

Adults and art



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Introduction





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*If art is
to become
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and what it can
give us.*

When does art happen to us?

Fans and admirers of stories about the adventures of the extraordinary inhabitants of the Moominvalley certainly remember the troubles, which resulted from moving the Moomin family to the lighthouse. Spending months on a rocky, isolated island, in an inaccessible and mysterious space, far from the idea of a cosy home, individual members of the family try to find their own place and activities that would allow them to give meaning and rhythm to the daily bustle. Although everyone bravely tries to cope with this challenge, getting used to the new situation does not come easy. Resourceful and attentive to the daily needs of the family, Moominmamma endures these conditions with admirable dedication and faith in positive thinking. She cooks, cleans, comforts, reconciles, sustains; she even tries to fertilize a tiny piece of land with seaweed to plant a rose bush brought from home. When her efforts do not bring the expected results, as the little garden is washed by waves and destroyed by strong gusts of wind, Moominmamma brings from the attic a couple of paints and old brushes, and starts painting what she misses most: the surroundings of the cosy veranda in the beloved Moominvalley. One day, when the family gathers in the kitchen for tea, as every evening, they are surprised to discover that Moominmamma is not there. She disappeared in the depths of the garden she had painted on the wall.

The adventure that happened to Moominmamma could happen to any of us. In the difficult moments of life, the need to move elsewhere, where the concerns of daily life will not follow us, seems to be a natural human reaction. We instinctively seek a safe haven, a place where we can find peace, be alone, rest, hear our own voice, feel at home, face our fears, longings, despair, the mystery of existence. The idea of just imagining such a place and returning to it whenever we want is by no means new or rare. The story

of Moominmamma painting adventure accurately describes the special ‘duality’ of human nature – our ability to move between the physically experienced reality and the subjectively experienced reality.¹

Art – and creative activity in general – can draw us in, completely absorb us; it allows us to act passionately. Physically, we are here, but at the same time, we are somewhere beyond the reality understood and described in its material aspect. Deep in ourselves? Outside ourselves? We are ‘here’ and ‘not here’ at the same time. In this sense, the artistic experience is an act of balancing on the border between the two worlds: physical and imaginary, which interpenetrate and refer to each other.

American art psychologist Ellen Winner devoted many years to study these mysterious properties of art. In the laboratory created as part of the Harvard program ‘Project Zero’, she tested how art works, how it affects us, what reactions it causes, what are the feelings of its recipients and how they interpret their impressions. In her search for the essence of the influence of art, she distinguished a common denominator, which combines various examples of artistic expressions. She recognized as an indispensable and universal property of art its ability to evoke ‘imaginative experience’. Our active contact with the work of art takes us from the literally understood, physically experienced reality to the imaginary world. ‘All forms of art – whether visual art, music, literature or dance – invite us to enter into an imaginary space, taking us away from “non-art reality”.’²

The operation of this mechanism can be easily observed in a simple experiment: simply take look at a dynamic line drawn on a piece of paper – we

¹ Ellen Winner, *How Art Works. A Psychological Exploration*, New York 2019, pp. 12–13.

² Ibidem.

can see it as a chart of the exchange rate, an outline of a mountain panorama or an expressive record of a strong emotion.



The interpretation of a drawing depends on its context, our attitude and assumptions about the intention of its author.

Our perception of art (especially contemporary art) functions in a similar way: the assignment of an object (or its reproduction) to the category 'art' or 'not art' will generally depend on the context: whether it is located in a space intended for art, whether it was noticed and chosen for presentation as an expression of a certain thought or emotion, or whether we decide on its status on our own (it evokes a reaction similar to that we attribute to art). The illusory and ambiguous nature of our belief about the character and artistic status of the given object can be proved by divergent and often contradictory reactions to specific artistic proposals, especially in the field of contemporary art – we all know anecdotes about the gallery staff who, after the vernissage, 'cleaned up' the work of art, considering it as a mess left after the lavish banquet. Such situations most clearly highlight the double status of a work of art: for some people it will be a worthless collection of random objects, for others it becomes a creative composition of elements, the meaning of which they try to decode and understand.

Adopting such a psychological perspective means that we can look at art not as a collection of human-made artefacts, but rather as situations in which we perceive these artefacts as art: when they send us somewhere, they do something with us, they move something inside us, wake us up, engage us. It is not about them being art, but becoming art.

This is precisely how Marcel Duchamp, considered the patron of the modern understanding of art, saw its meaning: not in the pure influence on the sense of sight, but in the ability to evoke our response. ‘The creative act is not performed by the artist alone’, he wrote. ‘The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.’³ Researcher and specialist in the theory of aesthetic education, Irena Wojnar also claimed that ‘the very fact of the presence of art, even widely disseminated, is [...], in a sense, a casual fact, i.e., the possibility of having impact, but not yet a necessity of doing so’.⁴ Stefan Szuman, an outstanding psychiatrist and researcher of cognitive processes, emphasized that the world of art does not open up to us automatically, and a work of art ‘begins to live its life only when it finds a resonance in us’⁵ – it becomes a mirror in which we see the world and experience it anew. Every work carries a certain potential, but this potential – in order to work – needs activation, completion.

³ Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp. A Biography*, New York 2014, p. 393.

