

Visual events and the friendly eye: modes of educating vision in new educational settings in Danish art galleries

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Abstract

New, experimental educational settings such as 'art laboratories', 'digital workshops' and 'theme-based tours' are important to the processes of change towards more inclusive practices, which have been initiated in many Danish art galleries. While traditional gallery education was constructed in order to stimulate the 'disciplined eye' or the 'aesthetic eye' of the visitors, this article aims to discuss the practices of looking encouraged by contemporary and experimental educational projects. The first part of the article develops a theoretical perspective on educational settings conceived as visual events, and it discusses how 'the desiring eye' of some constructivist approaches, along with traditional practices of looking, have contributed to the formation of the modern, autonomous individual. The second part of the article analyses two cases from Danish art galleries and, inspired by Mieke Bal, proposes the 'friendly eye' as a possible dialogical and collective practice of looking that can be stimulated in educational settings.

Key words: education, art galleries, vision, visual culture, Denmark

Over the last ten to fifteen years, there has been an increasing focus on the development of new and experimental forms of education in art galleries. In Denmark, recent initiatives such as 'Curator for a day' at Trapholt, Museum of Modern Art and Design in Kolding (Grøn 2005), 'The Laboratory of Aesthetics' at Esbjerg Art Museum¹ and 'The Laboratory of Art' at Arken, Museum of Modern Art near Copenhagen (Illeris 2008) have in important ways contributed to the development of new and different ways of perceiving the educational encounter between audiences, artworks, exhibitions, museums, educators and, in some cases, artists.

At the root of these educational initiatives lies a conception of the relationship between art galleries and their audiences in which visitors' lived experiences of the artworks on display has become central. Through the introduction of constructivist approaches to learning, the traditional educational focus on knowledge transmission from teacher to student has shifted to a focus on how educators and students in collaboration can frame and stimulate the students' individual and/or collective learning processes (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 31).

On a more general level, the introduction of experimental educational settings is related to an important tendency among Western museums to initiate radical changes towards more inclusive practices, based on dynamic and complex understandings of the relationship between learning and social change (Sandell 2002). Even though these processes seem to have begun somewhat later in art galleries than in other kinds of museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 4), in Denmark, as well as in other Scandinavian countries, many galleries have now started to put considerable effort into experimental initiatives directed at social groups other than their traditional core audiences (Illeris 2008: 7-10). Mission statements centred on user experiences and educational initiatives such as 'laboratories', 'workshops', 'stages' etc. are being conceived as increasingly important for the image of the museum as a whole. Furthermore, the new and positive attitude towards education in a broad sense has increased the number and importance of educational staff, and in certain galleries, like the Danish National Gallery, staff from the educational department often collaborate with staff from other departments throughout the

process of exhibition planning, hanging and promotion (Illeris 2007: 44).

The focus on learner-centred activities has been further encouraged by an increasing number of research projects in museum and gallery education, which in many cases have been carried out in collaboration between galleries and researchers. Inspired by British research in museum education and by poststructuralist and deconstructivist perspectives introduced, for example, by 'new museology', several reports and articles have been published in the Nordic countries on educational settings in art galleries.² In Denmark, an increasing number of publications take the form of evaluations of new initiatives through qualitative inquiries among the staff and learners involved (e.g. Hjort and Larsen, 2003; Bøje et al. 2005; Illeris 2007, 2008), while others aim to introduce new theoretically based understandings of learning in galleries (e.g. Christensen 2000; Hansen 2000; Illeris 2003, 2004a, 2006; Rung 2008).

In this article, I will try to both delineate a theoretical perspective and relate this perspective to two empirical cases. My focus will be on the ways in which educational settings conceived as 'visual events' influence the 'eyes' of the learners involved, through organized interactions between gestures of showing, acts of looking and strategies of establishing visual relationships. In the first part of the article, I will develop a theoretical understanding of the positions involved in visual events and briefly examine the practices of looking that have traditionally dominated the education of vision in art galleries. In the second part, I will discuss the modes of educating vision which are encouraged in two cases, which I believe represent some of the most advanced examples of experimental, learner-centred educational settings in art galleries in the Copenhagen area. The case studies will also serve as examples of how educators can stimulate an alternative practice of looking in gallery education, based on reciprocal exchanges between viewers and artworks. Inspired by Mieke Bal (1996) and her use of the theories of feminist moral philosopher Lorraine Code (1991) I define this practice as 'the friendly eye'.

Part I – Gallery settings as visual events: theoretical approaches

Visual culture

The theoretical perspectives guiding the article are located in the field of visual culture studies, a recently established and still very open and dynamic area of research, which includes scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds such as sociologists, literary scholars, media theorists, art historians and museologists. A key issue in the study of visual culture studies is the scrupulous problematization of those positivist assumptions concerning the act of seeing as providing a 'natural' and 'objective' access to the world around us. There has been a growing interest in understanding vision as it is influenced by a number of historically and socially constructed 'practices', 'strategies' or 'screens' that influence what and how we see (e.g. Sturken and Cartwright 2001, Elkins 2003). While the discipline of art history has traditionally concentrated on the study of the artwork as a solitary *object* which can be exhibited, interpreted and understood by the historian, but which does not play an active role itself, scholars occupied with art from a visual culture perspective, such as Svetlana Alpers (1984, 1991), Norman Bryson (1991) and Barbara Stafford (1999), have, albeit in very different ways, studied how certain practices of looking are constructed and maintained in encounters between art and its publics. Furthermore, scholars with a museological focus, such as Carol Duncan (1995) and Andrew McClellan (2004) have discussed questions regarding visual culture through studies of the ways in which viewer positions are constructed in museums and galleries through social relationships between visitors and museums, exhibitions and hangings.

