanings." /17/. This presumption demands that the teacher has quality knowledge and a positive relation to contemporary art practices.

### **4 The communication paradox of contemporary art**

The communication paradox of contemporary art exists because contemporary art practices are in their essence communicative, and their subjects are connected to life, especially the different layers

of social life. Brejc /18/ states that for contemporary art, it is characteristic for artists to choose methods of conceptualism and social realism for their subjects. Contemporary art wants to communicate. This is different from the art of modernism, which was closing into itself, researching only itself and above all working on artistically formal problems. Contemporary art, however, opens outward and comments on the happenings around itself, always reinstating and emphasizing communication. The relationship between modernism and postmodernism is explained by Hardy: »However, adopting a constructive postmodern approach does not necessarily mean a rejection of all that the twentieth century had to offer, but an overlaying of a critical eye and language which challenges the conventions of modernism, while picking over its tastier morsels and revisiting all that modernism rejected.« /19/.

At the same time (as mentioned above), within the sphere of pedagogy, we are aware of a deep communication gap between contemporary art and the observer. This inability to communicate with contemporary art is bigger than the similar gaps that exist in classical art or modernism. This paradox stems from a lack of knowledge. Contemporary art uses all possible means of expression to present their subjects. Many of these methods may at first seem incomprehensible, even repulsive: Body Art, including exhibitionistic nude exposure and all the myriad ways to self-cripple oneself; Performance art in all its extensions; Site-Specific Sculpture, with its different phenomenal forms; and other similar methods – and this is mentioning only the most visible ones.

Overcoming the communicational paradox of contemporary art is a simple problem to solve. This is not only true within the sphere of pedagogy, but for communication between postmodern artwork and the observer in general. Whoever wants to establish a communication with contemporary artwork must achieve the following: (1) overcome the personal limits of their perspective of what art should be and (2) learn to read contemporary artistic codes with which contemporary art codifies its messages.

Concerning pedagogic work in schools, the task of the art teacher is to enable the pupils to overcome stereotypes about art and to teach them to read contemporary artworks. There exist no general rules on how to achieve this. In accordance with contemporary postmodern curriculums, there exist two autonomous situations for the teacher. In Jagodzinski's words: »how the artwork is structured and the effects of its viewing should remain the art educator's priority" /20/.

## 5 Communicative possibilities of contemporary art

With its conceptual direction and remarkable diversity, contemporary art offers innumerable possibilities to establish communicational channels between humans and cultural objects. Many strategies have been developed in recent years within the profession of pedagogy. On an empirical level, we have been researching the advantages contemporary art has to offer, with an emphasis on the communicational bonds between contemporary art and pupils. This research is continually being carried out on a population of Slovene primary school students (14 years old).

### 5.1 Methodology

The pupils' personal opinion toward individual contemporary art practices was researched using a scale of degree-points that were calculated from answers to our standardized poll questionnaire. If their relation to contemporary art was proved to be a positive one, it was considered an established communication. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions in the form of explicitly worded statements.

The following are a few sample statements: I would like to be an artist. Art does not interest me. Contemporary art deals with interesting problems. Art in today's world is needed. The answers were given using a 5-degree Likert's type scale (true, partly true, no opinion, partly false, false). The poll questionnaire was performed /21/ on a test sample of 30 pupils from 8<sup>th</sup> grade-level primary school students in Maribor.

The poll questionnaire had the following measurement characteristics:

#### Validity

To determine the validity we used the percentage of the explained variance with the first factor. The procedure of factorization with 30 variables explains 46,6 % of the total variance with the first factor, which satisfies the above stated criteria for the validity of our system of measurement (more than 20%).

#### Reliability

All the factors combined represent 63,7% of the total variance, which by the principal represented by  $r_{tt} = \sqrt{h^2}$  means that the system we used is reliable within a degree of  $r_{tt} = 0,798$ .

Further on, we expressed the reliability with the Cronbach coefficient, which amounts to  $\alpha = 0,958$ .

The coefficient shows sufficient reliability of our system ( $\alpha > 0,80$ ).

### Objectivity

We assured the objectivity of the poll by uniformly managing its implementation (the same instructions, available time etc.).

## 5.2 Findings

With the help of the system of measurement described above, we found that there are different views of establishing communication between pupils and contemporary artworks. The following is an introduction to the segment of our research that examined the external characteristics of contemporary art that allow quality communication.

We established different components of contemporary artworks that attract students (and therefore enable them start to communicate with the cultural object):

### Being visually interesting

Students get visually interested as soon as they see the artwork, independently of their knowledge of the conceptual background of this artwork.

Students are drawn by the interesting sight of hung submarine models (Chris Burden: All the Submarines of the USA, 1987), the gallery floor, fully covered by figures made of clay (Antony Gormley: The Field, 1989, 1991) or an interesting distribution of these figures. The teacher's explanation of the background of the message conveyed in the artwork only enlarges the students' interest in the artwork. New visual art technologies play an important part here. "By conventional art techniques, students recognize some new alternative visual art technologies; they broaden their understanding of contemporary visual art practice" /22/.

### Joining the incompatible

For example: an object made of totally unsuitable material.

In the case of Wim Delvoy's artwork called The Cement Truck (1991) the information about its origin is even more interesting for its presentation in the classroom. The artist employed twenty workers in an Indonesian jungle who spent eleven months constructing a lorry (truck) of normal size. By this act he exposed the problem of modern employment of cheap manpower

### The use of objects in an unusual way

The idea of covering the floor with vinyl records (Christian Marclay: Footsteps, 1989) seems interesting. This can be related to Milan Knizak, a Fluxus member. Vinyl records, which are easy to obtain, can be used in the classroom in a similar way.