⁴ Irena Wojnar, *Teoria wychowania estetycznego* [Theory of Aesthetic Education], Warszawa 1980, p. 151.

⁵ Stefan Szuman, *O sztuce i wychowaniu estetycznym* [On Art and Aesthetic Education], Warszawa 1969, p. 20.

Researchers pay attention to what happens when a work of art triggers a reaction in us, sends an impulse to which we do not want to remain indifferent. It ceases to be the result of someone's work, and becomes the agent. In this sense, art is not permanent but rather happens only sometimes – when we are ready to open up to it. Works of art function by interacting with our experience and all our cognitive processes that occur when we come into contact with them. They can also remain closed, unread, mute – when they do not provoke any reaction in us. Art comes and goes. It is present when we make room for it and when we simply need it.

Moominmamma's artistic adventure came to an end when the garden she painted lost its secret power and again became a simple plastered wall. The island became peaceful, the family finally considered the lighthouse to be their new, real home. 'I wanted to find out', thought Moominmamma. 'And I was right. It's obvious I can no longer enter this garden, because I stopped missing our home.'⁶

The story of the ability to cope with one's own confusion and longing freed by art allows us to see – apart from the belief shared by many of us about the therapeutic power of creativity – a certain general characteristic of experiencing art. Even the most perfect and widely recognized masterpiece will not be able to move the viewer who will simply not need it at the given moment. Indeed, such a viewer can appreciate its external features, check it out on the list of holiday attractions or snap a photo to place it in an album, but the real interaction needs something more – the meeting requires a conscious pause and a taking a look not only at the presented object, but also inside oneself. It requires tuning in to the topic, place,

⁶ Tove Jansson, *Tatuś Muminka i morze* [Moominpappa at Sea], translated into Polish by Teresa Chłapowska, Warszawa 1977, p. 190.

context, mood of the work one is viewing as well as one's own readiness for such experiences.

In our book, we want to look at art as a meeting place, where two groups of people face each other: on the one side, those who examine themselves and the world from behind the easel, through the lens of a camera or camcorder, with a chisel, a soldering iron, a loom or their own body as matter and a tool for creative inquiry, and on the other, people willing to follow the paths indicated by artists to discover what they may not yet know about the world and about themselves. We will look at the circumstances and conditions that allow art to work – to speak directly to us, move us, take us 'elsewhere'. We will also reflect on what hinders personal engagement with art, and often even prevents it.

We will look for clues and leads that can help us switch to the creative perception of art. The keys that open the passage to the world of imagination; the crossovers that lead us to the tracks of various possible connections between what we see and what can happen when we activate emotions, senses, intellect. Each of these trips will depend on the particular baggage of feelings, knowledge and experiences with which we board the train. It will also depend on whether we decide to board this train at all and – whether we will get to the right platform.

If art is to become a personally engaging experience for us, we must first determine what we actually expect from it and what it can give us.

What does art do to us?

We started by asking ourselves this question first.

Our colleagues from the Małopolska Institute of Culture in Kraków accepted our invitation to a creative workshop, during which, sharing personal artistic fascinations, as well as supporting ourselves with sculptures made of plasticine and designing pictorial symbols, we reflected on how art affects us.

Based on our individual experiences, we noted spontaneous and, in our opinion, quite widespread reactions to various types of art, discovered in different circumstances. We had thus created a vast field of potential influences of art, which we then recorded in the form the following 'cloud of meanings':



The image of art composed on the basis of these statements seems very attractive and intense. Art makes us stop at something. It asks us: Why? What is behind it? It gives us space to disappear, to escape. It brings us closer to others. It makes us hear our inner melody. Having before our eyes such a variety or even a 'storm' of possibilities, we could expect that the contact with art would work with the power of electric discharge. If art can comfort and shock, outrage and delight, stimulate thinking, tear away from reality and activate imagination – it should basically be difficult for us to pass by it indifferently. Its potential seems enormous, and its sense of existence – indisputable. It does sometimes happen, but mostly it is not the case.

The world of art captured in this way seems to be an attractive area full of strong sensations, stimulating imagination and reflection; an area we would like to look into in search of inspiration, respite, entertainment or simply beauty. Everyone knows someone who cannot live without contact with art, but for the vast majority of people, the relationship with art is far less meaningful and engaging. Social research shows that over half of Poles have never been to a museum or art gallery, and only 1% visit them regularly.⁷

Even if we belong to the group of art lovers, we will probably admit that indeed, reactions to selected works of art and artistic practices can be strong, but the romantic image of the shocking power of art is not confirmed in its universal perception: art is somewhere nearby, kind of in a separate world of its own, one that is attractive to connoisseurs and experts, but

⁷ Marek Krajewski, Filip Schmidt, *Wizualne Niewidzialne. Sztuki wizualne w Polsce – stan, rola i znaczenie* [Invisible Visuals. Visual Arts in Poland – State, Role and Meaning], Warszawa 2018, p. 17.

which is detached from 'ordinary people', for whom art is very often indecipherable. Although the repertoire of the potential effects of art on our lives may seem substantial, even in the case of people with high sensitivity to art, we cannot expect an intense reaction to everything that artists and creators propose. For art does not 'do' all of this at once. Sometimes you want it and sometimes you do not.