While most of the studies mentioned above aim to construct genealogical perspectives on practices of looking of the present through explorations of material from the past, only few studies in visual culture focus explicitly on the ways in which *contemporary* art forms and/or expository practices position their viewers. Furthermore, rather than using empirical material generated from ethnographically inspired case studies, for example, in the form of observations and interviews like the ones I use in this article, most visual culture studies seem to prefer analyses of images and other 'ready-made' visual phenomena.³

Visual encounters as events

In order to frame the understanding of the dynamics of the complex interactions that take place between the viewer, the viewed and the various contexts of viewing in encounters with works of art, I will use the term 'visual event'. Inspired by social constructivist epistemology, I understand visual events as constructions constituted through interactions between a limited number, *not* of empirically existent visitors, artworks, hangings or surroundings, but of possible *positions*, which often shift dynamically among the partakers in the event: looking positions ('subjects'), looked upon positions ('objects'), framing positions ('contexts') and vision positions ('eyes') (Illeris 2003, 2004). As Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal contend in their seminal article *Semiotics and art history* (1991), visual events in art galleries can be analysed by departing from all of these positions, which semiotically speaking can all be said to function as 'signs', as can the visual event itself (Bal and Bryson, 1991).

To further explore the ways in which certain 'eyes' are established and maintained through the organization of visual events in gallery settings, I will turn to another important text by Mieke Bal, namely her 1996 book *Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*. Both in the introductory chapter and in the nine essays contained in the book, Bal constructs an idea of the functioning of visual events similar to the one outlined above. However, while my *educational* approach basically takes its point of departure from an idea of equivalence and exchange between viewing positions, Bal's *cultural analytic* approach is based on a vision of viewing positions as fundamentally asymmetrical and intertwined with relationships of power and dominance. Inspired by the French linguist Émile Benveniste (1971), Bal characterizes the basic positions involved in gallery settings as 'persons' in a discourse, where the first person is the one 'speaking', the second person is the audience, who is 'talked to' and 'listening', and the third person is the, present or not present, object 'talked about'.

Bal points to the first person, not as the museum as institution, physical appearance or 'context', but as the position which holds the 'expository agency' of the situation, the one that through certain forms of display is visually pointing to the artwork as well as to how to look at the artwork. In Bal's words, expository agency '...includes practices like constative language use, visual pointing (display in the narrow sense), alleging examples, laying out arguments on the basis of narratives, mapping and laying bare' (Bal 1996:8). In the gallery setting, the 'first person' most often conceals her/himself behind 'realistic narratives', which appear to tell the 'truth' about the artworks through self-evident gestures of display. This self-determined 'erasure' of the expository agency as a visible component in the visual event almost becomes an act of violence, both in front of the audience, which is deprived of the possibility to question the 'expertise' of the cultural authority, and in front of the artwork, which is silenced by the expository agency's naturalized and universalized discourses.

The 'second person' is the visitor, the viewer, the imaginary reader or respondent implicit in the display. According to Bal, 'this audience tends to go along with the assumed general meaning of the gesture of exposing: to believe, to appreciate and to enjoy' (Bal 1996:8). Unlike the artwork though, the viewer occasionally has the possibility of becoming 'first person'; the "second person", implicitly, has a potential "first person" position as a respondent; his or her response *to* the exposing is the primary and decisive condition *for* the exposing to happen at all' (Bal 1996: 4).

The 'third person' in Bal's analytical model is the object, the artwork, that is talked about, but not talked to, showing everything and receiving nothing in return: 'The "third person", silenced by the discursive situation, is the most important element, the only one *visible*. This visibility and this presence paradoxically make it possible to make statements about the object that do not apply to it; [...] (1996: 4). Bal's account includes a number of striking examples of the ways in which artworks are 'silenced' by the discourses produced by expository agency through gestures such as texts and hangings. A special focus in her analyses regards paintings and other representations of naked or half-naked women, who have been 'silenced' through (male) art theorists' objectifying discourses, but to whom Bal (1996: chapters 6-9) confers a convincing voice as active partakers and possible first persons in visual events.

Altogether, Bal's analyses of the existing organization of visual events in gallery settings give us an unprecedented understanding of power relations in gallery settings, which can be

very useful for educational purposes. Through her readings of positioning in visual events, Bal shows that the dynamics between positions consist mainly in fixed and hieratically ordered ascriptions: '...a "first person", the expositor, tells a "second person", the visitor, about a "third person", the object of display' (Bal 1996: 3-4). Furthermore, as we shall see in the second part of this article, Bal uses her definitions of traditional viewing positions to propose alternative understandings of power relations through the introduction of 'friendship' as a new practice of looking, where both viewers and artworks are conceived as 'second persons' in a dialogical relationship.

