



Contemporary art or just
something:
Young children learning through
art at the Maribor Art Gallery in
Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses examples of educational activities at the Maribor Art Gallery in Slovenia (Umetnostna Galerija Maribor – UGM), for children aged 4 to 11 years old. The activities involved children exploring some famous examples of work by modern and contemporary Slovenian artists. Several educational activities took place during a five month display organized by Young Friends of the UGM which offered children regular and active visits to exhibitions. The children discovered the exhibitions gradually, and the educational process in the gallery included many games as well as art making opportunities. The main goal of the museum's educational programme is for children to develop a deep understanding and a profound experience of art, especially contemporary art. The educational experiences described in this article have enabled UGM to successfully realise this goal.

The current article discusses examples of educational activities for children aged 4 to 11 years old, based on exhibitions held at the Maribor Art Gallery (Umetnostna Galerija Maribor – UGM), in Slovenia. The main goal of the museum's education programme is for children to develop a deep understanding and experience of art, especially contemporary art. Through the educational activities provided at the museum, children were involved in examining and exploring some famous examples of work by modern and contemporary Slovenian artists. The children discovered the exhibitions gradually, and the educational process in the gallery included many games as well as art making opportunities. Several educational activities for children and families took place during a five month display that had been organized by Young Friends of the UGM. This educational programme offered children regular and active visits to the gallery's exhibitions.

Why visit the gallery in early childhood?

A gallery or a museum of visual art is an institution whose primary goal is to introduce quality visual artworks to a diverse and wide range of visitors. The gallery offers a fully aesthetic and authentic experience in a place which is dedicated to exhibiting high quality artwork – both local and international. Despite the quality of today's media (books, photography, video, and the internet), it is impossible to get complete factual information about artworks through these sources. At the gallery, however, as the visitor views paintings, sculptures and installations she/he experiences real-size works and undistorted colours. The visitor can also experience movement, sound, or scent. As many of those aspects are missing in reproductions, visual art educators have developed a new method for helping visitors engage with art objects. Duh & Zupančič (2011) describe this process as a method that:

“...ensures that reproduction and art education do not convey only informative data but also the aesthetic components of artwork. In the method of aesthetic transfer, the presentation of chosen works of art has to allow the observation of such artwork to lead to an interaction between the observer (child, student) and the artwork, whereby the sensory stimulus is tied directly to memories, experiences, emotions and associations.”(p. 49).



Figure 1: Girls are observing the kinetic art object by German contemporary artist Rebecca Horn (presented at Maribor Art Gallery in 2012). They are impressed by the colours and the movement of butterfly wings.

However, direct contact with art, especially with contemporary art, is sometimes not enough to enable a fully immersive experience for the visitor. In order to understand and experience art, visitors have to follow a path of creative observation, reflection, comparison, self-questioning, and research. A gallery education programme has to help

visitors to develop an understanding of art as a metaphor, and as a new experience which can make their lives richer. One of the main points of discovering art is not to learn more about the theory of art or the artist, but more about the visitors themselves and the world in which they are living. The connection between the artistic message and the individual one, can help a visitor make more sense of the art on display. This may have an impact on their attitude towards their existing reality, or their personal growth. Socio-cultural strategies in the museum context have been noticed also by Anderson, Piscitelli, Weier, Everett and Taylor (2002) who stated that "Museum experiences that are in some way connected with familiar social-cultural episodes appear to be powerful mediators of museum-based learning" (p. 222).

It makes sense to invite the youngest children to experience and discover a connection with art (see Figure 1). In fact, children seemed to be the best teachers in the gallery because they do not have any expectations of what art should look like, thus they feel comfortable to confront contemporary art (Epstein & Trimis, 2002). Children often enjoy art as they are always prepared to learn and experience something new. Contemporary artists sometimes use media (television, videos, installations, everyday objects, kinetic objects etc.) which are familiar to children in their everyday lives, and can relate to the use of these. Very often, works of art are interactive and the experience of these artworks, which can include all the senses, seem to be made for children. Kroflič (2010) observes that :

"...in preschool period, artistic experience is shown to be a form of activity which supports the learning process on the highest level possible. In this period when the child's verbal and mathematical-logical intelligence is not very strong, art helps the child to exteriorise its silent knowledge and actively develop its own theory of mind through listening to oneself and others, observing their artistic creativity and argumentation."(p. 49–50).