Is the rest of the world beyond its influence and reach? Why does art not cause widespread interest and enthusiasm? Why do we often prefer to leave dealing with art to experts and connoisseurs? Why is art so rarely the subject of daily conversation?

Why are we looking for answers to these questions? Because we are convinced that the absence of art in our everyday life deprives us of a valuable tool that – if consciously and skilfully used – can not only provide us with aesthetic experiences, satisfy the need for beauty, provide entertainment, sensitize us to multidimensional relationships with people and the environment, but also allow us to gain insight into ourselves and to better understand who we are.

We also believe that 'something is not right here'. It seems that when considering the reasons for the poor presence of art in the social circulation, we omit something important that could explain why art is rejected and does not reach many people, why – unlike other types of creative disciplines: film, music, literature – it is considered difficult, inaccessible, not intended for 'ordinary people'. Perhaps we are dealing with a kind of cognitive 'fissure' which results in the mismatch of the ways of presenting and disseminating art and the real needs, expectations, sensitivity and interests of its potential recipients.

We will look at the obstacles that prevent us from establishing a personal relationship with art with an attempt to disarm or bypass them, and sometimes perhaps even creatively use them as a kind of provocation or challenge leading to an initiation and personal involvement in the world of art.

What is our relationship with art?

Authors of the report *Invisible Visuals. Visual Arts in Poland – State, Role and Meaning*⁸ claim that art is a social phenomenon of troublesome status, something at the same time marginal and important.

On the one hand, we can talk about the institutional recognition of the importance of art, which is expressed in the creation, maintenance and promotion of the collections of ancient and contemporary art. This means that in cultural policy, art is considered an important and valuable area of social life; particular budget resources are allocated to art, expert staff are employed and trained, academic studies – artistic as well as those in art history – are conducted, creative scholarships are funded, the art market is being developed, and collections and investment programs are created to encourage investing capital in works of art. On the other hand, we can discern in everyday conversations and in social research the widespread distrust towards art (especially contemporary art) and uncertainty about its meaning and sense. Uncertainty, and often even aversion to art, manifests itself in the misunderstanding signalled by many people and related to the works presented as important statements and comments about the

⁸ Marek Krajewski, Filip Schmidt, *Wizualne Niewidzialne. Sztuki wizualne w Polsce – stan, rola i znaczenie* [Invisible Visuals. Visual Arts in Poland – State, Role and Meaning], Warszawa.

world. Messages issued by the creators are not instantly intelligible; it requires effort to comprehend their meaning, and the final message, when read, may strike us as a cliché unworthy of our attention.

The same people who willingly engage in conversations about favourite films, music or fashion, fall silent with embarrassment (sometimes also with irritation or disdain) when talking about visual arts. 'I don't know much about it', 'I'm not interested in it', 'it's not for me' – in all these often-heard reactions we can recognize the belief that dealing with art requires some sort of prerequisite knowledge. It is a paradox that our attitude to the field of creativity, which operates with means that are supposed to directly affect our senses and emotions, remains one of indifference, and we rationalize our impassivity by claiming an insufficiency of knowledge that we have no intention of acquiring.

This ambiguous social status of art, consisting of the belief that it is both important and marginal, may indicate that its potential remains hidden; not necessarily because most of us are not sufficiently interested in or sensitive to it, and are unprepared for its reception, but because of the weak presence of art in our environment, its isolation – in a literal sense – its confinement to specialized institutions and functioning mainly in a professional, expert circulation.

How do we try to explain this state of affairs?

In the discourse describing the condition of modern society, art is usually treated as an elite phenomenon: it requires knowledge and reception skills, free time that we could devote to entertainment and development of our own interests, as well as the money to travel to places where we can see

impressive art collections or spectacular artistic realisations. In this context, we can also hear explanations that art enjoys recognition in affluent societies, while we in Poland are still an ‘aspiring society’, which in the individual plan translates into a hierarchy of needs: first, we care about the basics of living, only then we can think about pleasures and self-realisation.

One of the commonly raised reasons for the marginalisation of art is the Polish educational system, in which art is neglected, and even good teachers are not able to cope with the task of conducting a course in art history and developing the creative abilities, interests and needs of their students. Exhibition institutions, in turn, are specialized in a limited catalogue of tasks: storing, preserving, researching, promoting art – and it is for such tasks that they select their staff (for example, in the museum, there are no positions of an art therapist, handicraft teacher or psychologist). This results in the perception of art as a specific section of culture, the interaction with which requires specific competences.

Art issues are also largely ignored by the media; if the media decide to take up a topic related to art (especially contemporary art), they usually present it as provocative or controversial. Finally, art is sometimes perceived as an area full of reefs and shoals and strange currents, which many experts and critics also highlight as the reason for the intuitive aversion to it.

When we juxtapose these numerous co-occurring causes of the absence of art in social circulation, it becomes clear that the ‘world of art’ and the ‘world of life’ are poorly intertwined. It is very difficult to constructively address such complex and multidimensional conditions to propose some systemic change. However, institutions, communities, people involved in the dissemination of art, can create their own exhibition, their own promotional, educational, animation solutions that will help encourage a wider

audience to make use of art. In order to support them, we will look at the presence (or absence) of art in our everyday life from a slightly different perspective and try to find out what art can bring to this life and how it can penetrate into the world of the 'ordinary' people and under what circumstances it can speak to us.