Educational settings as visual events

While Bal's analyses concentrate on what I define as 'gallery settings', meaning the visual events that take place between the anonymous 'general public' and the artworks displayed by the gallery, the term 'educational setting' indicates encounters between artworks and a circumscribed group of 'learners' organized and guided by a specialized staff within a defined frame of time. The educational setting thereby doubles the positions of the encounter between viewer and artwork within the gallery setting, as analysed by Bal, but with the important difference that in educational settings, it is not only the artwork that is visible, but also the cultural authority, represented by the specialized 'guide' or 'educator', and the audience, personified by the group of learners. While the positions in traditional expository practices tend to remain fixed because of certain institutional practices, it is my hypothesis that, because all the positions are visible, in the educational setting the positions are more open to negotiation, experiments and changes.

In fact, even though, of course, it should never be forgotten that cultural authority, and thereby the ultimate 'first personhood', is held by the institutional framing, the educational setting is often characterized by a certain autonomy, made up by roles and rituals, which historically speaking tend to become more and more detached from the gallery setting. Because the whole situation so to speak is 'on display', staged by the expository agency but meant to function by itself, I contend that there has been an increasing freedom to experiment with different viewing positions, and thereby with different educations of vision, in educational settings. Actually, I think that it is exactly because educational settings, at least up till now, have been considered more or less as niches, which are not really part of the gallery and its policies, that they have acquired the status of autonomous 'signs'. When it comes to contemporary educational settings, the signs may sometimes, almost, be spoken of as interactive 'performances' or 'artworks' in their own right (Illeris 2003).

By way of further exploring the relationship between the visual event of the gallery setting and the visual event of the educational setting, I will now turn to a brief genealogical analysis of the ways or modes educationing of vision that have traditionally been encouraged in these settings. Through a strategically sharp differentiation between three dominant vision positions in art galleries: 'the disciplined eye', 'the aesthetic eye' and 'the desiring eye'⁴, I will discuss how the art gallery, through the organization of visual events, has contributed to educating the practise of looking by visitors according to certain ideals of seeing. Furthermore, I will develop my argument concerning Bal's thesis. Thus, although, as Bal contends, 'first personhood' is assigned beforehand in gallery settings, in educational settings, the positions of first, second and third persons have been challenged throughout modernity.

Education of the disciplined eye

The disciplined eye is the prevailing eye in visual events, where the 'second person' unconditionally tries to adopt the prevailing practice of looking proposed by the 'first person', the expository agency, while watching and pointing to the holder of the 'third personhood', the object. Historically speaking, the education of the disciplined eye is linked to enlightenment ideas of the museum as an educational institution where paintings and sculptures are selected because of their indisputable value as masterpieces and hung according to 'educational' principles taken from the logics of the new 'science' of art history: school, style, nationality and chronology (McClellan 1994: 4; Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 191).

In the gallery settings of the disciplined eye, the expository agency is only visible through the unquestionable authority of the selection of the artworks, the spatial organization and the information provided to visitors according to principles that are meant to guide the docile eyes of spectators towards a correct understanding of the cultural and artistic value of art according to their historical and national context. The artworks ideally do not attempt to speak for themselves, the 'best' artworks being those that adhere to ideals of absorption in their own world, which the viewer is only allowed to admire from the 'outside': first and foremost, classic sculptures and modern painting from the renaissance and onwards (Bryson 1983:112-14, Fried 1980:107-8).

The ideal educational setting of the disciplined eye is the one conforming to the gallery setting most closely. In this setting, first personhood will be held by the museum or gallery *guide*, who will be expected to act as a representative of the institution and to transmit its views and values in an 'objective' and 'natural' way without asking questions or seeking a dialogue with the audience. The learner is thereby fixed in a second person position. As such she, tends to consider herself as a *pupil*, an empty vessel who should be educated according to the rules of high culture, and who therefore expects to be taught how to look at art according to the rules and systems of the representatives of this culture. As in the gallery setting, the third person position becomes that of the artwork, which is talked *about*, and not *with* or *to*.

However, in practice, because of the visibility of the guide, and her direct contact with the learners, the adoption of the disciplined eye is questioned in guided tours both by the learners, who may start to ask questions of the guide, and/or by the guide herself. The guide may start to adopt alternative forms of expository agency, or may occasionally hand over first personhood to the learners or even, more rarely, to the artwork. In fact, guides are often regarded with suspicion by curators and other gallery staff for what 'they do' with the artworks, 'disturbing' the original intention of the curators⁵ (Eisner and Dobbs 1986: 20-22).

