

Examples of Applying Contemporary Art Practices in the Visual Arts Curriculum in Grammar Schools

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Abstract

The experience of practitioners has confirmed that primary and secondary schools in Slovenia do not pay enough attention to contemporary art practices. Teachers do not sufficiently (or not at all) include contemporary artists in art education. Consequently, students are not informed about experiencing and receiving contemporary art. They are often unable to define it and make their own opinions about it, as they have problems understanding and reading the content and force of expression regarding contemporary artworks.

The current article shows a few examples of how grammar school teachers can successfully apply contemporary art practices in the visual arts curriculum. It presents the content-related, pedagogical-and-didactic planning and the possibilities of including contemporary art practices. The works of good quality, presented in the present article, have confirmed that contemporary art can be exceptionally interesting to students themselves, provocative and, above all, different from what they are used to.

Key words: contemporary art; curriculum; grammar school; visual arts

Introduction

Contemporary art has a major advantage: it draws from the presence. “Contemporary artists breathe in the same air as children. They both live in the same time. The problems of contemporary artworks – on an obvious or hidden, declarative or symbolic level – also apply to our children and youth” (Duh, Zupančič, 2009, p. 12). “Artists are a sensitive probe of the society and their efforts are often directed towards the exchange between nature and society, which is continually changing” (Duh, Herzog, 2012, p. 15). “Today, creative thinking is of key importance,

as only those who think creatively contribute to the development of mankind and the solving of society's problems. Art results in creative thinking, as to create art means to engage in a high level of intellectual cognitive activities" (Duh, Herzog, 2011, p. 23). There are, of course, rules in choosing the right contemporary works. Contemporary art pedagogy distinguishes two principles. The first principle refers to the diversity of selection, which includes as many different authors and their works as possible. "We thus guarantee a broad overview of a phenomenon" (Duh, Zupančič, 2009, p. 13). The second principle refers to the presentation of a single author and one of his/her works in detail. Regardless of the principle, the following criteria have to be considered in selecting the artist: "the artist's importance and the importance of his/her work, the characteristic nature of the author and his/her work, the obviousness of works and the appropriateness of content" (Zupančič, 2006, p. 33).

Art education teachers often wonder which works of art are good enough and appropriate to be presented to pupils and students. Atkinson believes that "we know that many artists today are conducting their work outside of acknowledged frameworks of art and their respective institutional forces so that their work is sometimes difficult to conceive as art, and this raises some pertinent issues relating to recognition, objects and practice" (Atkinson, 2012, p. 7). In line with the development of pedagogy, psychology, didactics and educational technology, contemporary art didactics also generates specific contemporary teaching methods. One of them is the method of aesthetic transfer.

"This is a set of didactic decisions, the aim of which is to create optimum conditions for the development of aesthetic feeling and aesthetic activity of the participants in the learning process in visual arts education. The method of aesthetic transfer considers all principles of visual arts education and incorporates most requirements of art didactics and aspects of the implementation of art activities. The method of aesthetic transfer encompasses a specific articulation of time- and content-related activities, teaching methods and techniques, motivation techniques and evaluation methods. The main emphasis is placed on the procedures of transferring aesthetic messages contained in a work of art to the recipient, i.e. the participant in the learning process" (Duh, Zupančič, 2011, p. 49).

Purpose and Aim of the Study

The purpose of the study refers to the use of findings, theories and practices for preparing and implementing possible ways of including contemporary art practices into the grammar school visual arts curriculum, and to their realisation with students enrolled in different Slovenian grammar school programmes.

The aim of the study was to show practicing experts and visual arts teachers the possibilities of incorporating contemporary art into their teaching activities, and to present them students' high-quality and successful artistic solutions resulting from such incentives.

