

CUMMA PAPERS #26

CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

IS

An Interview

*CAPABLE
OF TEACHING*

Contemporary
Art Museum Education

*AN ART
MUSEUM*

about

*CRITICAL
THINKING?*

with Asja Mandić
by Beti Žerovc

Curatorial work and museum education seem to sometimes be on completely different tracks. Even though artistic and curatorial discourses are increasingly interested in research and education, they are still full of practices of distinction; the codes for reading contemporary art seem closed, except to the very few. Meanwhile, contemporary art audiences are increasingly comprised of those who know little or nothing about it, and might seem “incapable” of reading artworks. All this positions contemporary educators in the middle of contradictory and problematic practices of “inclusion” and “exclusion”.

Asja Mandić, a Sarajevo based curator, art educator and professor, is a perfect candidate to meditate on contemporary art museum education and all the kinds of problems it faces within contemporary art institutions. Mandić used to work at Ars Aevi Museum/Centre of Contemporary Art, Sarajevo, and was searching for an educational approach that can help audiences who don't know much about contemporary art to find ways to access it. She became interested in the *Visual Thinking Strategies methodology*, first writing a PhD, and then a book about her research (*Izazovi muzejske edukacije*, 2014, Bosnian language only).

Museum Educators arguably have the task to attract as many people as possible, and to take care of them. But methods of care can be debated. One of my primary questions to Mandić is therefore, what does it mean—for art, and for us as a society—if we're welcoming and encouraging art audiences to lose all fear about asking the “wrong” questions, and prompting them to be opinionated without any real knowledge?

“I think it's important that educational programs in museums help wider audiences to access works of art, not just address those who, to use Bourdieu's terms, possess the “cultural code” or more precisely, the code within which the work is encoded.”

Asja Mandić, p.4

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What are, in your opinion, the main turning-points in the development of museum education in the field of contemporary art?

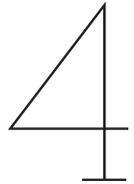
In the last twenty years, education has become one of the most important museum functions, and this had an impact on contemporary art museums as well. The 1990s were marked by visitor-centered—as opposed to traditional object-centered—approaches. Consequently, an emphasis on the public dimension of the museum and its importance in the context of informal education came to the fore. This trend stimulated growth in the educational programming of museums. It also fostered a rise in specialised journals and conferences on museum education, as well as museum studies programs. An increased museum literature—especially in the late 1990s and twenty-first century—encouraged clearer recognition of museum education.

However the development of education in museums of contemporary art cannot be observed without its connection to the economic sector. Since museums rely on external financial support, the success of the educational programs, visitor numbers, and more generally the voice of the public, play a crucial role in advocating for financial assistance. We can follow this growing trend in museum education in countries with tax exemption systems and the significant presence of corporations embedded within their museum work.

In your book, I was somehow looking for an answer to the question: what actually is being taught with-in museum education in the field of contemporary art today? I understand that it is no longer completely tied to the formal or art historical interpretation of works of art, but if it doesn't do that, what in fact

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is museum education doing, and what are its basic postulates? Are there some fundamental positions that museum education is committed to, like "art is" (like "god exists"), "art is good", "contact with artworks makes us better people", etcetera?

In my book I focused particularly on one educational method, the *Visual Thinking Strategies*, since the initial inspiration for my research was to look for an educational model that can be implemented in Ars Aevi Museum/Centre of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo. This method is tailored to viewers that do not have a basic knowledge of art; it is cost effective; and most importantly it is based on a conscious educational policy. *Visual Thinking Strategies* uses an open-ended questioning method and group discussion to facilitate viewing and interpreting works of art. It fosters active participation and learning through interaction to activate the spectator's critical and creative thinking. The strategies—based on constructivist and developmental theories of learning—comply with the notion that learners construct knowledge themselves on the basis of subjective experiences, including the impact of personal and motivational factors, as well as their physical and social contexts. This means that the meaning of an artwork is not *a priori* determined, but created in the process of group interaction and participation. One can appreciate that such an educational method challenges institutional power of knowledge production, the authoritative voice of curators, critics or art historians, however the main goal of this program is to give the viewer the tools to access works of art, and to feel confident and comfortable in the process of meaning-making. I think it's important that educational programs in museums help wider audiences to access works of art, not just address those who, to use Bourdieu's terms, possess the "cultural code" or more precisely, the code within which the work is encoded.

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In my research I came across the information that most guided tours and audio tours are tailored to visitors that have a foundational knowledge of art history and contemporary art. That has nothing to do with the idea of diversifying museum audiences. I think that museum education departments and museum educators need to develop a whole range of programs in order to speak to the interests and expectations of different audiences.