Education of the aesthetic eye

While the disciplined eye is the desired outcome of intentional initiatives of curators and guides, the aesthetic eye, on the contrary, is a practice of looking that considers itself to be connected to natural and innate faculties of the individual beholder. In fact, the visual organization constructed to meet and stimulate the aesthetic eye is the white cube gallery of modern art, which is conceived to allow visitors to contemplate the artworks without the disturbing interruptions of the openly educational measures of the galleries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Typically, in the gallery of modern art, the eye is freed from 'unnecessary' constraints to favour an unmediated and highly intensified encounter between a limited number of carefully selected artworks and the audience. In a certain sense, these events intend to restore 'first personhood' to the artworks by leaving them alone and 'free' to enter a visual dialogue with the viewers. In another sense, though, the artworks are silenced in a more subtle way by the expository agency, because, if we follow the prevailing discourses of high modernism, the scope of hanging is not really about establishing an exchange between the work of art and the viewer, but rather about inducing a heightened state of intense absorption on the part of the visitor. Here, the role of the artworks is not to 'speak' about anything, but only 'to be' (Duncan 1995:16-17).

Even the audience seems to be left alone in the gallery settings of modern art. With almost no guidance from texts, labels or chronological or thematic hangings, the visitor must perform a first person kind of viewing based on his own intuitive feelings and preferences. Because of the invisibility of the real first person, the expository agency, who hides behind apparently 'neutral' white walls and who does not give any guidelines or explanations for the displays, visitors, when directly or indirectly asked to adopt an aesthetic eye often refuse, claiming that they 'don't understand art' (Bourdieu and Darbel 1969).

The most typical educational setting constructed to enable the aesthetic eye of the viewers, is that of the *workshop*, a space separated from the exhibition, where learners can experiment with the language of expression themselves, without disturbing the 'sacred' halls of the exhibitions. In line with the aesthetic ideas of gallery settings, the aim of this educational setting is to free the intuitive forces of the learner by letting her explore her own creative vein,

and thereby to stimulate an intuitive, empathic and truly aesthetic eye in the relationship with the artworks of the exhibition. In the early workshops, established during the nineteenth seventies and eighties, participants were in fact asked to identify with the artist, and the workshop leader, often an artist herself, acted more as a facilitator than as a teacher. As a consequence, in educating the aesthetic eye, the education officer strove to negate her position of first personhood and to hand it over to the participants, who, even if they might not understand the subtle expectations involved, were supposed to be the 'real' authority in creative matters.

Because they physically take place outside the gallery setting, it comes as no surprise that workshops have tended to live their own lives through the creation of visual events detached from the activities of the main gallery setting. In fact, quite different workshop practices and 'methods' have developed from the seventies and up to the present according to the different ideas and ideals of the workshop leader and staff⁶. Following the discourses of what in Denmark came to be known as *Formning* ('Creative arts') (Illeris 2002: 119-161), what in many cases has counted as success, has been whether the participants 'were creative', 'had experiences' and eventually 'freed themselves from dominance by others'. This ideal can still be found in Danish workshop pedagogy (e.g. Ringsted and Froda 2008: 40-43) but is now generally combined with a much more defined demand of learning, as I will discuss below.

Education of the desiring eye

The third dominant practice of looking that is stimulated in gallery settings, the desiring eye, can be compared with the education of both the disciplined eye and the aesthetic eye. As with the education of the disciplined eye, it is openly educational, meaning that the expository agency considers the audience to be *learners*, and like the education of the aesthetic eye, there is a strong interest in visitors' individualized relationship to the artworks based on their personal preferences. Nevertheless, unlike the other two practices, in educating the desiring eye, the expository agency tries actively to stimulate the visitors' first personhood by designing gallery settings and educational settings which aim directly at meeting the visitors' motivation and desire to learn.

The gallery settings of the desiring eye take their point of departure from the growing recognition in the last 10 to 15 years of the failure of the modern museum to meet the needs of the large groups of visitors who were excluded by the elitist demands of the aesthetic eye. In fact, the recently introduced notion of *difference*, both at a sociological level between social groups and at a psychological level between different 'intelligences' and 'learning styles', has become central in the development of the idea that every person has a natural desire to learn but that this desire should be met in personalized ways according to a range of social and psychological factors (e.g. Hein 1998: 155-179). To strengthen this approach, some socially engaged art museums have begun to think of themselves more as 'centres of learning' than as cultural authorities. They may, for example, offer a range of approaches to the artworks, from experimental hangings and alternative forms of guided tours to community activities outside the museum walls (Hooper-Greenhill 2007:13). By adopting this view, the independence of visual events organized by the gallery settings from those organized in educational settings is, at least potentially, inverted. In contrast to 'educational' and 'aesthetic' galleries, with the education of the desiring eye, it is actually the gallery setting that can be said to adapt to and borrow from the educational setting. In these cases, the visibility of the 'first person' typical of the educational setting also becomes a goal of the gallery setting, which openly tries to expose and even problematize the kinds of reflections which precede a hanging along with its materials and sometimes even the spatial and visual organizations displayed by the cultural authority.

The kinds of educational settings that have been created more specifically for the education of the desiring eye take the form of open 'laboratories' or 'projects', where different groups of visitors (and former non-visitors) are invited to shape their own learning processes through activities that often challenge the museum's traditional practices of looking (Rung 2008: 5-6). In these settings, the learners are asked to position themselves not only as viewers but as some kind of 'cultural authority', for example, by making proposals for new hangings, texts or even art forms to be hypothetically included in the gallery. The point of departure is highly individual: through learner-centred and personalized exercises, each learner is supposed to

take full responsibility for her own 'eyes' through an attentive registration and analysis of what she sees, what she feels and what she thinks, while less attention is given to the artwork's possible responses (Illeris 2006a: 20). The role of the educator can be likened to that of the midwife in that she helps the learners to 'give birth' to their individual learning desire, and of the cultural operator, who contextualizes the processes within the aim of the project.