We live in a culture of images, so there is no way to escape their impact on us. What content from the world of visual arts reaches us and how? What does not reach us and why? Are we so indifferent and uninterested? How to work with what art 'does' to us? Where is there a place for art in our lives? What can it give us?

In the following chapters we will look for favourable conditions, organisational and exhibition solutions, inspiring educational and animation activities that can 'unblock the flows' between the world of art and the world of our everyday experiences.

Why do we need art and what can we expect from it?

What is the purpose of art? How and can it be useful?

In her essay opening the publication *Art in Our Century*, which explains the mechanisms governing today's 'art world' in an interesting and often perverse way, Hanna Wróblewska describes the changing conditions and understanding of the role of art in subsequent periods of its development. 'It [the role of art and the position of the artist] was once supposed to serve – the religion, the ruler and the court – and the works were often made by nameless authors. Later, art became more and more accessible, and to the new social strata as well, and became increasingly individualized

(artists gained names, became important people in the society). Art balanced between the task of describing reality and the aesthetic values (fine arts!), which so often served the clients of salons, the art dealers or galleries as criteria in their choices. The 20th (and 21st) century gave art autonomy and granted the artist almost unlimited freedom to cross artistic and intellectual boundaries (fine arts do not have to be beautiful), but it also democratised art and made it more connected with reality. Over time, the demand emerged that art be an instrument of intellectual, social or even political change. Artists therefore reached for more appropriate measures – sometimes to the dismay of the viewer, another artist, gallery or a wide audience. Today, the artist has to negotiate not only their position in society – in order to be seen, heard and recognized – but also the role of art itself.⁹

The contemporary world highly values art – its high status is evidenced by, among others, rich museum infrastructure, programs supporting artistic education and facilitating access to it for people of various age and social groups, prestige enjoyed by the history of art as a field of academic studies, or vertiginous prices achieved at auctions by selected works of art. Nevertheless, our encounters with art do not always go as we would like: we often leave the museum disappointed that we did not experience anything special; we may even feel ashamed that ‘something is wrong with us’, since we are unable to open ourselves to the transformational experience that should come about through the contact with art. The main problem, however, is not the recipient, but rather the usual ways of presenting art and teaching about it, which are responsible for this state of affairs.

⁹ Hanna Wróblewska, *Dlaczego na wystawach sztuki współczesnej jest tak mało obrazów?* [Why Are There So Few Paintings in Contemporary Art Exhibitions?], [in:] Sztuka w naszym wieku [Art in Our Century], Warszawa 2015, pp. 10–11.

It is generally accepted that art cannot be assigned specific tasks and goals, but thinking in this way, we fall into a trap: we close ourselves to the diversity of influences and meanings that can be brought by contact with the creative endeavours of artists. The philosopher Alain de Botton and art historian John Armstrong, authors of the best-selling book *Art as Therapy*,¹⁰ see the main reason for the weak impact of art in the reluctance of contemporary institutions and artistic circles to question the function of art. The questions ‘What is the purpose of art?’ and ‘What is the use of art?’ are considered awkward, inadequate, unnecessary – and as such they are generally dismissed or neglected.

Although art is appreciated, its meaning and importance are often assumed as a certain obviousness that needs no explanations. Questions about the reasons and aims of creating art are usually put to its creators, researchers and theoreticians; they are rarely addressed to non-artists. Deep down, we believe that artists should decide for themselves what they do, in accordance with processes that they sometimes do not fully understand themselves. We are possessed by a romantic approach to high art, an approach that considers art as a mysterious force, which should not be interfered with by ‘ordinary people’. We do not ask ourselves about our expectations towards art, which is why it is difficult for us to look in the field of art for something for ourselves, consistent with our needs.

Without questioning the changes described by art experts in the understanding of the role and tasks of artistic creation in various periods and cultural circles, and especially its ambiguous, fluid boundaries today, it is worth thinking of art as a rich, diverse record of human experiences. Now that we have access to the forms of artistic expression present in different

¹⁰ Alain de Botton, John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy*, London 2016, p. 68.

cultural circles from all around the world, we can doubt the belief that we are at the point of history 'after the great avant-gardes' and therefore we have a reserved, 'post-servile' idea on what are the tasks of art. The basic desires, needs, sensitivity to beauty have never been revoked – what may seem 'out of date' to connoisseurs, is for many people an 'accurate', strongly resonating, necessary and important expression of their deep beliefs, hopes, fears, emotions.

Inspired by the ways of thinking about art indicated by de Botton and Armstrong, it is worth to look at the potential therapeutic properties and functions of art; of course, in a common, not clinical sense of the term – just as we commonly talk about the therapeutic effect of holidays, talking with a loved one or a well-chosen book. Similarly, contact with art can also positively affect many aspects of our everyday life by improving our mood, nurturing relationships with others, overcoming fears and prejudices.¹¹

Authors of the therapeutic concept of art distinguish seven functions that correspond to our existential needs:

ART SUPPORTS OUR MEMORY: it is the mechanism and carrier of experiences and observations that we would like to preserve and share with others;

ART PROVIDES US WITH HOPE: it allows us to have constant access to images that make us feel good and are uplifting;

ART GIVES DIGNITY TO SUFFERING AND SADNESS: it reminds us that they are an integral part of a good life;

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 4–5.