Processes that help children experience artworks can be internalised and developed in ways that can enhance their relationships in everyday life. Children's first contact with contemporary art can be very emotional and their response to it can never be 'wrong' as it is connected to everyday life experience, knowledge and current mood. Even if the teacher or the gallery pedagogue does not agree with them, refusal or rejection of children's feelings about artwork can be disrespectful of their unique ideas and personalities. Instead, teachers and gallery pedagogues need to help children express their feelings about art. That way, children will feel accepted and thus more able to express their experience and thoughts. As Durant (1996) supports:

"... when all children are encouraged to express their own authentic voices, their own perceptions and ideas, and to share these with others in the group, everyone's understanding increases. When children in the group come from a variety of different backgrounds, the richness and variety of perceptions and ideas become greater." (p. 20).

To illustrate this, examples of children's responses to the spatial installation *Art Descending upon the Earth* by Slovenian artist Marko Pogačnik that was exhibited at Maribor Art Gallery in 2012 are described here:

"I started to breath deeper when I came in."

"I heard music."

"I felt like I am in outer-space."

"I felt calm."

(Young children talking about Marko Pogačnik's Descending upon the Earth)

However, although this first engagement in discussion is very important, it is not enough to create a fully artistic experience. The role of the gallery pedagogue is not only to initiate a discussion but support and enable children to have a deeper understanding and experience of the displayed work. In this case, the gallery pedagogue followed up children's initial response by asking "Why do you feel as you are in outer-space in front of this artwork?" or "What makes you feel calm in this space?" In search of an answer, children started with a creative observation and description of an artwork. In response to these questions, one child replied "I felt that way because of those things hanging from the wall ...". However, in order to help children observe, talk, compare, understand, feel more comfortable and self-confident in the gallery setting, it is also useful to include different tasks, games, and art making into this process.

These methods may develop a dialogue between the children, the artwork, and the gallery pedagogue where everyone's ideas are equally accepted (see, for example, Figure 2). The gallery pedagogue does not know everything, so by developing reciprocal dialogues with children, he/she has to be open to learn something new about art. In other words, while presenting a contemporary artwork, the teacher needs to be on an equal footing to the students. As Zupančič (2006) suggests, "the teacher is neither someone who understands and interprets a piece of art correctly nor the person whose view of the artwork is sacred" (p. 29–30). Pedagogues at UGM agree with Larcher's (1993) idea that he would like to see the museum's pedagogues to be like Socrates who "seduces people to thinking" (p. 65).



Figure2 (Photo: Andrej Firm): The picture represents an activity for families attending the exhibition of contemporary Slovenian artist Dragica Čadež (2011). In the middle is a father who is presenting his views about the displayed sculpture. The mother is joining the debate while the children and the gallery pedagogue are listening, prepared to hear something new.

Play in the museum

Marjanovič Umek & Zupančič (2006) believe that through play, children develop a different context of reality outside their everyday experience. The fundamental part of play is an 'imaginary' context in which an activity is carried out. The player is aware of the fact that this 'is not for real'. In the playful, imaginary, alternative context, individual acts are based on the original, normal, 'real' reality" (p. 8). If, in the gallery context, we replace the word 'play' with 'art', the meaning remains the same. Art has some of the characteristics of play, which can convey new experiences to the player/receiver.

The following section discusses different plays for children who are working with an artwork. Pedagogues at UGM consider play to be the most natural way of learning for children. With the help of didactic plays, children develop abilities to understand and memorise artworks. Games create tension and release, and the children enjoy this and feel satisfied within such an activity (Marjanovič Umek & Zupančič, 2006).

