

Message: Teenagers into art!

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The Moderna Museet in Stockholm has been working with art education since the early 1960's. Yet have I never heard the education curators being so encouraged in their work, as when they heard about the great interest for their new, innovative, programme for teenagers called Zon Moderna, from the just opened and much talked about 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan.

I think the happiness had two sources: First and foremost the fact that colleagues in a different part of the world, and furthermore working in one of the most interesting new museums for contemporary art in recent years, showed interest. The fact that Japan in the West in recent years have been so strongly associated with its globally influential youth culture – but also with the “youth issue” that have become a concern in Japanese society – made the honour even greater.

The second source of happiness had to do with the fact that Zon Moderna with its focus on teenagers and adolescents actually radically challenged both a long-standing tradition European art education and a Western infatuation with the idea of the small child's (but absolutely not the teenager's) close links

with art. This idea of the close links between the small child and art has been present at least since the Enlightenment and escalated during Romanticism to go into full bloom during Modernism. It is therefore hardly surprising that educational activities for small children were given prominence in the model for European museums of modern art that evolved in the 1950's: The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art outside Copenhagen and last but not least the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Guided tours and workshops for kids, where they could draw, paint and model, were soon *de rigeur* for any ambitious museum of modern art.

Behind this trend lies the idea that “art” has a generally beneficial effect on the child's development. This is probably true, but I believe that it is primarily a focus on *the visual* that is good. All research underlines that the visual dimension plays a vital part in the development of the small child, but that it eventually gives way to our society's focus on the textual. A major hitch in this context is the confusion between art and visuality – a mistake indicating that even though nearly 100 years have passed, we have not quite taken in the significance of what Marcel Duchamp

tried to convey. Could it be that we still slip into old romantic ideas – ideas that were inherited by modernism – of the close affinity between “the artist, the fool and the child”? This mindset is in direct conflict with a contemporary definition of art that, besides pointing to the fundamental importance of the institution and the context in even beginning to define something as art, also emphasises the extreme complexity of the work of art. One particularly intriguing and rarely discussed side of the romantic-modernist perspective on the child's privileged relationship to art is that it is in direct opposition to one of the fundamental assumptions of art education, namely that, “the more you know, the more you see”.

I am not arguing that art education for children is a mistake – I am just indicating that the extreme focus on small children has helped to keep other groups – groups that perhaps would benefit much more from the encounter with art – out of the museum. One group in particular I am thinking of is the teenagers. They are not always as endearing as five- or seven-year-olds. At the same time lazy slackers and boisterous, pimply and loud, we often think. But, they are also the most likely group among the museum's

audience for whom art – and the artist as an alternative role-model – may be most important! They are in that very phase of life, when they are breaking away from the past, from their parent's values and perspectives, in an attempt to formulate, or rather, reformulate, their identity. Is it not so, that a teenager's position is very like that of art? Like art the teenager challenges boundaries and conventions, reformulate the given and formulates the new. And we can rest assured that teenagers perceive much more in art than a five-year-old – simply because they know so much more!

This was basically the foundation for the creation of Zon Moderna in 2004: The realization of the potential of art for teenagers – coupled with an awareness that they, paradoxically, are the audience to whom the museum has given the least priority. Zon Moderna is an art education programme – or perhaps it should merely be called an art project – for teenagers. Each term it involves some twenty upper secondary school pupils, one of the museum's art educators and a leading artist – but it reaches many other by spreading rings on the water – actually thousands of pupils and teachers each year. At Zon Moderna pupils and schools

from different parts of Stockholm meet – we interact across the boundaries that divide a major city: class, ethnic and cultural divides.

The result to date – after twelve terms and hundreds of pupils – exceeds our wildest expectations. Thousands of their student friends have come to the museum to see the result – and the idea of going to the Moderna Museet is now quite natural for a teenager in Stockholm. Personally, I would like to relate what joy I feel when a pupil suddenly takes the leap from producing nice things – a nice picture for example – to making art. How the picture is suddenly imbued with unique meaning, how it suddenly formulates something unique with the incomparable precision and openness of art.

All this was created in a sense in competition with and challenging the idea that art education is for small children – and for adults – and the only thing museums should be preoccupied with. Therefore it was so important for the educational staff at the Moderna Museet to be seen and understood by their Japanese colleagues from Kanazawa. They also saw the great potential in investing in art education for teenagers. Perhaps they also perceived the hope that is always inher-

ent in art and the artist role. In an era when young people could reasonably feel pessimistic about the future, in light of world poverty, climate change, war and repression and while the media and entertainment industry have a firm hold, art points towards unknown escape routes. When it feels like there is nowhere to run to, art represents another feeling – there is always a way forward, always another way of opening up the closed structures. Art can simply give hope to younger generations! Zon Moderna proves that – and I know that the programmes at The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art successfully prove the same. Thank you for a wonderful and very stimulating exchange over the years – and warm congratulations on you 5-year anniversary!