ART EMPHASIZES THE VARIOUS PROPERTIES OF LIFE: it can serve as a mirror in which we look at different dimensions of our personality – we make a balance, discover what we lack, what we need to compensate, what is our typical characteristic;

ART IS A GUIDE TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE: thanks to art, we can express what is important to us and inconceivable to language;

ART BROADENS THE SCOPE OF OUR EXPERIENCE: it allows us to go beyond the circle of directly available sensations and observations; what initially appears as ‘strange’ can provide us with reflections on ourselves and our attitude towards the world; it allows us to discover and enrich our ideas about the world;

ART IS A TOOL FOR ‘RE-SENSITISING’: it strips reality of its conventional meaning, allows us to look deeper, rethink and re-perceive objects, items, places and people that we saw many times before.¹²

As we begin to review the ways of entering into meaningful relationships with art, we will focus not so much on the aesthetic, but on the cognitive and emotional dimension of art. At the same time, we will look at situations in which adults can ‘switch’ to modes of thinking, acting, reading and responding to reality other than those conditioned by their daily tasks.

We will consider what the actual relation of adults towards art looks like. Are we able to wonder? What do we see when we look? Are we coping with misunderstanding? What does it mean to us, what and how do we understand it from the perspective of the reality we think we see? What do we

¹² Ibidem, pp. 58–59.

choose for ourselves from this image of the reality around us, and how do we choose it? What do we want to remember? What draws our attention and why? When is experience born?

In the case of children and young people, we wrote about various ways of using art to get to know oneself, recognize and process emotions, build relationships with others, express one's feelings, create one's image, launch various modes of studying and experiencing the world, explore imagination, speak the language of images and metaphors, to go beyond purely rational and logical understanding of reality.¹³ In this developmental approach to education, learning about art is the starting point for personal creative expression. What is important is not only what resonates in us and how it resonates, but also what we achieve with this process: whether it allows us to better understand ourselves, quiet down, inspire, let go of the unimportant and focus on what we really care about. The proposed educational influences in the field of art were also aimed at gradually discovering and learning the languages used by art.

However, while children and young people participate in educational processes, adults are no longer required to do so. In order to encourage them to participate in the proposed activities, it is necessary to offer them an attractive framework for contact with art. Something that will make us want to 'switch to another track'; something that will allow us to understand why it is worth engaging in various creative activities.

The famous British historian Mary Beard, commenting on today's views on the art of different cultures and historical periods, points out that the

¹³ Magdalena Kosno, Mikołaj Spodaryk, *Dzieci i sztuka* [Children and Art], Kraków 2021; Magdalena Kosno, Elżbieta Kaproń, *Nastolatki i sztuka* [Teenagers and Art], Kraków 2023.

history of art is not only the story of its creators – artists who painted and sculpted. ‘It is also the story of men and women... who watched, interpreted what they saw and the changing ways in which they did it.’¹⁴ Following this way – taking the perspective of the audience who make their own creative contribution to the work of art – we will look at the various dimensions of meetings with art; however, our interest will be focused more on the experiences of people viewing the works of art and experiencing adult life, than on the works themselves.

The ways of understanding our relations with the world of art presented in the present book are based on concepts taken from the works of numerous researchers and practitioners of art education – psychologists, educators, philosophers – as well as the creators themselves, proposing unusual paths of experiencing and processing the reality around us. In order to reflect on the role of art in our lives, we also invited people who use it in their professional lives: for therapeutic, animation, and project work. Based on the most important dimensions of the impact of art and ways of developing our own creative abilities, we propose sets of activities that can support the processes of building in-depth, personal relations with art.

We recommend them to all the people who want to discover in art potential places of encounter with imagination, with others and with themselves. The proposed activities can be done individually, and many of them can be used as inspiration to work with groups.

¹⁴ Mary Beard, *Civilisations* [Episode 2], *How do we look?*, BBC Worldwide, 2018.





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Art and myself





Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

What does
it mean that
something moves
us? When do
we feel moved?
What does
this movement
manifest?
Why is it
significant
to us?

Meeting with each other

When we started to think about how to talk about art to understand how it affects us, we quickly realized that the characteristic way of describing a meaningful, memorable encounter with art is the observation that we came across something that moved us. The reasons why we find a particular work of art moving are of various nature. It seems very difficult, or even impossible, to point out some specific factor that puts us in this particular state: wonder, anxiety, sadness, tension, curiosity, surprise. However, the common feeling of all these reactions seems to be that something touched a tender chord within us. We felt touched by something important to us personally, something that resonates – as if the sound wave came across the right soundbox that brought out the specific sound we heard.

**What does it mean that something moves us? When do we feel moved?
What does this movement manifest? Why is it significant to us?**

Numerous psychological studies cited by Ellen Winner in *How Art Works* indicate that situations in which we feel moved (or strongly moved) generally refer to important events in our lives, such as the birth or death of a loved one, marriage or separation, reunion after many years. The source of intense emotional experiences are mostly our interpersonal experiences. In comparison with them, the resonance caused by art appears to be moderate, weaker, coming from a completely different register of validity.