Methodology

The study employed the descriptive method of pedagogical research. The results were analysed by qualitative pedagogical research, i.e. “a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organises and interprets information obtained from human using his or her eyes as filters” (Lichtman, 2009, p. 5). We are, thus, speaking of research in which the material was processed and analysed orally, with no measuring procedures and no mathematical operations (Mesec, 1998). This means that the results, in terms of quality paradigm, cannot be generalised independently of the environment where they were obtained. In order to include contemporary art in the grammar school visual arts curriculum, we applied the method of aesthetic transfer in three phases: “(1) perception, i.e. perception of artwork with all senses and relaxing one’s senses, (2) reception, i.e. putting images into words and (3) reaction, i.e. activity, productive reaction to a work of art” (Duh, Zupančič, 2011, p. 49).

The study was based on a case analysis, where a single case was analysed and presented systematically and in detail (Vogrinc, 2008, p. 45). The case analysis monitored individual students in their artistic and creative work. We also employed the idiographic approach to monitor the development of individual elements of studied situations, i.e. the artistic reinterpretation of contemporary art practices through the artistic and creative work of students. The study included a sample of three fourth-year female students of the university Art Education study programme at the Faculty of Education in Maribor, first-year students of the Second Grammar School in Maribor, the Third Grammar School in Maribor, and the Centre Grammar School of Art in Celje. The study was conducted in the academic years of 2009/2010, 2010/2011 and 2011/2012.

As an independent technique of data collection, document analysis was used in our study. The document comprised the chosen photograph of the monitored individuals. The technique was non-invasive and non-reactive due to its document basis. In the interpretation of results, the photographs were analysed within the framework of objective hermeneutics working with sequence analysis (Peez, 2006). The study also verified every criterion (4) for establishing the quality of document, such as authenticity, credibility, ability to convey a message, and representativeness. Besides, it fully established the correspondence between the selected photographs and all requirements. The photographs were taken so that the students were not recognisable, but every element needed for a complete interpretation of the studied problem was evident.

Results and Interpretation

Three contemporary artists were chosen for the use of contemporary works in education: the contemporary American artist Cindy Sherman, the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth and the Slovenian contemporary artist Matej Andraž Vogrinčič. The art educational task was presented applying the principle

of choosing one author and his/her work. We introduced a single author and some of his/her works, allowing the students to get to know the artist. The criteria for choosing contemporary artists were considered (Zupančič, 2006). We presented the chosen work of art in detail and used it to shape the concept of art educational work.

Using the Artwork by Cindy Sherman

In her work, Cindy Sherman uses profane iconographic themes, i.e. women from films and images from advertisements. Being the central figure of her photographs, the woman is presented as an image of a woman that is stored in our subconscious mind. Looking at the photograph, the figure seems familiar as though we had already seen it before. It is interesting that the artist herself always looks at us from the photographs but we do not even notice that. We look at the figure and perceive the emotions she expresses. The light and dark contrast conjures some special atmosphere. The face is actually the key photograph element and the one which conveys the message.



Photographs 1 and 2. Cindy Sherman: *The Office Killer*, videostill (1997) and *United Film Stills #51* (1980)

Conceptualising the Idea for Student Practical Work and Artistic Solutions

The concept of the idea predominantly referred to exploring the female identity in the modern world, and representing the female identity as a fluid and an instable notion. The students chose the artist's photograph and tried to reproduce it approaching the female figure in the photograph. They analysed the photograph trying to establish the character/role of the woman shown there. The students used this to try and create a similar figure and to take a picture of it. The following teaching aims were determined accordingly: to adopt one of the methods of contemporary art practices, create a digital photograph, repeat the figure in the photograph of the chosen conceptual artist, react to the artistic and content-based problem with the aid of modern media, create a body composition, and take a picture of it. For the students, the aim of the artistic task was to relive the aesthetical message in the artist's work and to reinterpret it through their own artistic actions.



Photographs 3 and 4. Group A: *Untitled #1 (2010)* and Group B: *Untitled #2 (2010)*

The work of students in Group A (Photograph 3) indicated an adequate understanding of the starting concept. The face was the key element of the photograph. The students showed the figure of a woman with a pensive and insecure expression waiting for what would happen next. Her gaze takes us outside the room in which the figure is standing. The work in Group B was interesting, as the students introduced a strong light and dark contrast in the composition of the photograph causing it to be dramatic.



