



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Issue 5 (2017) 62-67

ISSN 2421-8030

www.prosoc.eu

Selected paper of 5th World Conference on Design and Arts (WCDA-2016), 26-28 May 2016, South East European University
Skopje-Macedonia

Contemporary art as tool for reinterpretation of museum exposition

Vasya Delibaltova^{a*}, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", 1504 Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria

Suggested Citation:

Delibaltova, V. (2017). Contemporary art as tool for reinterpretation of museum exposition. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 5, pp 62-67. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ayse Cakir Ilhan Ankara University, Turkey

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Abstract

This study presents theoretical grounds and expert evaluation of one model of reinterpretation of museum exposition. This model was created on the base of work of contemporary art and realized in National Military Museum during exposition dedicated to World War II. The implementation of specific activity is facilitated by 4 students - 1 in the third and 3 in the fourth year of the Faculty of Education who participated voluntarily in the project. The expert assessment of the design of the program is carried out by 8 museum professionals from the Military Museum. The recommendations from experts and data from the program implementation allow outlining some specific recommendations regarding the use of contemporary art as a catalyst for the reinterpretation of museum exposition.

Keywords: contemporary art, museum, museum education

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Vasya Delibaltova, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Republic of Bulgaria
E-mail address: v.delibaltova@abv.bg / Tel.: +3-234-32-323

The problem of the essence and meaning of art is among the oldest scientific problems examined from different perspectives in the fields of philosophy, psychology, art studies, sociology, and pedagogy. While seeking the basics of the modern conception, the numerous publications present some serious analyses of the strong influence of the German and French philosophic schools, of the gestalt philosophy, of the challenging Russian researches in the field of art philosophy, of the development of the ideas of education through art from Antiquity to the present day. The main intention of the present text is to examine art through a prism less explored: the relation contemporary art – museums – museum educational programs.

The very title of the present article provokes at least four questions. Why contemporary art? What makes us see it as a means of reinterpretation? Why is it viewed in the context of the museum rather than the gallery?

1. Introduction or Why contemporary art through the prism “contemporary art – museum educational programs”?

In an attempt at answering this question we will start from our understanding that unlike reality, “In art there is exhibition, work with artistic means, creation of a new reality born by the fine coordination between the unconscious powers of the Ego, oscillating at the border of internal and external, social and personal, individual and common. In the everyday life a person interprets continuously, in the field of art the outside reality is being reinterpreted by the author” (Delibaltova & Morozova, 2015). We can see a similar thesis in the classical German esthetics and we can easily find it in Goethe, “In an artwork, what appears to be nature to the ignorant is not the nature (as seen from the outside), but it is the man (the nature inside)”. I. Pasi is right that this Goethe’s thesis blazes a trail for both Schelling and Hegel whose philosophical reflections form the basis of art-therapy and even of art-based education today. The point is that the man, as a self-organizing being cannot but create, but while creating he cannot create but himself (1985, p. 165-191).

A special place in these processes is occupied by contemporary art with the interesting relations between viewer and author that it offers. The specific change of roles not only proposes but even presupposes; it places the viewer in the position of a reinterpreter of reality but also of a reinterpreter of the author’s interpretations. This is a unique opportunity to see reality not just and not only through your own eyes but through the eyes of the author in a purposefully set and unusual space, which is at the same time unreal and constituting a new reality in itself.

This capacity of art was mentioned by Vygotsky: “The artwork we experience can truly expand our perspective on a certain aspect of the phenomenon; it can make us see with new eyes, draw conclusions from and combine sometimes completely heterogeneous facts. The thing is that just like any strong experience the esthetic experience creates a very tangible experience for the subsequent actions and of course always leaves a trace on our behavior.” (Pasi, 1985, p. 238) This effect of the artwork as an accumulator of energy and a stimulus for action in our current concept is much stronger in an environment created by contemporary art, due to the active participation of the viewer in the happening and in the act of creation.

These ideas correspond directly with the notion of a museum, oriented or centered on the visitor, where the idea of the need for personal comfort is crucial. Undoubtedly one of the main accents here is the provision of intellectual comfort. Hein further develops this idea in the concept of the different learning styles and modalities, in the adoption of the theory of multiple intelligences and the need for overcoming verbalism in the contact with the audience. This involves the use of drama techniques, music, video and audio materials, virtual tours, different internet resources and the design of computer models and simulations. Collaboration is also in place with libraries and with archives as well as among the very museums; the main aim is to help the visitors to construct individual meanings

under the influence of the educational statement of the expositions (Hein, 1998). The main goal is the self-development of the person by means and in the environment of the museum programs, which were created not as a counterpoint but as a continuation of the contemporary museum expositions.