Playing with the doll: Before beginning to discover an art exhibition, children need to conquer the gallery's new space and meet new people. First of all they must meet the gallery pedagogue. After their arrival at the gallery, the children might, however, feel shy and reserved. The gallery doll has a magic power to help children feel comfortable and at

ease by having a conversation with it, even though there is an unknown person animating it. As Borota et. al (2006) remarks, "To trust an adult in direct communication can be difficult [for children]... When the puppet is animated by the educator, children forget him/her, because all the attention is centred on the doll. All the obstacles are removed in mutual communication" (p. 34).

Playing with words: An integral part of the aesthetic experience is the interpretation of art through methods of conversation, description, comparison and explanation. Listening, observing, imitating and 'reading' the work of art can involve methods that include expression with words and elements of the play of perception (Marjanovič Umek & Zupančič, 2006). By playing with words, the gallery pedagogue can lead the children to develop creative interpretations. Methods such as: describing the artwork, searching and logically integrating artistic relationships to the work, exploring feelings about the work and integrating with familiar knowledge and experiences are all important. The pedagogue, for instance, after explaining the objective characteristics of an artwork might ask "How big is this sculpture? What is it made of? What is its colour?".

The use of close – ended questions may limit respondents' choices to one or two possible answers, for example, "the sculpture is 2 meters high" or "there is a lot of red colour". However, when discussing the subjective experience about art, it is usual to come up with many different answers. Whilst the gallery pedagogue's subjective interpretations need to be articulated to the same extent as the children's (visitors) interpretations, it is important to keep in mind that they may never create the feeling that his/her interpretation is the best or the only answer. The learning process is reciprocal, and the pedagogue observes and receives the art experience of children. This process may help him/her find something new in the artwork which he/she was not able to notice before. In this process, a dialogue is developed in which all participants enrich their artistic experience and, by doing so, the children feel accepted and important.

Playing with associations: To connect the theme of an artwork with the children's everyday experience, pedagogues at UGM, use the play of associations. Children are encouraged to explore the artwork using their knowledge and experience and through this process, they discover and encounter many different views, and begin to develop an understanding of art as a metaphor.

The following is a transcription of an ethnographic record (Bračun Sova & Strnad, 2012) of a conversation between the gallery pedagogue and a group of children aged 4 to 5 years in relation to the artwork of well-known Slovenian sculptor Dragica Čadež *Lignificated shades* (1998). The children were asked, "What does the statue remind you of?"

Boy: "A tree."

Gallery pedagogue: "It reminds you of a tree. Why does it remind you of a tree?"

Boy: "Because it is as big as a tree."

Gallery pedagogue: "Because it is as big ... Is there anything else that reminds you of a tree?"

Boy: "Yes. Because it is hard."

Through association and comparison, the boy recognised the characteristics of the sculpture such as the height and the hardness. Another boy said that the work reminded him of a giant because of its form. A girl remarked that it reminded her of lines and she pointed to these in the structure of the material (wood).

Playing with movement: In many cases of contemporary art, the visitor's physical interaction is important for their interpretation. For example, often the visitor has to go into the physical space of an installation. So instead of standing in front of an artwork, the visitor is actually in it. Brian O'Doherty (1986) writes, in his famous essay *Inside the White Cube*, that not only eyes and minds are welcome in the galleries of today but the whole body. Body and movement are often necessary conditions for aesthetic experience.

At contemporary art exhibitions, there are many possibilities for movement. However, if there is none, one option is to create an opportunity for children to move during the educational experience. Children have a natural tendency to move, so gallery pedagogues can direct them in their motion. The photograph below (Figure 3) demonstrates how the gallery provided different movement activities for children in order to satisfy their needs to move, as well as introduce the exhibition topic to them.



Figure 3: Children use their bodies to imitate the artwork by Dragica Čadež, *Story about tree* (2006).

The artistic expression of children at the gallery

Art making by children underpins the gallery's main goal of making quality works of art accessible to children who visit. The aim is to create in-depth opportunities for observing and understanding of artworks through an artistic process. When children perceive information from an artwork and can employ their understandings in their own drawing or painting, they observe the artworks on display carefully and for a longer time. Thus, the possibility of art making, based on exhibited artworks, means that the quality time spent with an artwork can be extended. Consequently, it has been our experience at the gallery that, through this process, the children remember and internalise the artwork in a more profound way.