Photographs 5 and 6. Group C: *Untitled #3 (2010)* and Group D: *Untitled #4 (2010)*

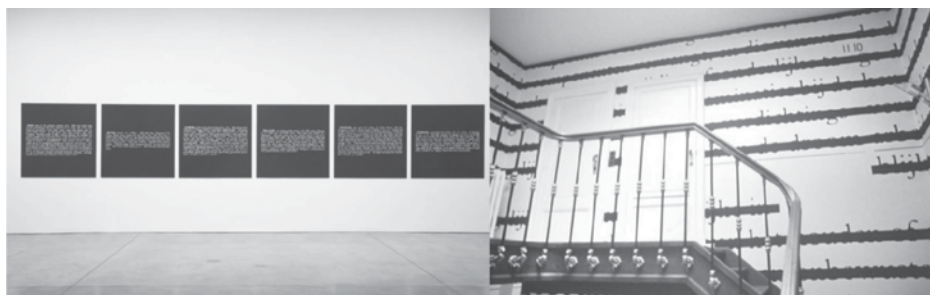
The face of the woman shown by the students in Group C (Photograph 5) was represented as a whole and the way in which the photograph and the composition were positioned expressed the issues of the woman and her attitude towards her

own body. The expressiveness of the figure is equally increased by the room itself, which is noticeable even though it is much lighter than the figure itself. The work of Group D showed a woman expressing discomfort and uneasiness of the body being observed by someone. The face is harmonised with the figure.

Using the Artwork by Joseph Kosuth

Next, we chose Joseph Kosuth and word art. We focused on one of his most famous works, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965 (Photograph 9). We also presented other works by Kosuth (*One and Three Hammers*, *Zero & Not*, *Nothing*). The basic characteristic of word art is that the artists exhibit words, not photographs. They are interested in their meaning and not in the aesthetics of writing. Instead of conventional modes of expression, galleries often exhibit words and enlarged dictionary definitions as artworks. The definition on the wall has a visual presence and evokes memories of the named object (Zupančič, 2006).

We wished to introduce the students to conceptual art and decisive role of the concept in a work of art. We particularly wanted to familiarise them with the so-called non-conventional ways of artistic expression, characteristic for conceptual art. The special feature of such a work is the appearance of words. Words and definitions appear on the wall and function as a work of art – a painting hanging on the wall. The chair which the artist used in his artwork was already made and was not made by the artist himself. We are, thus, not discussing a sculpture. The same applies to the definition of a dictionary entry, which is also not the artist's independent product. His work is actually only the photograph connecting the three ways of showing the same object, i.e. the concept which plays the decisive role.



Photographs 7 and 8. Joseph Kosuth: *Nothing* (1966) and *Zero and Not*

Conceptualising the Idea for Student Practical Work

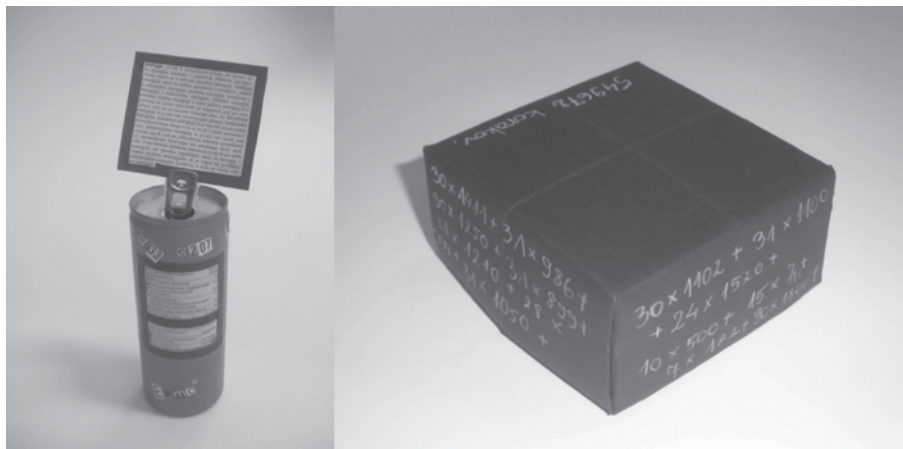
For their work of art, the students independently chose an everyday object and established a specific attitude towards it (negative, positive, provocative, etc.). The object could be of any shape. It could be mobile, an object photograph or model, a drawn object, etc. The students could artistically change and redesign the object according to their attitude towards it. They could add or take away parts of the