Although we know examples of violent and intense reactions under the influence of communing with the works of art, music or architecture (called the Stendhal syndrome – after the name of a French writer who described

in his memoirs his intense experiences when visiting Florence),¹⁵ they do not belong to the repertoire of emotions that happen to us regularly in contact with art. Intense exultations are rather evoked in relation to the reception of music or films ('tearjerkers'), when we tune into the character and tone of the work we are viewing or listening to. In the case of music, it may also be important that we are experiencing emotions related to being among other people: sharing with them joy, emotions, sadness.

Visual arts lose to other types of experience and interaction in terms of its ability to produce intense sensations. However, when the question of a moving experience is narrowed down to the field of visual arts – as was done in the research cited by Ellen Winner¹⁶ – it turns out that people are eager to cite specific examples of works that strongly affect them.

In one such study, a group of people were asked to imagine that they were to recommend to the museum, among the works shown to them, those that gave them the most satisfaction in terms of the strong reaction they caused. The study participants rated each painting based on the intensity of nine emotions it evoked: joy, pleasure, sadness, admiration, fear, disgust, sense of wonder, beauty, and sublimity. Did they agree on which works moved them and in what way? Not at all! Each painting highly rated by one person received a low rating from another participant. It therefore

¹⁵ The name of this phenomenon derives from the weakness described in the memoirs of the French writer Stendhal, which he suffered in Florence after visiting the Uffizi Galleries, 's tomb in the Basilica di Santa Croce and seeing Michelangelo's *David*. He had to spend a few days in bed with a fever, and when he decided to go out again on the streets of the city, he was once again experiencing what he described as a 'violent palpitations'.

¹⁶ Ellen Winner, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

turns out that people are moved in a deeply specific manner. And although there may be some agreement on the content expressed by individual works, individual reactions to them proved to be very diverse and sometimes even contradictory.

However, the summary of the aforementioned research points to a certain regularity: the works of art that move us the most are those that make us reflect on ourselves. When we watch them, the area of our brain associated with self-reflection is activated.¹⁷

Bearing in mind the specific conditions that govern our perception of art indicated by the researchers, let us try to look at several areas and circumstances in which contact with art can provoke our vivid reaction, stimulate reflection on ourselves, support the development of relationships with ourselves, as well as discover the potentials that lie dormant in us, and explore and process human experiences.

Emotions

In one of the popular speeches of the *School of Life* series, Alain de Botton recalls his own experience of meeting with the work of Mark Rothko. ‘For many years I viewed his paintings at the Tate Modern gallery and didn’t know what to do with them. I once read a lengthy interview in which Rothko, cornered by a journalist to explain what he was painting, confessed: ‘You have sadness in you, and I have sadness in me – and my painting are places where both these sadnesses can meet, so that we can both feel

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 85.

less sad.¹⁸ This confession of the artist acted like illumination; it allowed to understand what contact with a work of art can become. Knowing the purpose of the artist's creative explorations transformed the ordinary situation of standing in front of a painting hung on the wall of a gallery into a different kind of experience: getting deep into oneself, feeling emotions and feelings brought to the surface, thanks to the invitation contained in the work: to be honest, open, interesting. This kind of experience can change our expectations towards art, open our eyes to the nature of aesthetic experience. It can also help us understand why we enter a museum and why we often feel helpless or disappointed that a work of art 'does nothing to us', leaves us indifferent or even irritates us with its incomprehensibility.

And it is in such emotional categories that one can consider many different examples of art, which we see in museums and galleries. It is worth remembering that we should not limit our expectations to blissful or joyful experiences. Art can help us to work through the emotional states that we are subject to in various life situations: from anger, resentment and rage to feelings of admiration, delight and joyful carelessness.

At different stages of life and education, we are taught by caregivers, teachers, co-workers, and current behavioural norms to ignore our own emotional complexity, because emotions are something we should avoid or control. 'It is a bit like trying to tell your stomach not to digest food', highlight Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, two researchers studying the impact of art and aesthetics on humans. 'Emotions will come up in you, it is as

¹⁸ Alain de Botton on 'Art as Therapy', 3 December 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFnNgtskHPM>, (accessed: 5 February 2025).

certain as the fact that your heart will beat and your lungs will take oxygen from the air you breathe.¹⁹

Mira Marcinów, a writer, psychologist and philosopher, writes in a similar way about the importance of emotions: in her virtual exhibition *Five Fundamental Feelings as Five Fingers*, she emphasizes the need to lean over all emotional states, including suppressed or repressed, because we constantly experience them, and leaving them without conscious examination and without being worked over causes us a growing problem. By pushing them aside, ignoring them, and being ashamed of them, we lose the opportunity to get used to them, to understand how they regulate our daily experience of reality. In a museum journey through the world of feelings, Marcinów proposes to search for and get used to the variety of emotions felt, treat them as a set of five fingers, because just as a well-functioning hand needs all the fingers, so every person cannot do without a full range of emotions. ‘Because the problems with naming them do not end with the completion of primary school. They actually often start there. Because we, adult children, must learn to feel, including those unwanted emotions like sadness or forbidden like anger. It is exhausting when universal feelings are mostly negative mental states. We do not want to experience them, and even if we want to experience them again, we do not know how to do it. How to feel what we have not been allowed to feel for years?’²⁰

¹⁹ Susan Magsamen, Ivy Ross, *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*, Polish translation by Magdalena Nikiforuk, Elbląg 2023, p. 51.