Pedagogues at UGM have observed that children interpret artworks through art making, as well as by expressing their feelings towards it. First, they have to find the artwork which they will imitate. They do this by searching, comparing, making judgements and then, finally, by choosing the one they prefer. By recreating the artwork in their own way (see Figure 4), they highlight the elements of the artwork that they experience as the most important.



Figure 4: Children's art making can extend quality time with an exhibited artwork.

Activities for children at UGM (the Maribor Art Gallery)

During 2013, the UGM's exhibition *Almost Spring / 100 Years of Slovene Art* presented a review of 20th century art from Impressionism to Retro-avant-garde. The exhibition offered an insight into the new practices of 21st century Slovenian visual art with a view into the future. The exhibition was accompanied by a wide range of educational activities

for different target groups: children and families, groups from pre- and primary schools, students, adults, seniors, and groups with disabilities.

During the exhibition, UGM prepared several different activities for Young Friends of the UGM. Every second Saturday of the month, UGM offered workshops for children aged 4 to 11 years as well as free membership to Young Friends of the UGM. The programme invited children to regularly explore the world of art. Through these opportunities they became more comfortable at the gallery. By participating in a range of different activities throughout the year, they seemed to have developed an intensive and positive attitude towards art.

Although the artworks from *Almost Spring / 100 Years of Slovene Art* were presented chronologically, the Saturday workshops programme did not progress in this way. Children (and families) discovered the exhibition systematically through seven different activities: four activities involved the method of contrast and contradiction, two activities included meetings artists, and one was a family workshop.

Impressionism & Sublime painting

The children were introduced to Slovenian Impressionism from the beginning of the 20th century, and to examples of contemporary Sublime painting. Gallery pedagogues used the method of contrast and contradiction. This method involved presenting children with very colourful paintings created in a monochrome style using realistic motifs, as well as totally abstract Slovenian artworks (see figures 5 and 6).

Slovenian Impressionism developed twenty years after the European mainstream Impressionist movement. It differs from European work through the inclusion of national symbols, for example, the use of the landscape and nature, village people, indigenous architecture, and shadows (which are regularly used as a symbol of a tough way of life). Its characteristics generally include a colourful style, short brush strokes, the use of impasto, and the typical impressionist's interest in light. Impressionism as a modern art form is appreciated and understood by the present public in Slovenia.



Figures 5 and 6: Children compare the colourful painting of Slovenian Impressionism with the monochrome style of the Sublime painting.

In the presentation of impressionist paintings, the emphasis was on the artists' use of a variety of colours, the effect of short brush strokes, and the significance of the motifs. Children were encouraged to name different colours on the painting and they also observed the surface of it. They learnt that some motifs are very colourful, although they may not be what they seem at first sight. An example of this occurred with a group of children who were encouraged to examine a painting carefully. The gallery pedagogue initially asked "What colour is the snow on this painting?" The children's first response was that it was 'white'. However by asking the question "Can you show me where the painter uses white colour?" the children were required to have an even closer look at the work. Through this, the children recognised that there was no white colour on the painting. Instead, there was a whole range of colours that, together, created the effect of white. The same thing happened when they carefully examined the grass or the sky.

After their initial encounter with the exhibited works, the children started with their art making activity which was inspired by the surrounding paintings. To understand the process of impressionists' painting, the children were given small pieces of coloured paper which they used to imitate short brush strokes. Children worked directly in front of the paintings so they could observe them during the art making process. Throughout the activity, the children were able to develop a feeling for colours, and for the variety of colour relationships in the exhibited artworks.

After their experience with the impressionists' colourful landscapes, the children then explored a sublime painting where colour functions as a purely visual sign. The children focused on the painting object *J-05* by Maribor artist Oto Rimele. This artist is interested in the luminous power of colour, which constantly changes. For the artist it represents and symbolises dematerialisation. There is no central composition in his painting and,

consequently, emptiness fills the centre. However, colour can be found on the broad sides of the painting object and on its backside.