object or combine the object with other ones. They could decide on any kind of material. They could additionally fit out the object by including the written word that would express their attitudes, feelings, associations or provocations regarding the redesigned project and the highlighted theme. The students were allowed to freely use words such as definitions, also to make new words from dictionary clippings, and to write them upwards or backwards. Their work was based on a thoroughly considered combination of words and visual work. The students focused on designing the idea and choosing the words, not on the aesthetics of writing and its shape. The artistic task could be realised in drawing, painting, sculpting, contemporary art practices, and the media. Again, this artistic task was mainly aimed at the students' ability to find the aesthetic message in conceptual art and to reinterpret it through their own artistic actions. The idea can be related to the existing syllabus aims. The students will get to know and understand conceptual art; compare and analyse their own and their peers' work; create a conceptual product; use contemporary artistic approaches to creatively redesign the object or space; develop self-confidence and self-perception by independently carrying out artistic tasks (Syllabus, 2008).



Photographs 9 and 10. Group E: *All Nations Love Pizza* and Group F: *No Words*

Group E chose the pizza as a notion uniting different nations regardless of their political and social order. A pizza was drawn on the plate and the cutlery was painted in the colours of different flags. The concept was slightly disrupted with the use of all cutlery pieces, as it is known that a fork and a knife suffice when we eat pizza. The idea of the complete cutlery set was, thus, used because of diverse colours that should unite diverse nations in a single set – we are all the same – “we are all in a single set”. The artistic product of Group F was originally transformed: the frame and the glass surface of the sunglasses were thickly painted in various colours. The visible world is invisible and you cannot see it through the sunglasses. Those looking through such sunglasses are inevitably self-absorbed as they do not see the rest of the world. They are unable to communicate with the outside world, as they do not have a free field of vision.



Photographs 11 and 12. Student G: *Energy* and Student H: *Shoe in a Box*

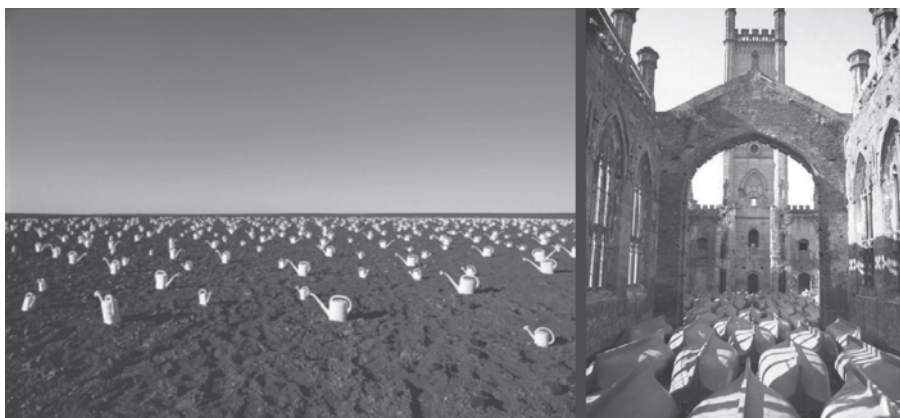
Student G painted an energy drink can red, symbolising energy. She added the definition of the word *energy* and completed her work with the $E=mc^2$ equation. She also equipped her product with international food emulsifier signs as a symbol of negative effects of energy drinks. The product was seen as a provocation dealing with the artificial and harmful stuff we consume with food. The student relied on Kosuth's work "One and Three Chairs" and presented the notion in several different ways. Student H entitled her work *The Shoe as a Keychain*. She put the shoe in a box and on the box wrote the number of steps that she had made with this keychain in her pocket.