²⁰ Mira Marcinów, *Five Fundamental Feelings as Five Fingers*, Virtual Museums of Małopolska 2021, <https://piec-uczuc.muzea.malopolska.pl/en>, p. 5 (accessed: 5 February 2025).

How can we use the encounter with art to observe, analyse and ‘tame’ various emotions? Can a visit to a museum or gallery evoke them in us and suggest ways to organize them, name them, react to them?

In the aforementioned speech, Alain de Botton uses a playful mental exercise to draw our attention to a certain paradox contained in our thinking about museums as places of living contact with art. On the one hand, we expect that art will provide us with intense experiences, change our attitude towards the phenomena it presents, bring comfort in difficult moments, and on the other hand – we cannot imagine that someone could come to the exhibition overwhelmed with strong emotions, in search of existential consolation, answers to spiritual dilemmas, understanding for experienced worries. ‘If this really happened, we would probably call for specialist help or at least museum security staff as soon as possible.’²¹

Why does contact with art so rarely release vivid emotions in us? Why is it that we do not cry in the museum?

Ellen Winner highlighted the factors that determine the establishment of a personal, deeply felt contact with a work of art.²² We must experience the work without being distracted by the conversations around us. When we visit an art museum, we often come with other people and talk to them, moving from one painting to another. Experiencing strong emotions in such a situation or in a crowded gallery is unlikely. We have to spend enough time viewing the given work so that it can act on us and create a sense of immersion. Finally, we need freedom and comfort in moving around the gallery – we feel differently when we move along the walls with the works

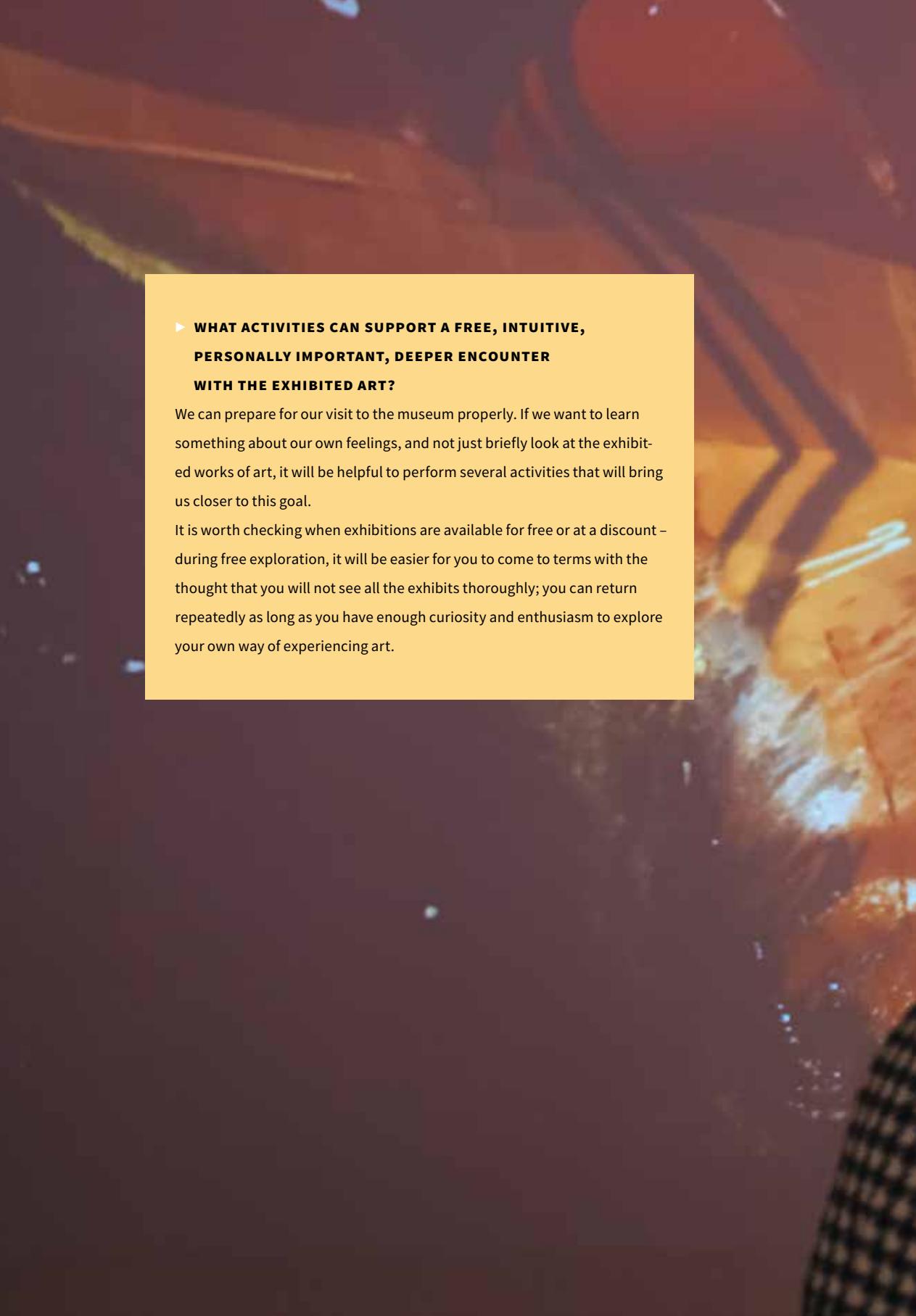
²¹ Alain de Botton on ‘Art as Therapy’, op. cit.