The children were most impressed by the luminous colour reflections on the wall. The gallery pedagogue helped them understand the connection between colour and light by turning on and off the exhibition floodlights. This enabled them to make day and night associations, discussing how they see things and colours during daylight and at night. Children were encouraged to look at the painting object from different directions, at a distance and then close-up so they could develop an awareness of themselves as an active observer.

Instead of being provided with the usual two-dimensional painting surfaces, such as paper or canvas, the children were given picture frames to work with. Instead of painting the ('empty') centre, they painted the frames by using only one colour. When the frames were placed on the wall they enabled a play of light and shadows and created a diverse intensity of colours on the wall (see Figures 7 and 8).





Figures 7 and 8: Like the painter Oto Rimele, who works on the sides of a painting, the children were provided with frames. Instead of painting a work for the inside of the frame, they painted the frame itself.

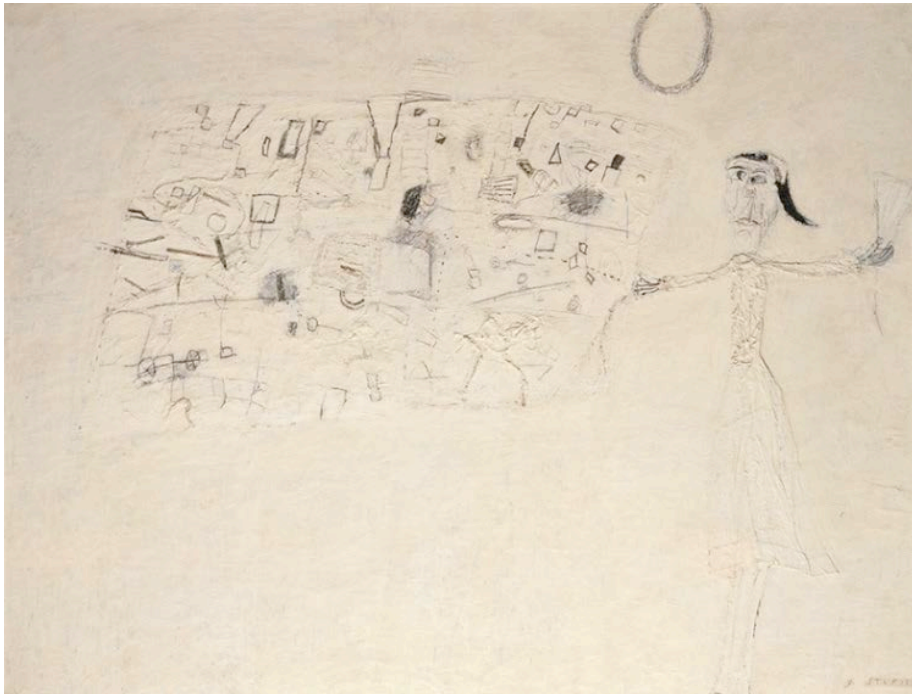


Figure 9: Gabrijel Stupica, *Girl with Toys*, 1967 (photo: Matija Pavlovec, ownership: Ljubljana Museum of Modern Art)

Another art experience provided to the children involved two paintings *Girl with an Orange* by Ivan Kos from 1927, and *Girl with Toys* painted in 1967. *Girl with Toys* (see image 9) was created by the well-known Slovenian artist Gabrijel Stupica in the second half of the 20th century. The artist developed a new approach towards figurative motifs (deformations, expressions) and towards the painting technique itself. *Girl with Toys* is from his white period. However, *Girl with an Orange*, created 40 years earlier, represents a new objectivity in painting which is characterised by an objective and cold view of the world. When children observed this more realistic work by Ivan Kos, *Girl with an Orange* they thought it was a photo, whereas in response to *Girl with Toys* they thought the work was drawn by a child because of its figurative deformations (Vovk, 2013).

During the experience with these two very different paintings, the children were able to imitate the portrait *Girl with an Orange*. They were provided with a costume and an orange, and one of the girls in the group was chosen to dress up (see Figure 10). She was encouraged to put herself in the same position as the girl on the portrait. The other children helped her to do this by comparing her with the painting and by observing the work very carefully. They paid attention to the gesture of the hands, the position of the head, and the facial features. Through this activity the children explored the dark colours of the painting that are in such contrast to the bright orange fruit.