Using the Artwork by Matej Andraž Vogrinčič

The next application presents space-specific installations in urban and natural environment and the place where they are positioned. It relates to tradition and history. We presented the students with the work signed by the contemporary Slovenian artist Matej Andraž Vogrinčič. We first focused on his works, as follows: *Untitled* (Lopate, Krasnoyarsk, 2007), *Car Park – Members Only* (2000, Adelaide, Australia), *Moon Plain* (2000, Australia), *When on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (2005, Melbourne, Australia) and *Untitled* (56 Boats, Liverpool, 2006). In his projects, Vogrinčič is always inspired by space. He starts with some space, local community, town and history. He studies the space and gets the main idea, which he develops and upgrades during the project. These are mostly usual and abandoned or neglected spaces. His monumental installations use everyday objects (clothing, toy cars, buckets, balls, boats, shovels, etc.) and transform the selected locations in visually and imaginarily challenging spaces.

We decided to present Matej Andraž Vogrinčič because of our belief that his work is a good example showing the artistic variable of colours, as we see it to be especially emphasised in all his installations. So, the students also learned about the

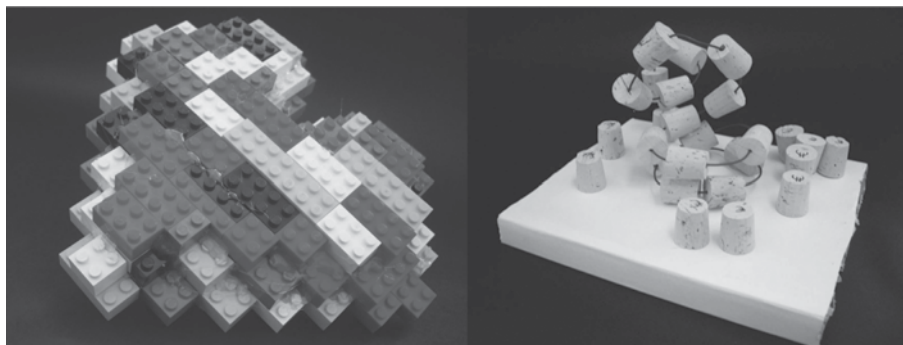
term *installation*. Installation is a contemporary art form with which the artist makes interventions in space, while combining other modes, such as painting, drawing, sculpting, architecture, scenery, sound, etc. Active participation of viewers is often required in order to experience the work of art. These works are not made to last, do not have a definite form and are adapted to every space. The majority are preserved only in the form of artistic documents – photograph, video, etc.



Photographs 13 and 14 Matej Andraž Vogrinčič, *Moon Plain*, 2000 and *Untitled (56 Boats)*, 2006