In the wider scheme of things, the education of the desiring eye can be connected to late modern educational ideals of 'lifelong learning' (Illeris 2006a), 'identity production' (Hooper-Greenhill 2007) and 'self-formation' (Rung 2008) through learning processes that extend far beyond learning about art into wider processes about how '... to shape ourselves as uniquely and originally as possible' (Rung 2008:5). In this perspective, the presumed 'first personhood' of the learner's desiring eye becomes an almost absolute requisite in gallery education, while in the most radical cases, the positions of the artworks and even of the gallery institution itself become that of 'third person' 'objects', which are visible, but not allowed to speak.

Summing up part I

In conclusion to the first part of the article, I would like to sum up three important points:

- 1) The relationships established between the gallery setting and the educational setting not only show an increasing independence of the educational setting. From the guided tours of the education of the disciplined eye to the relatively independent 'artistic' workshops of the education of the aesthetic eye, there seems to be a certain tendency in art galleries today to let the highly individualized educational setting of the desiring eye function as an inspiration for, and thereby in a certain sense precede, new conceptions of gallery settings.
- 2) The relations between 'first', 'second' and 'third person' positions in the educational settings tend to move from the organization of visual events, where 'first personhood' is exclusively held by the guide, towards a willingness to give this position to the learners. In the education of the aesthetic eye, though, this intention remains highly ambivalent, while in the education of the desiring eye, a series of new ways of giving over expository agency to the learners is explored through an appeal to the learners' desire and need for self-formation.
- 3) Finally, it seems clear that the three dominant eyes, in spite of their obvious differences, can be said to have one important thing in common: they all contribute to the education of the prevailing practices of looking of the modern, autonomous and educated subject, capable of dominating both the world around her, her inner life and emotions and her relationship to and interactions with the surrounding world. The disciplined eye is educated to apply objectifying practices of looking through distanced and 'scientifically correct' approaches. The aesthetic eye is further individualized through observations and expressions of personal intuitions and emotions connected to vision. And the desiring eye is educated to add even more complex forms of vision to the other two, including possible relationships between individual ways of seeing and perceived needs for further development in never-ending processes of self-formation.

Part II

Speak Up

It is Monday morning and a vagabond finds a woman lying dead in a narrow street. She still looks fresh except for the bruises and the torn clothes. He finds a book in her pocket and opens it to the last page. It says:

"Lonely ... Oh, so lonely. Have just been to the hairdresser. It is a little too short, but that's the way it is. I think I'll go out tonight. But not to one of those fancy places. Too dull. People with no sense of humour. It's all a show. I hate being there. No, I think I'll go to The Blue Lagoon, but then I'll have to go through the

dark alley. I really don't like it. I once heard of someone who was attacked there. But I am not afraid. I have nothing to lose anyway. Dear Diary, I am so alone. I am so lonely".

This short and dramatic narrative is transcribed and translated from a soundtrack produced by L, S and M at Arken Museum of Modern Art, located South of Copenhagen. These three, 15 to 16-year-old boys, were participants in a 'digital workshop' called 'Speak Up' arranged by the educational staff in connection with the American artist Duane Hanson's exhibition 'Sculptures of the American Dream', which took place 27 January – 3 June 2007. The basic idea, framing the educational setting, was to stimulate the visiting school classes in the construction of visual events that would allow artist Duane Hanson's lifelike sculptures to 'speak' through the adoption of specific eyes selected and created by the learners. The workshop was organized in six phases with a total duration of 4 lessons (3 hours):

- 1) The class was given a short introduction to the exhibition, with an explicit focus on different ways of approaching the artworks using a few sculptures, selected by the students, as examples. The exemplifying approaches were based both on semiotic readings of the various forms of signs present in the sculptures, and on the creation of visual relationships through the selection of a particular practice of looking, for example, the practice of the art historian, a friend or a detective. No biographical, art historical, sociological or other more traditional introductions to Duane Hanson's *oeuvre* were offered.
- 2) In smaller groups, and equipped with small digital dictaphones, the students were asked to 'give voice' to one or more selected sculptures by establishing visual relationships based on semiotic readings and by using particular practices of looking of their own choice.
- 3) Each group was given the chance to edit their audiofiles on a computer, to cut and to reorganize their sound tracks and eventually, to add new recordings and sound effects.
- 4) The students presented the sculptures they had chosen to their classmates together with their edited sound productions.
- 5) The students discussed and evaluated the process and the learning outcomes, guided by the educators.
- 6) The soundtracks were uploaded onto the Arken blog on the Internet⁷.