### Interesting idea

As opposed to the above-mentioned paragraphs, the first impression of the artwork at first isn't that interesting to the students. Their motivation becomes aroused when the idea of the artwork is presented to them. Getting to know the installations, allows students to be drawn by authentic ideas of Ilya Kabakov, such as the combination of a public toilet and an apartment (The Toilet, 1991) or the strange idea of how to launch oneself into space from an apartment (The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment, 1981-89).

## 6. Conclusion

People within different disciplines of study are aware of the meaning and possibilities contemporary art has to offer in the field of developing streams of communication between cultural objects and the individual. These disciplines include: communication science, pedagogical theory, special didactics in the field of creativity, critical studies and postmodern theory. The theoretical presumptions involved are more and more often combined with deep empirical research. The research in which we developed the above mentioned system of measurement was the first to be implemented in Slovenia (2001).

Based on our findings, the changes in the paradigm are also appearing in curriculums nationwide (teaching plans for art education) as well as inside art didactics at higher-level university programs.

The successful incorporation of contemporary art practices into everyday art education in our primary schools will require teachers to receive a quality education. Future teachers will have to gain professional knowledge as well as didactic communication skills and be able to incorporate contemporary art practices into art education. All this will have to be done within the framework of the required school subjects. Permanent professional programs (improvement of qualifications) will have to offer more subjects with the above-mentioned topics. This will enable them to receive the quality professional and didactic knowledge that teachers need at work. We are aware that this is a long process. The first opportunity is appearing already

with the implementation of new programs in primary schools and universities.

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- /2/ For details about the goals of modern primary schools see: The White Book of Education in The Republic of Slovenia, 1995.
- /3/ Cole, I. (1996). Young People and Contemporary Art. in: Dawtrey, L. (Et.al.) (Ed.). (1996). Critical Studies and Modern Art. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. p.146.
- /4/ The processes of the perception and reception of artworks are components of art appreciation, and have creative characteristics. Kalavaris separates the process of art education into the following phases: intentional attention and horizon of expectation, intertwining of an observation with intellectual and emotional processes, first valuation, and global synthetic experience, analytically-critical evaluation of individual layers of an artwork, valuation synthesis, and conclusion of reception. (Karlavaris, 1991, pg. 101).
- /5/ Duh, M. (2008). Likovna vzgoja v funkciji razvijanja ekološke zavesti otrok in mladostnikov. V (ur. Duh M.) Razvojno-raziskovalni koncepti ekologije od vrta do fakultete in naprej v prakso. Maribor, Pedagoška fakulteta.
- /6/ Original artworks are mostly accessible to pupils in galleries and museums, rarely in school exhibition halls. Some original contemporary artworks are available for pupils in virtual galleries in the form of computer graphics, computer animation, video spots.
- /7/ Blohm, M. (1995). Vermittlung zeitgenössischer Kunst in Kunstunterricht - Probleme, Fragen und Denkalternativen. Heidelberg: RAAbits Kunst. Abteilung V, Beitrag 1.
- /8/ If we begin with the fact that art appreciation is accessible to everybody (although not to the same extent) and that it is possible and necessary to develop better accessibility to works of art in primary schools that bring them systematically closer to the pupils, then the possibility exists, given suitable methods of evaluating artwork, to achieve appropriate pupil-responses to works of art that are presented to them.
- /9/ Črčinovič-Rozman, J., Duh, M. (2007). Contemporary forms of visual and audio media in the function of the simultaneous experience of Art and music. Informatologia, 40, št. 4, str 276-283.
- /10/ Zupančič, T. (2006). Metoda likovnopedagoškega koncepta. Ljubljana: Zavod republike Slovenije za šolstvo., p.29
- /11/ Vreg (1990, pg. 20) separates communication by purpose. According to this theory, this purpose is established: (1) when a messenger wants to message something to the receiver of a communication and establish an agreement with that communication partner and (2) when the messenger tries to achieve particular goals (personal, group or social) and start a communication activity because of particular interests.
- /12/ Strmčnik, F. (1999). Značilnosti pouka. Sodobna pedagogika, 50, št. 3, p.129

- /13/ Bratanič, M. (1990) Mikropedagogija. Interakcijsko-komunikacijski aspekt odgoja. Zagreb, Školska knjiga., p.31
- /14/ Duh, M. (2004). Vrednotenje kot didaktični problem pri likovni vzgoji. Maribor, Pedagoška fakulteta., p.68
- /15/ Contemporary art, with its performances, installations and analogous artistic interpretations of ecological topics often activate sensual modalities. Some artistic forms demand interaction on the part of the observers. In this way the observers become co-creators of the artwork. Often, this involves more than one sensual channel; such art works can activate not only the common visual and audible channels, but also the kinesthetic, scenting and tasting channels.
- /16/ It is possible to achieve a higher level of communicative understanding when both communication partners share the same experiences, the same language and have a mutual system of values.
- /17/ Duh, M. (2004). Vrednotenje kot didaktični problem pri likovni vzgoji. Maribor, Pedagoška fakulteta., p.72
- /18/ Brejc, T. (2000). Kuratorji in globalna umetnost v leri. Ampak, 1,2, p. 45.
- /19/ Hardy, T. (Ed.). (2006). Art Education in a Postmodern World: Collected Essays., p.7
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