Conceptualising the Idea of Student Practical Work

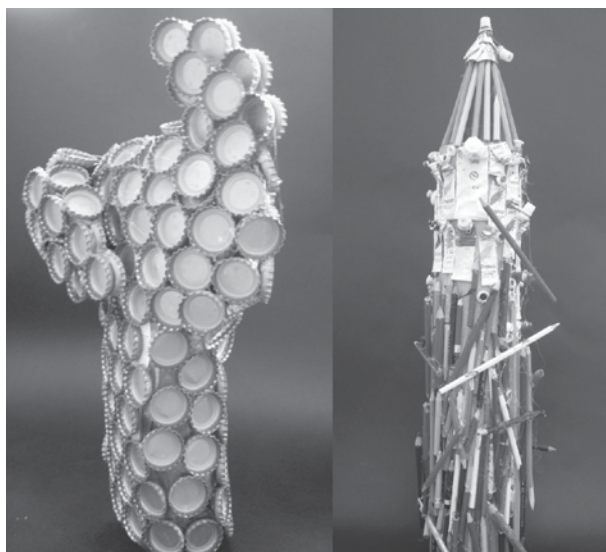
In the final concept, the students themselves chose an everyday object that should not be too big and they could bring a larger quantity of the same type of objects to school. Their next task was not to change the objects, add or take away something, nor make combinations with other objects. The students were engaged in a group discussion and decided to choose a part of Celje which they thought to be problematic or for which they wanted to stress a specific problem. They made a sculpture from the selected objects and its meaning had to correspond to the chosen material and the space in which they positioned it. They additionally equipped the product with a sketch, a photograph of an installation, an explanation of what they meant to express with the work and the dimensions of the sculpture in real-life. The artistic task was realised in sculpting but it could have also been done in drawing or painting. The students' aim was to make a sculpture from the same kind of objects while considering the artistic variable of colours. We wanted their products to express a critical view of the events around them. The idea can be related to the existing syllabus aim (Syllabus 2008). The students will develop their self-confidence and self-perception while independently solving artistic tasks, analysing their own and their peers' sculptures and those of artists - from the viewpoint of artistic expression - which they compare with the content-based and technological analyses (the message and meaning of the work of art). They also develop a sense of gradual and planned sculpturing (the appearance of sculpture).



Photographs 15 and 16. Group K: *Don't Play with Me* and Group L: *Save-Put Aside*

The students in Group K made a sculpture from Lego blocks. Given the possibility, they would erect it in front of the Town Hall in Celje. They wanted their work to express that people holding high positions have the power and influence to change things; they are just “playing” all the time, instead. The heart-shaped sculpture indicates that love should conquer all. The students were original in their choice of material which they sensibly combined with the place where the sculpture should stand and its interpretation.

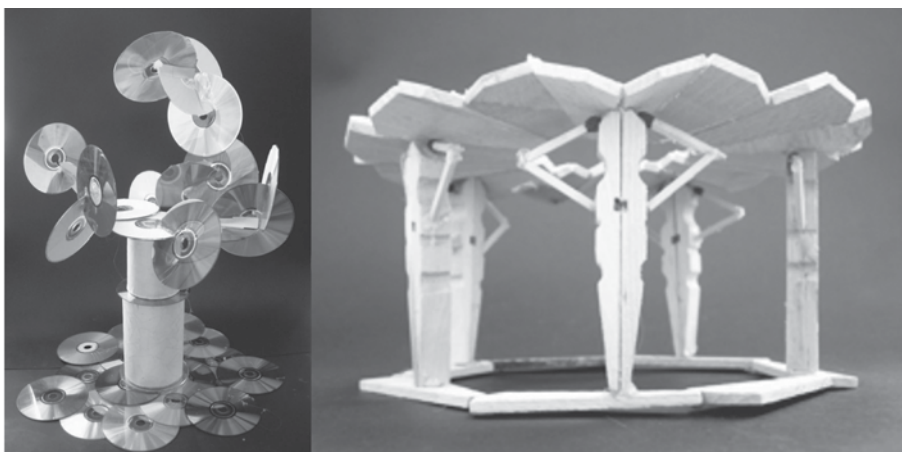
The students in Group L made a sculpture which was a model of a rubbish bin, which they would erect in front of the City Centre Celje shopping mall. They wished to point out the problem of consumer-driven culture. People often spend their money on things they do not even need and are thus “throwing the money away”. Perhaps seeing this rubbish bin, people would stop and think and, next time, perhaps they would buy only the things they actually need.