In an interview, Lise Sattrup, the education officer responsible for the project, explains the connection between this kind of educational setting and the development of different practices of looking, by pointing to the three concepts of looking, positioning and narration: *looking* carefully at the sculptures to understand what and how they communicate, taking a conscious *viewer position* in the relationship with the artwork through the selection of an 'eye', and constructing a *narration*, which explores the particular visual event created through practices of looking and positioning. Sattrup also explains how the project started with some fundamental reflections on educational settings in art galleries:

How do we make this about art? How do we make them enter the galleries and look at the art? How can we avoid having them expect to experience the artworks, but actually finding themselves closed in a computer room?

And, she continues:

When they had to give voices to the sculptures, we were very focused on the eyes they used. We started with a half-hour tour, asking them to choose a sculpture and then talk about it and about different ways of looking at it. What if it was a friend standing here talking to it? And what if... you chose different positions to enter? We talked about the work, but we also started a kind of role play to try to put the different eyes into motion.

Summarizing Sattrup's statements in the interview, the educational aims of Speak Up are as follows:

- To engage the students through participatory activities that take place mainly at the exhibitions rather than in isolated laboratories and workshops.
- To construct 'settings' that make it possible to establish relationships between groups of students and artworks of the students' own choice.
- To give voices to the artworks through the students' construction of narratives based on different 'eyes' in the creation of relationships between students and artworks.
- To stimulate shared metareflection through explicit discussions of the positioning of the educators, the students and the artworks in the educational setting.

The transcription of the soundtrack produced by the three boys provides a more concrete notion of the kind of learning processes that actually occurred within the groups. In 'giving voice' to two of Duane Hanson's sculptures, the boys did not apply a disciplined eye from the 'outside', like an art historian or even a semiotician might have done. Nor did they turn to the subjective forms of viewing of the aesthetic or the desiring eye. Rather, they chose to explore the 'eyes' of the sculptures themselves, especially those of the strangled woman, whose 'diary' actually constitutes a vivid piece of female narrative, making the sculpture 'come to life' in terms of what one could call its 'own premises'. In this way, the students actually succeeded in entering a dialogue with and between the sculptures by creating a visual event based on both the communicative signs present in the sculptures and the experimental employment of the sculpture's 'eyes', while reflecting upon the woman's own life. I also find it particularly interesting that the boys chose to explore a first person narrative of a *female* figure, thereby seeking a dialogue with an artwork representing something very different from their own life experience.

Altogether, the visual event created by the boys appears to be in clear opposition to the traditional visual events in museums analyzed by Bal. While a typical 'set up' of a gallery event is that of a male viewer watching a painting of a more or less 'defenceless' female figure without allowing this figure to speak or participate, in Speak Up, the artwork, an equally female and 'defenceless' figure is given a voice of its own and is thereby conferred the right to enter into a dialogue with the viewer, who has in turn changed position from a spectator to a partaker/constructor of the event.

Friendship as a practice of looking

'The mode of vision I am trying to describe is not an archaeology but an epistemology: a different way of getting to know' (Bal 1996: 285). A crucial aim in Mieke Bal's analysis of museums, displays, and displayed objects is to find ways in which she can enter into a genuine dialogue with them by applying dialogical modes of vision. Inspired by the feminist moral philosopher Lorraine Code (1991), Bal is interested in finding a way to overcome the 'third person narrative', which positions the artwork as an object, and introduce 'second personhood' as the central position for both the viewer and the artwork, meaning that both reciprocally constitute and position each other through exchanges. Instead of the focus promoted by most educators and philosophers upon the person's autonomy and self-containment as the main goal of identity formation, second personhood sees human beings as positively relying on intimate relationships.

Following Code, Bal (1993:400) contends that the viewing position of second personhood is best characterized as a position *friendship*. In accordance with this position I would like to purpose a fourth practice of looking defined by dialogically oriented forms of vision, which I call *the friendly eye*. The friendly eye constitutes a practice, which ideally allows the viewers, the educator, and the artwork to position themselves as 'second persons' in dialogical and sympathetic visual interactions with each other. In this way the friendly eye differs clearly from the disciplined eye, which unconditionally accepts the first personhood of the expository agency; from the aesthetic eye, that seeks absorption by assigning a silent first personhood-position to the artwork; and from the desiring eye, which urges the learners to consider themselves as 'first persons' in their (supposed) individualized project of self formation.

The explicit goal of the application of the friendly eye in educational settings, is to find a way to construct more equal forms of collective exchanges, where both 'subjects' and 'objects' are allowed to 'look', 'speak' and 'perform'. Thereby it is possible to make students understand how different and more empathetic practices of looking can be actively constructed through the assignment of viewing positions, diverse from those traditionally employed in museums and galleries. One way in which the friendly eye can be stimulated in educational settings, as my cases show, is through the conscious 'staging' of dialogical viewer positions. Through the construction of narratives, visualisations, role playing etc., dialogical relationships between viewer and artwork can be stimulated and adopted and power relations in relation to vision and visuality can be discussed.

Interestingly Sattrup reported that a key issue in the discussions with the learners that concluded each session in the Speak Up workshop is whether it is 'really permissible to look at art this way' without being taught about the theoretical and historical facts of art and without having to decipher and analyze the formal elements of the pictures, the artists' intentions or their own personal reactions to the work. In her opinion, the feeling of doing something almost forbidden has to do with the question of learning:

...if you ask them afterwards what they have learned, they have difficulties telling you. It is almost like if I should make them reflect about what they learn [...] but the playful pleasure they experience is basically what motivates them to engage with the works. What we see, is that they care about the work and that they use much more time to find out what it actually is about.