Figure 10: A child's imitation of the painting *Girl with an Orange*.



Figure 11: Self-portrait by a 5-year-old girl inspired by the use of different materials, white and other bright colours that are found in work of Gabrijel Stupica.

After examining *Girl with an Orange*, the children looked for a painting with a similar title at the exhibition. Moreover, they were encouraged to read the labels and information about the artworks. They found *Girl with Toys*, which has opposite characteristics to the previous painting. They then compared the realistic portrait, containing a lot of darkness, with a painting that had used a lot of white. They also compared the body types in the two works which highlighted that fact that the body in the second work was deformed. The children understood this as an expression of sorrow, illness or suffering.

Children were given different materials to explore in their own work similar to processes used by the artist (The artist uses different white and bright materials for his paintings such as glass, paper, and wood). They were encouraged to create self-portraits using white as the dominant colour (see Figure 11).

A family workshop with contemporary figurative painting

Through an activity organised for families (actually for children with their grandmothers), participants discovered figurative painting from the 1990s (see figure 12). These works included a lot of different painting approaches and use of different motifs including realistic, fantastic, figurative stories, as well as deformation. Artworks from earlier periods (e.g. impressionism and expressionism) often have many common characteristics that have evolved into a specific and recognisable style. In this case, the

paintings explored in the family workshop involved work by artists who had each developed their own unique artistic language. The workshop focused on looking at the differences between the paintings (size, format, colours). It gave children who developed a sense of art narration, the opportunity to describe and interpret the motifs. The gallery pedagogues used questions such as: “Who is in the image?” “What does she/he look like?” “What is she/he doing?” “Does the image remind you of something?” and “What are your feelings about the image?” to encourage children’s thinking.

At the workshop the children and the adults were able to create their own artwork, which was to be called *My Family*. However, in order to do this successfully they had to be acquainted with the different types of work in the gallery so they could choose one as a model. They experienced a range of paintings of different styles and sizes. They learnt that their first creative moment making their own work was to choose a painting they liked, and copy the artist’s format (see, for instance, Figure 13). They were able to paint their own work using tempera painting techniques and were provided with a variety of brushes and other materials, such as sponges and cloth, to apply paint.

Through the activity both the children and the adults who accompanied them had a very enjoyable time as they learnt more about each other (by listening to each other’s art interpretation), as well as being involved in the hands-on creative art activities. Whilst some children and grandmothers worked individually, most of them worked collaboratively.



Figure 12: The activity for families started with a figurative work by Slovenian painter Jurij Kalan (2001) depicting a grandmother and a child. The UGM had invited children and their grandmothers to join the workshop, so they were able to successfully imitate the painting.



Figure 13: A 10 year old girl was intrigued by the unusual and very specific format of one of the displayed artworks and this inspired her to create her own unique painting.

Meeting the artists

UGM also organised two workshops with two of the artists whose work was featured in the exhibition of 21st Century Slovenian Art. Consequently, the children who had been participating in the programme had an opportunity to gather first-hand information from the artists themselves. They also had opportunities to discuss and create art together with the artists.

The first workshop was led by Matej Andraž Vogrinčič. Vogrinčič has created site-specific installations in urban and natural landscapes for more than two decades and his works have reached audiences throughout the world. Curator Simona Vidmar describes his work as "... monumental interventions [that] incorporate every-day objects (water cans, balls, shovels, and glasses) and transform selected locations into artistically and imaginatively provocative spaces. His installations – found across Europe, Australia, Asia and the USA – have been created in a dialogue with local communities, tradition and history, but with a convincing turn into the unknown". (Vidmar, 2013, para 1).

Inspired by Vogrinčič's work, workshop participants tackled the challenge of changing the inside of a selection of buckets in response to a political issue facing Maribor (see Figure 14). In the Slovenian language, *kangla* is the word for bucket. This word resembles and associates with the surname of a (now former) mayor who was unpopular, and Mayor Kangler was often called kangla. During the time of the UGM workshop there were demonstrations taking place against him. Therefore, the workshop conveyed a strong message about the need for political change.