2. Methodology

Within the frameworks of an exposition dedicated to World War II and set at the National Museum of War History in Sofia in March-April 2016, a museum program* was developed jointly by the contemporary art author (Morozova) and a pedagogue. The program is entitled "War post" - the conception of war as a labyrinth. This is authors' reinterpretations based on an exposition dedicated to the 70th anniversary since the end of World War II.

Philosophy of the program include the idea of the human in the centre – in the centre of history, of education, of art as an author and spectator, is not only one of the most influential in recent years but to some extent the common "thread", connecting human thinking in different spheres of life. Looking for personal identity through self-consciousness and self-cognition not only and not simply as individuality but also as concentration, mirror of family memory, is undoubtedly a complicated process with its social, historical, pedagogical and psychological dimensions. The main question, however, has always been related to the urge, the motive, the initial push, which makes human development a "self"-realized process.

At the level of pedagogical construction of an environment, favoring and provoking this personality "self-development", for a few years we have been defending the thesis that this is possible when we break the limits of the comfort, the known, the stereotyped. This could be provoked by modern art, with the opportunity to be a viewer and author at the same time and to interpret phenomena, reflecting the reality, transforming it into another reality.

Aim of the program is physical, intellectual and emotional "experiencing" of the exposition through creating and inhabiting an author's installation.

This is connected with main tasks - creating personal interpretations of the exposition through authors' "reconstruction" of the installation "War post".

Idea and content:

An author interprets their reflection on the exposition into an installation of objects – minimum 30, through modern art. The idea of the labyrinth represents the 11 threads, projected and realized in the exposition with separate and personalized examples – photographs, texts, etc. The installation is situated at the end of the exhibition in order to provide the visitors with enough time and resources to create their own idea. For this they are offered a variety of resources (copies of objects presented in the exposition), related to the exhibition and the possibility to create their own "means", proving or supporting their point of view (to write, to add). Then they have the opportunity to "inhabit" the ready installation, to change it and add resources, to create their "own story".

In the program implementation took part 4 students from the Faculty of Education.

The program is based on an indirect education strategy. The target group is adult viewers and families. The main risks were identified in relation with lack of this kind of experience and a gap between the expectations which the visitor of the War History Museum has and what he is offered. Getting out of the risk zone presumes readiness of the team to encourage activeness and to accept possible refusals or disagreement.

* The project is realized with the financial support of the National Science Fund of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and with the invaluable support of the director of the National Museum of War History.

At the preparatory stage the program was evaluated by all museum experts responsible for the museum educational programs at the National Museum of War History – a total of 8 persons, 7 women and 1 man. For the needs of the research a special expert card was designed, comprising 18 statements grouped in four observed features: content, accessibility and adequacy to the audience's needs, philosophy and goals of the program and planning of the program. A six-point grading scale was selected – 0 to 5 – spanning from “does not correspond at all” to “corresponds completely”. The experts were also asked to add some important comments and to give a final quality assessment of the program.

3. Results

The first observed feature, content, includes five statements, connected with the content cores of the exposition, the contemporary interpretations of historical facts and the development of science, as well as the reflection of community's values. The experts' grades vary from “correspond to a great extent” to “correspond completely”. Evaluations “correspond completely” were given to statements 3 and 5: The content of the program corresponds to the contemporary interpretations of history and the content of the program expresses the community's values.

The second observed feature – accessibility and adequacy to the audience's needs contains three statements referring to the age, the interests and the present knowledge of the viewers. They are graded by the experts with “correspond to a great extent”.

The evaluation of the four statements in the fourth feature - philosophy and goals of the program – is the most interesting from a researcher's point of view. Even though the median of the opinions of all statements is between “correspond to a great extent” and “correspond completely” the examination of the evaluation coherence shows that the biggest difference in the opinions of the experts concerns statement 11 The goals and the objectives of the program reflect the specifics of the audience and the aims of the museum exposition. The grades range from “correspond to a certain extent” to “correspond completely”. The comments in the expert cards don't explain this difference in opinions. On the other hand, these results might be explained with the relationship between the original goals of the exposition and expected results of the program. But are we ready and to what an extent are we ready to adopt the thesis of the contemporary museum education experts claiming that constructivist museums and constructivist learning in general presuppose a rejection of the traditional understanding of the learning results as measuring what has been learned according to the plan? It is a well-known fact that the most controversial point in the constructivist approach in education, including museum education, has always been the relation between the preliminary goals and achieved results and the impossibility to develop a strict system for evaluation of learning results. It appears that this problem might be the reason for the great variability in the experts' grades.

At the same time in the next feature – program planning – statement 14 the activities are attractive for the selected program target group shows the expert's unanimity. These data call for a reflection as to whether attractiveness can guarantee high learning results and whether the constructivist approach aims at high results in the first place?