Even if Speak Up was not explicitly based on an idea of 'the friendly eye', I do think that the setting could be used as an example of how to engage and experiment with this kind of second person looking. Furthermore, I think that giving voice to artworks, whether through sound, images, performance or text, can be a way to challenge the individualization associated with dominant ways of educating vision and especially with that of the desiring eye. To further deepen this point I will conclude by giving another example of an experimental educational setting, taken from the u.l.k. in the Danish National Gallery.

u.l.k

Are you ready to be challenged?

Welcome to the u.l.k. – Young People's Art Laboratories – where you, together with other youngsters, get in touch with art. Discover, share and create new knowledge and new art. Get challenged, exploit the opportunity and give us your version about how you think art should be taught and understood.

This passage is taken from the introductory folder to u.l.k., a new platform for art at the Danish National Gallery directed at young people between 12 and 20. On its website⁸, u.l.k. describes itself as a 'combination of physical facilities *onsite* (classrooms, medialab, mobile computers, digital cameras etc.) and virtual facilities *online*: this site'. Occupying a part of the right wing on the ground floor of the large National Gallery building, u.l.k. *onsite* presents itself to the occasional visitor as a series of connected rooms, characterized by a mixture of (more or less abandoned) activities in progress, artworks, computers, screens etc. On the Internet, the 'community site' of u.l.k. *online* presents itself in an invitation to users to follow a number of intertwined patches among personal presentations, presentations of artworks, projects, comments etc.

u.l.k. *onsite* features a series of activities, which can be divided into two groups: open laboratories and events, where everyone can participate and educational sessions for groups of students. The activities in the open laboratory generally adhere to the educational setting of the workshop, independent of the rest of the museum and focused on individualized activities such as making your own pictures, discussing your own artworks etc. The teaching sessions, on the contrary, combine a dialogue-based guided tour and a practical exercise in the

exhibitions. The theme of the year 2007-2008, chosen by the 'art pilots', a group of young people who have worked together with the gallery staff to realize u.l.k., is presented like this:

How do you get into the picture? A session about portraits and identity.

What is identity, and how can one picture or represent one's own identity? The gallery contains lots of portraits and self-portraits – from paintings and sculptures to photos and videos – which show similarities and differences in the rendering of human identity in different periods. That's the point of departure for this session, where the students create portraits/self-portraits by themselves after a tour in the gallery. During the session we touch upon what surroundings, colours, light and symbols or props mean to our experience of the person in the portrait. The students' photos are uploaded to the u.l.k. site, where the class or individual learner makes a profile before the visit.

In December 2007 and January 2008 I was allowed to observe two of these teaching sessions. Both sessions took place on Wednesday evenings, when the Gallery is open until 8 p.m., and both groups came from voluntary afternoon programmes for young people and were very small: the first group consisted of five students and one teacher, and the second group of three students and one teacher. In both sessions, the education officer was Nana Bernhardt, the head of the museum's school services.

In the following section, I will focus on a specific example taken from the first session: the encounter of the group with a Rococo portrait of the Danish King Frederik V and two of the students' self-portraits which were inspired by that encounter. I have chosen this encounter because I think it constitutes another example of how educational settings can stimulate complex visual dialogues between the work of art and the students based on the idea of a 'friendly eye'. In contrast to the spoken narratives in *Speak Up*, the dialogue of the portraits and identity is exclusively based on images.

Frederik V

The session begins in the u.l.k. laboratories where the students are invited to sit down on Fatboy bean bags and watch the video *No man is an Island* by Jesper Just⁹. After having watched the video a couple of times and having written down and briefly discussed their impressions, the group walks out of u.l.k. and into the 'real' museum to look at the king's portrait (C.G. Pilo: *Portrait of Frederik V in Anointing Dress*, ca. 1750, (fig. 1)). The education officer asks the group to come up with some new key words in relation to this work, and the young people immediately start to



Fig. 1. C. G. Pilo, Portrait of Frederik V in Anointing Dress, ca. 1750, (courtesy Danish National Gallery).

discuss and ask questions. The main issue discussed is how the king presents himself to the viewer in relation to the demonstration of power and in relation to ideals of masculinity. Nana introduces the idea of 'an artsy-fartsy king', but she leaves relatively much of the talking to the students.

When the tour ends, the group has spent almost an hour and a half relating to three artworks and they are now ready to do their own portraits. They divide into three groups. I follow a boy, S, and a girl, L, who want to do 'something on the king' related to visualizations of power and weakness. L engages in a narrative about a cleaning woman. By asking S to take a photo from of her with a broom, L intends to give an impression of being 'no one' as a contrast to the portrait of the absolute ruler. S helps her take the first pictures, but after that he appears more interested in performing dance steps on the huge floor. In the end, L leaves him alone and starts to explore her own image reflected in the dark windows of the museum. She takes a couple of pictures of herself leaning upon the broom with S dancing in the background.