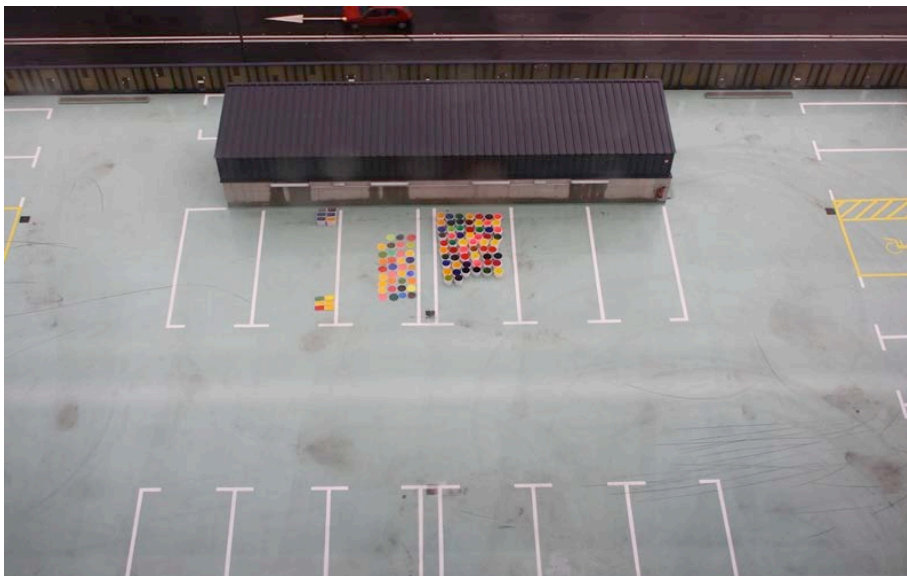


Figure 14: After finishing painting the buckets, participants went outdoors and created an installation made from 60 coloured buckets.

The second workshop was held by the intermedia artist Sašo Vrabič who had created the wall drawing for the exhibition entitled *Friends of Friends*. It was made of charcoal and the artist had used a photo projection of an image taken from Facebook to create the work. Vrabič is known for his recycled images taken from the mass media, which he places into new contexts and relationships. His work connects to worldwide problems and issues, especially the problem of mass communication.

After Sašo introduced himself with a presentation of his work, workshop participants went through the same processes to create an artwork (see Figure 15) by using

projections of different images, and drawing on the gallery wall. The children recognised that the drawn image using charcoal was very fragile because, after drawing a new image over the previous one, the lower layer of the drawing became more and more unclear. Sašo Vrabič is also a musician who often combines visual arts and music. In the same workshop, the children and the artist also created a piece of music together which accentuated the wall drawing installation.



Figure 15: The art process, using the projection of images and then drawing directly onto the wall, was a lot of fun for the children.

Conclusion

Comments such as "Contemporary art is ... whatever!" or "I don't understand this kind of art!" are generally made by adults, not by children. This is because adults often may have fixed ideas about art, and dislike artworks which are not compatible with their perceptions of what constitutes good art. Unfortunately, such examples can lead children to share adult's conventions about art. According to Trimis & Savva (2004) pre-primary school children are "open to seeing beauty in unconventional forms" because they "have not yet been socialized to accept only the most conventional definitions of beauty" (p. 24).

Therefore, children need to have positive examples of how to approach art. This article exemplified practices taking place in *Maribor Art Gallery in Slovenia* by UGM pedagogues focusing on providing artistic learning experiences for young children. The role of gallery pedagogue is also described, emphasising his/her ability to act as a mediator and be open to new knowledge and experience. It is supported that, gallery pedagogues (and other adults) can teach children how to go more deeply into the meaning and purpose of artworks. The article also stressed out the importance of a regular and repeated

engagement with works of art in authentic contexts. By regular visits to the gallery, children can become more familiar with the gallery setting, and more comfortable with the gallery staff. Such an atmosphere motivates children to learn about art and explore different kinds and genres art, and such experiences enable them to link art with their every day life and make sense of their world.

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