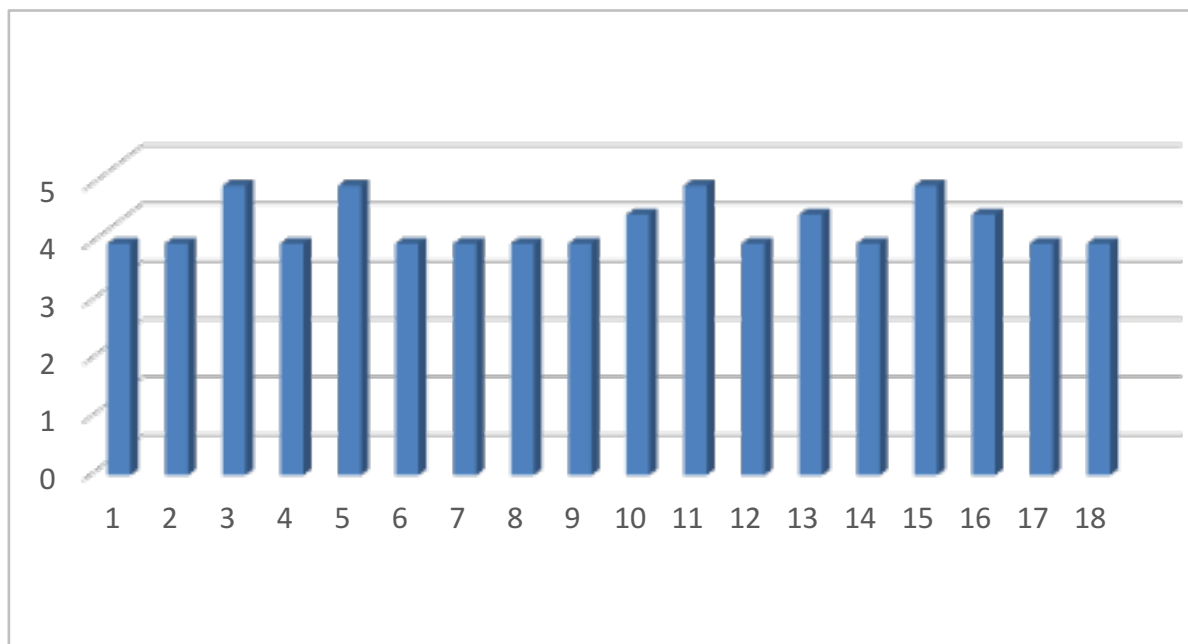
Probably by answering these questions we can explain the data from the experts' coherence study. A rank correlation of Kendall and Spearman was used and Kendall's coefficient of concordance was calculated. The data in Table 1 show that between experts 2 and 3 but also between experts 2,3 and 4 there is the highest coherence. With the rest of the experts the rank correlation coefficients are insignificant; there are even negative values, which mean that some of the experts expressed very different opinions.

Table1. Kendall's coefficient

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	-,316	-,303	-,250	,081	-,237	-,109	,141
		,755	,553	,204	,175	,218	,267
			,569	,037	-,012	-,022	,405
				,161	-,053	-,024	,235
					-,025	,035	-,363
						,344	,022
							,184

These data is confirmed also by Kendall's coefficient of concordance. As a whole its value is low which gives no reason to speak of coherence between the expert evaluation, except for the case of experts 2, 3 and 4. The value of the coefficient for them is 0,759 which is a further proof of a very high coherence. These results could be explained through the basic specialty and qualification of the experts, their personal preferences for a paradigm of museum programs, the absence of unified professional criteria for evaluation of programs, the strong creative moment in the program design and evaluation, etc.

Figure 1. Responses to the experts' questionnaire



Regardless of these data the mean values of the expert evaluation (Figure 1) range from “to a very big extent” (4) to “completely”(5) which is a proof of the program's merits. In the quality evaluation the experts highlight as main program advantages “the option for a personal interpretation”, “the chance for the viewer to feel as a co-author of the exposition”, “the visitor is placed at the center of the exposition”. But when adopting a certain approach to contemporary museum programs, to what

extent are we willing to deny the advantages of other approaches? And doesn't the key to success lie in our capability of preserving the variety of approaches and let the visitor decide?

4. Conclusion

In the last couple of years, time and time again, different authors have been rediscovering as their own the synergetic educational philosophy with its principles of compatibility, coordination and unity of action in a dynamic order of more participants, resources, methods and knowledge, in the attempt at supporting education as a care for both the preservation and the development of mankind and as personal self-improvement. Here we presented an attempt at expanding and enriching the educational environment with the opportunity to see a phenomenon through the eyes of many readers of the events, through the different levels of their interpretation, by means of a direct involvement in the creative process through contemporary art. Such an attempt means stepping outside the galleries – something that contemporary art has been doing for a many years – and an integration of art into a different museum environment, using a pedagogically-grounded and provoked intellectual game. Moreover, the presented idea makes no claim to be the only right decision but rather confirms the need for diversity where every viewer can find their place and their experience.

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