How to Speak of Art – Research into Methods of Active Learning About Art

Irena Bekić
Adult Department Librarian and Head of Windows Gallery, Zagreb City Libraries, Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail address: irena.bekic@kgz.hr

Petra Dolanjski Harni
Children's Department Librarian, Zagreb City Libraries, Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail address: petra.dolanjski@kgz.hr

Abstract:

The specific situation of the coexistence and cooperation of S. S. Kranjčević Library and Windows Gallery (Zagreb City Libraries), the programmatic concept of which deals with questions as to how theoretical practices of contemporary art and their practical and discursive analysis can contribute to the library's visibility, significance and cultural capital, opens up possibilities for interdisciplinary activity, broadening of the library and gallery audience, and creating new content for library users.
Through interdisciplinary activity at the crossroads of library and information science, contemporary artistic practices and pedagogy, the project examines a new interpretative model of contemporary art i.e. the possibility of establishing a new methodology of art education within the context of the coexistence of library and gallery. The programme is implemented in collaboration with Dobriša Cesarić Elementary School through workshops and research, whereby workshops with children are the base for further conduction of group interviews, and therefore the research is developing in two segments: development of the new interpretative model of contemporary art, and research of children's perception of art and method validation. It was shown that the interference of art and library science, as well as of other disciplines, is a strategic fold in the field of library science and from such a position it is possible to turn perspectives around and develop new spaces of knowledge and ways of learning.

Keywords: Active learning, Critical Visual Literacy, Contemporary Art, Art and Library Coexsistence, Interdisciplinarity.

Introduction

Public libraries, defined in their fundamental postulates by the demand for accessibility of information, openness with respect to all groups of users, freedom of expression and equitableness are caught in the cleft between the biosphere of traditional library science and the contemporary technosphere. The domination of software combined with the logic of the technosphere algorithms shape public space, the spaces of information and communication and our everyday world. In such a constellation, avoiding the trap of digitalism and the identification of the library with corporate platforms or start-up incubators, as discussed by Mario Hibert in the book *Digitalni odrast i postdigitalna dobra / Digital Degrowth and Postdigital Properties*, libraries should be re-examining the reasons for their existence, testing out their functioning within the whole of the infrastructural complex (Hibert 2018, 66-67). One of the basic questions raised here is that of the neutrality of the library, and of the neutrality of digital technology. A large number of internet users never call into question what is called algorithmic bias, that is, the constant renewal of the confirmatory information we are seeking; always the same dispositives are generated in a given internet environment, which will ultimately lead to an epistemological crisis (Hibert 2018, 72).

The research into the methods of active learning about art, *How to Speak of Art*, which we shall present here, stems from the exhibition activity in the Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević Library, part of Zagreb City Libraries, channelled through the work of the Windows (Prozori) Gallery. Involved is a specific situation in which a gallery and a library exist and work hand in hand, the programme and curatorial conception of the gallery endeavouring to emphasise the political potential of the public space of the library that is activated and directed by its programme to a non-professional public. Apart from that it explores the ways in which theoretical positions of contemporary art and their practical and discursive elaboration can contribute to the visibility, importance and cultural capital of the library, can open up possibilities for interdisciplinary activity, expanding the audience of library and gallery, can create new contents for library users. The theoretical paradigm within which the research is positioned is in the domain of critical visual literacy, as part of critical information literacy, within the field of the information and communications sciences.

In the text that follows there will be a description of the subject of the research, the paradigm perspective will be identified, the methodology presented and the results obtained outlined. Through this the position, potentials and specific features of a public library as a space for the alternative acquisition of knowledge will be established, and indirectly the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration among library and information science, contemporary art, literary theory and educational science.

The theme and the description of the research subject

The project *How to Speak of Art* takes up the possibilities of interdisciplinary activity generated at the intersection of the information and communications sciences, the library science branch, contemporary art and educational science. Through the interaction of their theoretical concepts, their research and practical activity, the idea is to set up a new methodology at the intersection of the disciplines. Through the project, using the example of a target group of fourth grade children of the Dobriša Cesarić Elementary School, the object was to explore the following: does the method of active learning about art actually work, and how do children perceive art? Research into the method of active learning about art was implemented through a series of workshops for children in the context of the coexistence and

combined activity of the Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević Library and the Windows Gallery (Zagreb City Libraries), the programme and curatorial conception of which takes up issues into how theoretical positions of contemporary art and their practical and discursive elaboration can contribute to the visibility, importance and cultural capital of the library, open up possibilities for interdisciplinary work, enlargement of the user base of library and gallery, and the creation of new contents for library users. We classify this research subject in the domain of critical visual literacy, as part of critical information literacy and communications sciences, at the same time founding it on the theoretical concepts of Jacques Rancière and Rita Felski. The workshops serve as a base for the further unfolding of semi-structured group interviews, and the research has developed into two segments: confirmation of the method of active learning about art based on the development of a new interpretative model of contemporary art and research into the child's perception of art.