Fig. 2. L, *Frederik V*, u.l.k. website

When L and S are uploading their photos to the website, L chooses the mirror picture as the central image (fig. 2), explaining that this image, more than the ones with the cleaning woman, is able to establish the dialogue with the portrait of Frederik V that she wanted: in the mirror of the window, what is reflected is not 'her' but the image of her, a shadow opposing the king displaying himself openly 'on parade' for the beholder. But the visual dialogue is not only about opposite signs, it is also about the exploration of a certain aspect of the king's communication with the beholder: at first glance, the king's exposure in the portrait is so obvious that no real depth or darkness is allowed, but at second glance, the image is unstable and contains fissures or crevices which, in the post-structuralist sense, yield openings for new interpretations. This instability was explored by the group in a lengthy dialogue conducted in front of the painting, when comments such as 'a small man portrayed as taller than he really is', 'a show-off' and 'an artsy-fartsy king' were supplemented by someone noticing that he probably was 'quite a cool guy' who was

'ahead of his time', suggesting contradictions in the communication of the portrait, which could be further explored. In fact, I think that what L succeeds in establishing with her photo is a dialogical relationship to the king through the use of a friendly eye. Instead of just watching and judging the 'show off', she explores the ambivalences that emerged in the group's dialogue around the painting and thereby succeeds in constructing a visual event that makes the king appear as a friend, a second person in an exchange between second persons.

The friendly eye as a new goal for educational settings in art galleries?

In this article, it has not been my intention to argue for a radical substitution of modernist forms of vision by the friendly eye, but rather to acknowledge the possibility, introduced by new experimental educational settings in art galleries, of working with the construction of alternative practices of looking to *challenge* the dominant ones. In fact, in both case studies, the friendly eye was not the only practice adopted by the students. Other ways of looking, especially the

traditional 'good eyes' of the disciplined eye and the aesthetic eye, were also relied upon both by students and educators, probably because most of us are so used to these approaches that they are very difficult to avoid altogether. Furthermore, it is my general conviction that the teaching of dominant practices is a necessary part of education, but it is also important to present them as *such* through practices of shared metareflection (Illeris 2006a: 22). Nevertheless, it is my hope – and I am convinced that it will happen – that many more experiments will be made by art museums in the future. Such experiments will contribute to the evolution of these institutions, not only as centres of learning which assign first personhood to the audience or learners, but also by assigning second personhood to both the art museum as institution, the visitors, and the works of art.

In conclusion, I will briefly summarize what I find to be the most important answers found in my cases to my initial question: how do new educational settings in art galleries influence the eyes of the learners involved?

- 1) In contrast to the educational settings of the dominant viewing positions, the experimental educational settings insist on the construction of dialogues between positions through the creation of exchanges between learners and artworks. The assignment of 'first', 'second', and 'third person' viewing positions in educational settings are thereby challenged through a continuous and, at least ideally, very open dialogue between positions, where not only the learners, but also the artworks, are called to adopt second person positions and to 'speak'.
- 2) The visual events constructed in the case studies challenge the practices of looking of the modern individualized learner by offering settings that stimulate the exploration of a different mode of seeing: the eye of friendship. This means that distanced forms of viewing at least occasionally are substituted, not only by empathy in the phenomenological sense, but by *exchanges* in the form of questions and answers.
- 3) The experiments with the adoption of a friendly eye in educational settings, I think, can have important consequences when linked to the general development of the subject. In experimental educational settings like *Speak Up*, practices of self-formation can occur through a dialogue with the 'Other', who might cease to be the Other and become a friend. This does not mean that power relations can or should be eliminated, but that it should be made clear to the learners first how power relations are intimately related to the embodied senses to be heard, to be seen (to be sensed) and second, how power relations, at least occasionally, can be overcome by seeking equal forms of exchange, e.g. through the use of non-objectifying or non-subjectifying practices of looking.

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Notes

- ¹ www.eskum.dk
- ² For detailed overviews of Nordic publications in art and museum education, see Illeris (2004b) and Lindström (2009).
- ³ In *visual anthropology*, which is another recently established field, several studies have been made on how people organize their everyday lives with and through visual representations (e.g. Pink 2006). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, no recent studies in visual anthropology focus explicitly on people's relationships to works of art.
- ⁴ I briefly introduced these terms in a previous article in *Museum & Society* (Illeris 2006). In the present article, I have chosen to substitute the term 'the aesthetic eye' for 'the connoisseur eye'.

- ⁵ The following quotation from a gallery director reported by Eisner and Dobbs (1986: 22) very much makes the point: 'The educators' role – if they are bringing people in – is to have been instructed by the curators and to see to it that the visitor views the work of art in the right way. I think the best educators are curators'.
- ⁶ In an interview, the workshop leader of the Danish National Gallery emphasizes how he and his staff, all of whom are artists, have maintained their independence: 'I have always been very autonomous in this place, because nobody actually has any influence on what I do. They might know what I do, but nobody else does the same things. They trust that what I do is approvable' (Illeris 2008: 45).
- ⁷ http://web.mac.com/arken_undervisning/workshop/Podcast/Podcast.html
- ⁸ <http://www.ulk.dk/page.asp?key=65>
- ⁹ www.jesperjust.com; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJw2HsNR8kE>

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