Photos 17 and 18 Group M: *A Dancing Figure* and Group N: *GCC in Colours*

The students in Group M made a lively sculpture from crown corks of alcoholic beverages. They would erect it in the town park. Their work was aimed at pointing out the problem of alcohol consumption among the youth, who spend their weekends partying in the park. The students were original in connecting the place of the sculpture and its shape, reminiscent of a dancing figure. Another original aspect was also the chosen material.

The students in Group N used old coloured pencils and empty colour tubes to make a sculpture of a gigantic coloured pencil. They would erect it in front of the Grammar School of Art in Celje. Their message was that the strict and dull walls of the school hide a colourful and creative world. The pencil standing in front of their school would be a recognisable sign of their orientation and would attract others to join them in their creative work. We believe that the students used original material, related to the chosen location of the sculpture.



Photographs 19 and 20. Group O: *CD-Tree* and Group P: *An Oasis amidst Industry*

The students in Group O made a sculpture using old CDs. The sculpture was reminiscent of a tree. They would erect it somewhere on the way to the Celje Mountain Hut, where its position would make it visible from afar. Their work was aimed at expressing that, instead of going into nature, young people often spend their days at a computer. These students were also very original in naming their work (CDrevo; drevo = tree).

The students in Group P would erect their sculpture in the town park. They wished to point out excessive demands on nature and its resources and to call for recycling. The human silhouettes and the way in which they are holding hands show that people are not indifferent and nicely corroborate the recycling idea. The silhouettes equally symbolise human power. Humankind can change the world, make sure there is a better tomorrow and preserve our environment.

Conclusion

The article presents some of the successful examples of contemporary art practices applied to the art work of grammar school students. The results allow us to conclude that similar individual and high-quality results could also be obtained if other contemporary artists were included in visual arts education in secondary schools. Starting from the results, it is possible to suggest a theory according to which the same pedagogical starting points may enable students to work or get engaged in artistic creations, dependent on their individual abilities and personalities, with different aesthetic impulses. Summarising King's thoughts (King et al., 1994), we can say that, in qualitative research, the research into more than one case predominantly confirms the causal connection conclusions, which gives them a higher and more general value. The results of the study indicate that contemporary art can be very attractive and provocative even for students who, in these post-modern times, have everything in excess, and are difficult to motivate for artistic creation. They can also find a challenge for expressing themselves. The results of such challenges were exceptionally surprising. We can, thus, agree with Atkinson (2012, p. 17) saying that "we need pedagogies that are open to the irreducible singularity of what happens; pedagogies that can be fed and nourished by the surprise of the unexpected. Such pedagogies would then be pedagogies of the event within their respective functioning contexts." It is through such approaches that we can succeed in our educational work in the field of art, in raising the youth's awareness of what contemporary art is and what it conveys.

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Primjeri primjene suvremene prakse u umjetnosti u kurikulumu vizualne umjetnosti u osnovnoj školi

Sažetak

Iskustvo praktičara potvrdilo je da osnovne i srednje škole u Sloveniji ne pridaju dovoljno pažnje praksi suvremene umjetnosti. Učitelji nedovoljno, ili uopće ne uključuju djela suvremenih umjetnika u umjetničko obrazovanje. Shodno tome učenici nemaju dovoljno informacija o doživljavanju i razumijevanju suvremene umjetnosti. Često ju nisu u mogućnosti definirati ni iznijeti osobno mišljenje, budući da imaju problem u razumijevanju, iščitavanju sadržaja i načina izražavanja u djelima suvremene umjetnosti.

Rad prikazuje nekoliko načina na koje učitelji osnovne škole mogu u kurikulumu vizualnih umjetnosti uspješno primijeniti radove suvremene umjetnosti. Prikazano je pedagoško-didaktičko planiranje zasnovano na sadržaju i mogućnosti uključivanja suvremene umjetnosti. Navedeni primjeri dobre prakse potvrdili su da suvremena umjetnost može biti vrlo zanimljiva učenicima, provokativna i iznad svega drugačija od uobičajene prakse.

Ključne riječi: *kurikulum; osnovna škola; suvremena umjetnost; vizualna umjetnost*