In the purpose-designed interpretative model of contemporary art, founded on the concept of universal equality-based learning, that is the horizontal relation of teacher and pupil (after Rancière), children have a greater share in the planning and effectuation of the learning-related activities. The intellectual point of departure of the research is that we all have a priori the tools for understanding and talking about art, without, however, having become conscious of them. Free conversations, without previous instructions or theoretical explications, will lead to the key concepts/themes the work of art is talking about, and will accordingly elicit analytical and critical thinking in the child. Such an approach will enable children to set up a relation between art and their everyday world and to arrive by themselves at a conclusion as to why art is important in life, and how it can help them. In this manner children are freed from any awkwardness in talking about contemporary art; they acquire the capability of understanding it and their preconceptions that contemporary art is unintelligible, difficult or meant for someone else are exploded.

Using art as a resource, through their own viewpoints, children speak about contemporary art without any a priori explanation of some theoretical and categorial apparatus or formal analysis, they themselves can detect a certain problem situation that stems from the work, which they recognise as important within their own environment, and solve a given situation, shortcoming or problem.

In this manner, through devising, researching into and evaluating a new method of studying art using examples of contemporary art, contemporary social processes are also comprehended, there is a (self) understanding of certain theoretical concepts and viewpoints, children are sensitised to art with the idea that it is meant for everyone. Long term, if research confirms this kind of approach to the interpretation of contemporary art, a new methodology for the interpretation of contemporary art can be established not only for the tested group of users (4th grade children) but more widely as well. Critical visual literacy is thus developed, enabling the users to interpret the visual materials that surround them, on the bases of the historical, political, social and cultural context in which they are created. They also become capable of critically thinking about their own everyday visual experiences and the methods in which they discover and consume information and visual culture. Ultimately, we see critical visual literacy as a way of contacting experts from other areas (taking part in the research are librarians and curators, a teacher and an anthropologist) and for devising a collaborative interdisciplinary activity, which is intrinsic to the very vocation of the library.

Theoretical grounding: identification of the paradigmatic perspective

The learning about contemporary art that children shape and give direction to has on the whole been marginalised. In conjunction with the introduction and monitoring of the method chosen, its professional and scientific well-foundedness will be tested out in the field. A recent text that takes up the issues explored in the project, *Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature* (Gasper-Hulvat 2017), tells of the topicality of this theme and the importance of conducting this kind of research in the field of art history education. It shows that although scholarly research into active learning in art history is a growing field, it also leaves room for further investigation. Learning art history, that is, is founded on the traditional concept of the model of transfer of information based on lectures, which often avoids the model of active learning. According to art historian Kathleen Desmond, pupils themselves often seek and expect from the lecturer knowledge based on facts and themes that in a traditional manner of teaching represent the history of artistic practices, institutions and aesthetics. But the tendencies that have appeared in the last thirty years are channelled towards concepts of active learning that open up room for analytical and critical thinking and encourage the pupil to embark on analysis and evaluation of an artwork without any facts being set forth in advance.

In the book *Active Learning* (Bonwell and Eison 1991, 1-4), the general characteristics of active learning include the following: more pupil involvement than mere listening, an emphasis on the development of skills and on higher order thinking, investigation of the pupils' own values and convictions. Also foregrounded are some of the main characteristics of teaching connected with active learning strategies. They include, for example, pupil participation in activities, a stress on the development of pupil skills, exploration of viewpoints and values, enhanced learner motivation and involvement of the pupil in higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation and creation). The researchers Rodney Carr, Stuart Palmer and Pauline Hagel have defined active learning as involvement of the pupil in interpersonal relations, interacting, prioritising pupil initiative, autonomy and self-regulation, while in the context of studying art history, the accent is placed on five approaches to active learning: object-based learning, problem-based learning; discussion, discussion and role playing, interactive multimedia and computer games (Carr, Hagel and Palmer 2015, 175).

What is more, the investigative premises of the project are founded on the theoretical concepts of Jacques Rancière and Rita Felski. In the essay *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (2010) Rancière urges a break with the old classical method of incessant explanation and the intellectual subordination of pupil to teacher, and suggests a new round of intellectual independence. Nothing is required but constant response to three questions: what can you see? what do you think about it? and, what will you do with it? The universal method of Jacques Jacotot that Rancière tells us of takes off from the stance that explanation is not necessary for obviation of the inability to understand, that is, that incapacity is a fiction that structures the explicatory concept of the world. The relation of teacher and pupils is based on subjecting one mind to another, the teacher proclaiming the act of learning an absolute beginning, in which he puts aside the veil of ignorance. Jacques Rancière, with the help of Jacotot's experiment, shows that the will is absolutely enough for us to learn something ourselves, whether constrained to it intrinsically or extrinsically. This latter is applied in the context of this research as one of its points of departure.