With contemporary art, there is no clear-cut criteria of what makes a work of art, hence such works are sometimes hard to separate from anything else in everyday life. The potential of contemporary art is its capacity to communicate with wider audiences, since it often works with issues surrounding our social, cultural and political environments. The educators can just direct their audiences to approach works of art using what they know, what they feel and what they have experienced, therefore relating their interpretation of art to their base of knowledge and experiences enables them to find personal ways to comprehend this visual information.

If, for example, we say that encounters with contemporary art combined with museum education can foster an individual's critical thinking, does that mean there is a sort of "correct" way of critical thinking, and that museum education supports and knows how to transmit it successfully to its audiences?

If we understand critical thinking as a process of logical and reflective thinking in which an individual is engaged in reasoning, hypothesising, giving evidence, and drawing conclusions from evidence, then this is something an educational program in art museum can stimulate and develop. With the use of programs such as *Visual Thinking Strategies*,

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museum education can foster the inquiry and exploration of art through the practice of creative and critical thinking. Open-ended questions encourage viewers to think and respond creatively, using what they already know and supporting their views with visual evidence, without fear of giving the “wrong” answer. Also, encountering dissonance—conflicting ideas that appear throughout group interactions and discussions—further stimulates and develops critical thinking. Critical thinking is not widely taught in schools, and much of what young people learn through formal education is not applicable knowledge that prepares them for the world they live in. I think contemporary art can be a great resource for teaching critical thinking, because it works with different experiences beyond those of art from the distant past, and it requires engaging cognitive processes for its reception. Besides, such art often reflects socio-cultural, political and personal contexts, as well as the invisible mechanisms that shape our everyday life experiences. Studies show that exposure to works of art and teaching through the use of visual art can boost academic achievement. Also, the critical thinking skills developed through art education programs are transferable to other subjects taught in schools, and can be applied to other life situations and personal experiences.

Would you agree that such an open approach can possibly create ethically problematic situations, in which the museum educator should somehow know what’s right? What code of conduct is the basis of the museum’s “being right”? Perhaps the World Convention on Human Rights, or something else?

An open-ended discussion approach means the educator does not have to give the “right” answers or determine what it means to “be right”,



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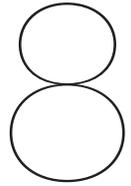
rather, they moderate the discussion and encourage the visitor to speak. This approach enables the visitor to decide what is right for them, and guides them through the discussion of similar, as well as opposing, views. In this process of group-problem solving or meaning-making, an individual can modify their views and accept other positions or ideas in a non-imposing manner.

The museum educator seems to be subordinate to the curator. Educators seem to be similar to catechists in the church who are not autonomous in further transmitting basic dogma and ways of behaving and thinking that they are in accordance with. What is your opinion?

I agree that educators seem to be subordinate to curators in terms of their freedom to interpret curatorial knowledge through their programs; guided tours in particular are mostly based on fact-laden information. Often educators and curators have conflicting visions when it comes to interpretation. For instance, curators see exhibitions as an opportunity to manifest their expertise, creativity and innovation—a vehicle for scholarship which often results in fancy catalogues. In general, their approach to texts in exhibitions, labels and brochures is an expression of scholarly language and art history knowledge, whereas educators are interested in achieving clear communication with visitors, and in helping them encounter works of art meaningfully. The general opinion is that curators know how the work should be interpreted, and that educators should follow their lead. Educators have a very challenging task: to follow the “dogma” prescribed by the curator, but also to make didactic material for diverse audiences. Curators, however, do not like when their language is melted down. This is almost a mission impossible for educators, because curatorial approaches to interpretation often ignore

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visitors who do not possess adequate art historical knowledge because curators don't possess sufficient knowledge about learning theories, learning styles, or how people learn best in a museum environment.

How should an educator deal with an artwork they do not understand or like (for example, through guided tours)? Does this cause them distress?

I can imagine an educator could resent some contemporary artworks, especially if they don't have sufficient knowledge of and affinity for contemporary art. However it is not uncommon to find "bad" art on museum and gallery walls, or at various biennales, and I am sure other curators would agree with me. The problem with guided tours is that sometimes they are performed by docent volunteers whose motivation for working in museums may be to learn about art, be in a museum setting, spend free time serving the community, and socialise with others who have similar interests. For guided tours, they just memorise facts about selected objects and present these in an instructional format. Such lecture-based tours are based on passive reception, and tend to be tedious and uninteresting. I feel that in general, museum guides just automatically repeat information from tour to tour, and this can cause distress for them, along with situations in which they have to assign value to artworks they do not understand or like.