In the book *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski widens the field of debate about literature, including into it the area of everyday aesthetics and personal experience. Cognitively directed structural and theoretical analyses exclude the possibilities that interpretation by the non-professional reader will have any relevance, and so Felski draws attention to the possibility of neglect of the personal experiences of the reader, and hence of the sensory and corporeal dimensions of the work of art. "Shifting the grounds of debate," she says, "requires a single-minded clarification of the calibre and qualities of such responses as they play themselves out in the relations between individual acts of reading and a broader social field." (Felski 2008, 133). This brings Felski close to Rancière, who says that the encounter and overlapping of art and other fields of human activity do not take place in an aesthetic transformation of other fields, for each of them has its own aesthetic, rather in the finding of a place for their mutual understanding. The theoretical premise of the research is that through informal conversation of children in their encounter with a work of art, without any interpretative framework being set up in advance, it is possible for a place of encounter of different aesthetics to crystallise out, that the politicalness of art will emerge in the relationship between them and in awareness of this relationship. This kind of approach will also, along with micro-politics, deal with micro-aesthetics, which is in culture, the basic aesthetic models of which are grounded on the rhetoric of spectacle and commercialisation, extremely important.

The theoretical paradigm within which the research is positioned is in the domain of critical visual literacy, as part of critical information literacy, within the fields of information and communications science. Positioning of this kind stems from the fact that the Windows Gallery shares space with the S. S. Kranjčević Library, and develops its exhibition and educative programmes in interference with the library.

Important from this point of view is the text *Break the Stereotype! Critical Visual Literacy in Art and Design Library science* (Greem and Meeks 2017) in which the authors consider an approach to the study of visual literacy based on the philosophy and practice of critical library science and feminist education. They explore the scope and constraints of existing standards, frameworks and educational models, in order to support the idea of critical visual literacy. They think it important for pupils to show critical thinking, critical re-examination and capacities for reflection that enable them not only to find, interpret, re-use and create images, but to be able to do this in a profoundly well-considered way. With this end in mind, they place visual literacy as a vital component of information literacy and, exploring the practices and examples from other disciplines, identify strategies for the study of critical visual literacy.

Although their conception derives from a development of critical visual literacy in the context of the training of artists and designers, there is a clear analogy with the need for critical information literacy to be developed in the framework of other kinds of libraries, particularly if the fact that almost every library is at least in some segment of its work involved in the activity of exhibiting is taken into account. A critical approach to the study of visual literacy in libraries can be built on the theory of information and communication science, and on literary theory, visual culture, art history, film studies and other disciplines. Through critical visual literacy, users become capable of interpreting the visual materials that surround them on the basis of the historical, political, social and cultural context in which they have been created. They become capable of thinking critically about their everyday visual inputs and the methods through which they discover and consume information and visual culture. With the application of critical and engaged practices in the work of the library, users can become empowered and educated to interrogate and explore the images and visual ecosystems in which they live and work and which they encounter. This theoretical paradigm affirms the aspect of critical library science and critical information literacy, opening up a space for the

entry of art into the field of the information and communications sciences, a heterogeneous field of reality being established, a new theoretical and practical concept at the intersection of the disciplines.

Methodology

In the research carried out, we started from the idea that children already have the tools for understanding and talking about art, tools of which they are however as yet unaware. Free conversation without any previous instructions or theoretical explications will generate the key concepts and themes that the artwork is talking about, and accordingly prompt analytical and critical thinking in the children. Combining this premise with the idea of active learning, we devised and conducted active learning about art workshops in which pupils of the 4th grade of the Dobriša Cesarić Elementary School took part.

In the research, we wanted to test out the effect of the workshops on the pupils and their experience and interpretation of art, and so posed two research questions:
How do 4th grade students in general experience art?
Did taking part in the workshops (active model of learning/talking about art) affect the attitude of the pupil to art and works of art and if so, how?

In order to provide answers to these questions, we carried out semi-structured group interviews with the pupils who had taken part in the workshops. We divided the pupils into two groups of 10 participants each. On the basis of theoretical points of departure and experience with the workshops, a template with questions for the conduct of the semi-structured group interview was constructed. The conversation lasted about 45 minutes, was recorded on a Dictaphone, and later transcribed in digital form. After transcription, systematisation of the transcript and coding with the aid of descriptive coding (Saldana 2009, 70) was started, the aim being to obtain explicatory categories.

Results of the research

The first research question related to the overall perception of the pupils about art, and analysis of the interview showed that most of the pupils understood art very broadly, and counted almost everything that an individual or groups can produce as art practices. Some of them in their definitions of art crossed the border of human creativity and ascribed artistic capacities to animals. But all of them agreed that what distinguished art from other areas was that observation of or making of art aroused in them an aesthetic experience, beauty and pleasant feelings. It is not then surprising that to the question of the usefulness of art the pupils referred above all to the possibility of individual expression, the expression of emotions. Apart from the emotional and individual component, the pupils thought art useful because through a study of it a lot could be learned, mostly about the past and about life in different historical periods. The perception of art as a medium for individual expression and the expression of emotions is also present in statements about the difference between art and other school subjects. Although some pupils see a similarity between art and mathematics, manifested in characteristics like precision and measurement, most of them nevertheless emphasise the difference, accentuating precisely the possibility of individual expression and creation through art, which other school subjects on the whole neither enable nor encourage. The second research question related to the examination of the influence of form and content of the workshops on the attitude of the pupil to art and artworks. Analysis showed that at the moment the interview was being carried out the pupils had a very clear memory of the activities, talks and artistic displays in the library. Giving their impressions from the

workshops, they said that the space and ethos of the library was more interesting and more fun for learning than school. They characterised the workshops as dynamic, entertaining and focused, and such an approach and active learning in the form of pupil engagement and open, non-hierarchical dialogue contributed to an easier and more effective way of learning about art. The most direct influence of the workshops on the attitude of the pupils to art is visible in the pupil consensus that the workshops were useful and that they had learned something new; some of them had already applied the new insights in their artistic expression: some pupils had started to use the new photography techniques they had learned in the workshops, and some of them had begun to use techniques of visual creation learned earlier in their everyday life.

Conclusion

In the research project *How to Speak of Art* that was carried out as part of the educational programme of the Windows Gallery that coexists with the S. S. Kranjčević Library, part of Zagreb City Libraries, the aim was to explore whether the method of active learning about art would actually work, and how children perceived art. Because of the context of the gallery-plus-library activity, the research is positioned within the theoretical concepts of critical visual literacy, itself part of the information and communications sciences, critical educational theory, contemporary art and literary theory. Through critical visual literacy, users become capable of interpreting visual materials that surround them because of the various contexts – historical, political, social and cultural – in which they were created; as part of critical information literacy, it encompasses the examination of the sources of images, the issues of power and representation, and the processes in which these images are created and distributed. Along these lines, it is necessary for library professionals to be linked up with experts from other areas and to devise a collaborative and interdisciplinary activity that, ultimately, is after all inherent to the very vocation of the library. Participating in the research then were two librarians/curators, a classroom teacher and a cultural anthropologist. Two research questions were posed, asking how 4th grade students in general experienced art and whether taking part in the workshops (active model of learning/talking about art) affected the attitude of the pupil to art and works of art and if so, how. To be able to answer these questions, semi-structured group interviews were carried out with the pupils that had participated in the workshops. Focusing on pupil narratives about the library as a place that prompts active learning about art and the concrete influence of the workshops on the attitude of pupil to art and also taking into consideration other categories and codes of qualitative analysis, it can be concluded that the active learning about art proved to be successful way in generating free, open, non-hierarchical learning about the experience and interpretation of art and works of art. It was shown that the interference of art and library science, as well as of other disciplines, is a strategic fold in the field of library science and from such a position it is possible to turn perspectives around and develop new spaces of knowledge and ways of learning. This was achieved in a project that linked up librarian/curator, anthropologist and a classroom teacher, and can function as a model for the further development of critical visual literacy.

References

Bonwell, Charles and James Eison. 1991. Active learning: creating excitement in the classroom. ASHEERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. Washington DC: George Washington Uni.

Carr, Rodney, Pauline Hagel and Stuart Palmer. 2015. „Active learning: The importance of developing a comprehensive measure." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 16 (3): 173-186.

Felski, Rita. 2008. *Uses of literature*. Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gasper-Hulvat, Marie. 2017. „Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature." *Art History Pedagogy and Pracite* 2 (1). https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol2/iss1/2

Greem, Stephanie and Amanda Meeks. 2017. „Break the Stereotype! Critical Visual Literacy in Art and Design Librarianship." *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 36. The Art Libraries Society of North America. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/694238

Hibert, Mario. 2018. *Digitalni odrast i postdigitalna dobra : kritičko bibliotekarstvo, disruptivni mediji i taktičko obrazovanje*. Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut: Institut za političku ekologiju.

Rancière, Jacques. 2010. *Učitelj neznalica : pet lekcija iz intelektualne emancipacije*. Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut.

Saldana, Johnny. 2009. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: SAGE