Do you know cases where museum educators resisted their institution and rejected an exhibition or artwork as bad or inappropriate? What were the reasons for this?

The educator has to think about the diverse audiences that come to museums and participate in their programs and be sensitive to



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their interests, while also having the ability to deal with challenging subject matter. School children are the most common target groups for museums, and the most sensitive. In contemporary art museums we often deal with works of art that contain subjects inappropriate for younger children, such as disturbing images of war and destruction, and sexually motivated subject matter. These works or exhibitions should be avoided.

Avoided? Could you explain that a bit? Do you have any suggestions or instructions on that matter for contemporary art institutions?

It is not uncommon that contemporary art museums show works that are not suitable for children, therefore access to inappropriate artworks should be restricted, just as R-rated films have restricted audiences. There are cases when the whole exhibition should be restricted to children—what comes to mind is the exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, one of the most controversial contemporary art exhibitions in which children under 17 were not admitted unless accompanied by an adult. It is important that museum educators are aware what subjects are appropriate or not for certain age groups, and they should plan their programs and tours with that in mind. For instance, in a Visual Thinking Strategies tour, the educator can work with up to four or five artworks in a one-hour tour, and the key is to select appropriate pieces for discussion. My experience is that second and fifth grade children can talk about one artwork for 20 minutes or so. Sometimes educators just work with the exhibition concept in their workshops, not with actual artworks, so there are ways to avoid disturbing subjects.

We are all aware that in today's world, it is almost impossible to protect children from distressing events, disturbing images and age-

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inappropriate material, given the proliferation of phones and laptops. However in a museum context, there should be ways to shield kids from that. I believe the museum should be a shelter for our children, and a place where they can find refuge from disturbing information.

Can such museum education be in serious conflict with the intentions of the artists?

It can be in conflict with the intentions of the artists, but isn't our art historical interpretation of an artwork sometimes different from what the artist intended?

The general viewer usually looks for meaning or narrative in their encounter with artworks. However, through the use of fragmentation, decentering and deconstruction, along with ambiguous, unfixed, incomplete and open forms, many artists refuse to provide fixed meanings.

Besides, artists often do not think of the public reception of their art, and assume this to be exclusive, even elitist. They assume audiences possess art historical and theoretical knowledge, hence deciphering their art becomes a challenge for the uninitiated.

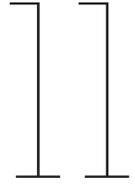
It really depends on the artists. The experience of some educators working with open-ended discussions is that some artists respond to this very well.

How does your approach to museum education work with more hermetic art?

I am not arguing that there is a universal approach to education that should be followed. In some cases, such an open ended approach just does not work, as one of the founders of *Visual Thinking Strategies* Philip Yenawine emphasises. He said the following should be avoided

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in open-ended discussions: historical, religious and mythological subjects, because they require “correct answers”; illustrations, photojournalism and advertisements, which do not allow for a wide range of interpretations; abstraction, because beginner viewers look for a narrative; still-lives, as one needs some experience in order to grasp their qualities; and some contemporary artworks, which require specific knowledge. This interpretation method is tailored to beginner viewers who may not be able to apply formal or iconographic analysis to artworks.

So this kind of approach probably doesn't work with more hermetic art, but I propose that regardless of the interpretation strategy, it is good to genuinely leave the artwork open for interpretation whenever possible. When art is recontextualised, then it can challenge fixed concepts and narratives, and open itself to the process of subjectification and demystification.

How does the VTS method fit together with populist and market-oriented tendencies in contemporary art museums, which have their own reasoning for persuading us that the institution is fun and provides a suitable experience for everybody?

Museum educational approaches should be really diverse and tailored to different types of audiences, from those who want to learn something in museums, to those who want to socialise or be entertained. The problem is, lots of museums are not aware of that, and understand their educational mission only through collaborations with schools.

Since most audience studies in contemporary art museums show that visitors are predominantly art professionals or art students, museums of contemporary art are often perceived as elitist, which

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undermines some of their main objectives: to attract more audiences, to serve diverse communities, to disseminate public knowledge, and to provide further access to the comprehension of contemporary art among wider audiences. They really need to work on diversifying their audiences, but not just in the sense of showcasing spectacular buildings or offering attractive exhibitions, but through programs that engage audiences in finding meaning and sense in contemporary art. The goal of the museum is not one-time astonishment, but to spark motivation, curiosity, and stimulate a visitor to return. Contemporary art museums have lot to offer. It is just up to their curatorial and education departments to use that and to communicate to their audiences.

What kind of education is museum education, if instead of hard work and learning, it proposes searching for answers within ourselves, where I myself am a measure of all things?

Museum education should not be confused with school education, which is associated with hard work in the context of learning. This type of education is based on rigidly structured curricula, where a traditional focus on facts is still the main method of teaching, and to change this requires education reform. It cannot utilise experiential and active learning like inquiry, active engagement, independent thinking and group problem solving. On the other hand, a museum is a flexible and unique learning environment that should be more responsive to new methods of teaching and learning—to the more open-ended approach which contemporary art and postmodern epistemology requires—to provide more effective, alternative learning resources.

The educational model I propose as effective for general museum audiences (those without sufficient art history knowledge), is based on the notion that learners construct knowledge themselves. Group

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discussions are essential and the individual is not a complete measure of all things, meaning answers can be found within ourselves, but at the same time can be altered or modified in a non-imposing manner via group dialogue.

Besides, can we say that museum education is effective if it just teaches us to think critically? I don't think that is less important than learning about art styles or artistic approaches.

We know that art institutions are not innocent and can have very problematic backgrounds; that there is a lack of understanding and communication on all levels of institutional work (between artists, curators, educators...); and that educators are often under or uneducated. Aren't we then overly ambitious or vain or blind if we claim that in such circumstances, we are capable of teaching critical thinking? The possible critique of this idea is that even people in institutions have scruples about those matters, but since the institutions want and need people to come and join their rituals, they just keep their heads in the sand and stick to this completely irrational belief that nothing can go wrong since we're in the miraculous realm of art.

As I mentioned earlier, museum educators have a very difficult task considering the complexity of their work: it requires cooperation between curators and artists and perhaps even those who finance the programs on one side, and knowledge, experience and skills to conceive and implement educational programs on the other. Through my research, I found various reports and surveys regarding the

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expertise of museum educators which showed that museums need broadly educated professionals for educational work. In art museums, educators need to have education in the fields of art history and education, as well as the expertise to develop, implement and evaluate educational programming for a variety of audiences in a variety of formats, especially touring techniques and hands-on activities. Often it is important that the educator has some studio art experience and good communication skills.

I agree there is certain amount of ignorance when it comes to education. Some educators think that learning-by-doing is sufficient enough for good programming. Others measure the success of their programs in attendance levels and the notion that any exposure to works of art is of educational consequence. The educational performance is often evaluated on an ad hoc, informal basis, such as walking through the galleries and observing how many visitors are present and reading the labels. In this context, to go back to your question, one can say we are overly ambitious when we think we are capable of teaching critical thinking in museums.

This is exactly why I think the solution is to establish a network with relevant specialists and consultants that will be able to take some of the load off educators, and perhaps even create programs and train educators to implement them. These programs need to be grounded in cognitive and developmental theory, perception and learning theory in relation to art, and then adapted for diverse audiences. If the museum takes pre-packaged programs, the educator can just focus on implementing them and communicating with audiences in the best possible ways. I was looking for such a program for the future Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo, and this is how I ran into *VTS*, which was developed by an art museum educator, an art historian and a cognitive psychologist, and evaluated in various art museum and classroom contexts.

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Is museum education capable of effective self-reflection? Pierre Bourdieu said that the insiders of the art system—the consumers or producers—are blind to the system they are in.

I believe that insiders of the system are often blind when it comes to reflecting critically upon the system they are in. That's the case with museum education as well, since as I mentioned earlier, there is no pressure on museums to assess the impact of the educational programs, interpretation materials or the effectiveness of digital technologies.

Can museum education have negative consequences? Are educators aware of them, and do they try to work on that?

I cannot attest to that. However there is not much assessment of museum programs. There is no pressure to evaluate the impact of programs and educational approaches, or to find out if that information and knowledge has negative consequences.

Do you see any danger in applying VTS strategies? I assume your experience with applying them is generally positive.

My answer would be if you are expecting your audience to respond to a work of art in the “right” way, if you are expecting to get appropriate answers to open-ended questions, then do not practice an open-ended questioning method. One can always use other inquiry-based discussions for guided tours, such as a directed questioning approach where the educator is leading participants to certain pre-established

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goals. The *VTS* technique does not work if the objective of the program is to achieve correct answers. That is why this technique is not appropriate with mythological or religious subjects. However *VTS* is very controversial. Many curators have an aversion towards it, mostly because it does not enforce expected knowledge or “dogma”, as you phrased it. Some education department specialists have resentment towards such a program because it was adopted from someone else’s expertise, rather than developed with their own knowledge and professional experience.

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Asja Mandić by Beti Žerovc

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