²² Ellen Winner, op. cit., pp. 86–87.

in a regular pace, and quite differently when we can sit quietly in front of the work or when we are encouraged to change the position of the body: we can see the works from many sides, interact with them, look at them from different angles (for example, if the works are arranged at different heights or have different sizes, which requires us to lean in one direction or other, or to look upwards).

An additional determinant, which often blocks the spontaneous release of emotions, is the expectation that art is supposed to delight us. We do not allow ourselves to reveal and explore the negative emotions that it evokes. However, by opening ourselves to the stimuli of art, we help to develop our mindfulness: a broader perception of reality in a particular place and a particular moment. This requires focus and concentration on the object being observed. As a result, we build a personal relationship with the perceived object, which makes us ‘see’ more; we launch new associations. We can thus get to know our emotions better, name them, and also influence them.²³

²³ Jadwiga Jośko-Ochojska, Ryszard Brus, Joanna Sell, ‘Muzeoterapia – nowy kierunek terapii zaburzeń emocjonalnych’ [‘Museotherapy – a new direction in the therapy of emotional disorders’], *Annales Academiae Medicae Silesiensis* no. 76, 2022, p. 63.



► **WHAT ACTIVITIES CAN SUPPORT A FREE, INTUITIVE,
PERSONALLY IMPORTANT, DEEPER ENCOUNTER
WITH THE EXHIBITED ART?**

We can prepare for our visit to the museum properly. If we want to learn something about our own feelings, and not just briefly look at the exhibited works of art, it will be helpful to perform several activities that will bring us closer to this goal.

It is worth checking when exhibitions are available for free or at a discount – during free exploration, it will be easier for you to come to terms with the thought that you will not see all the exhibits thoroughly; you can return repeatedly as long as you have enough curiosity and enthusiasm to explore your own way of experiencing art.



Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

► EX. WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Ask yourself: in what mood do you enter the gallery today? What brought you there – curiosity, longing for beauty, desire to learn something new? Even if you enter the given place open to discovering new experiences, they will be strongly marked by the state of mind with which you came, with what happened along the way, with the things you want to break away from, or with what you need to return to after the visit. Think about what you will look for in the art today: silence? Inspiration? Joy? Beauty? Solace?

► EX. NOTING YOUR IMPRESSIONS

Take a notebook with you, write down your attitude to the world and yourself today. Are you calm, irritated, lonely or overwhelmed by the excess of stimuli flowing from all around you? What could put you in a good mood? What feelings would you like to experience when viewing art? Note the thoughts that flow and try to name the emotions that you experience – you will thus make it easier to navigate through the scattered sensations and gain some insight into the ‘mixed feelings’ that we often face when visiting exhibitions.

► EX. WHAT ATTRACTS ME / WHAT REPELS ME?

Walk through the exhibition space, regardless of the suggested direction of exploration. You do not have to read the titles and explanations provided with the works; rely on your intuition and curiosity. Choose works that – at first glance – associate you with your present mood and the reason for visiting the museum. Go to one of them and give it some time to try to intrigue you. If possible, sit in front of it (in many museums there are seats available, or you can take a folding chair at the entrance; it will allow you to decide for yourself with which work you would like to

spend more time) – and... do nothing. Just look at the given work for a few minutes and try to focus on your experiences (you can write them down). What thoughts are flowing through your head? What do you feel? Does your experience change over time? When exploring our own reactions to art, it is worth paying attention not only to works that attract us, but also to those that arouse our aversion or seem completely incomprehensible. Try to capture what specifically repels you. Why do they annoy you? What associations do they evoke? Write down these thoughts, they tell you something important about yourself.

► EX. MUSICAL BACKGROUND

If you have your favourite music tracks on your portable player or in the app on your phone, take them with you to the museum and try to tune your visual experience with the right soundtrack (using headphones, of course!). Do not be discouraged by surprised or judgemental looks from others – it is your personal encounter with art and your own emotions, and you alone decide how you want to experience them. Search for a painting, sculpture, or installation that intrigued you (or on the contrary: something that you find indifferent, mute and strange) and experiment with the multi-sensory perception. How does perception change depending on the nature of the music? What do you feel when you look at historical or mythological scenes, portraits or abstract works accompanied by dance, melancholy, gentle or stimulating music?

And now stop reading for a moment, take a piece of paper and a pencil and do an exercise that does not require going to the museum:

► EX. BEING MOVED

Imagine that you have to choose from all the works of art you know only one that moves

you. What work will you choose? Of course, if you often deal with art, pointing out only one painting, sculpture or installation can be extremely difficult; in turn, for someone who does not show interest in art, the challenge will be to remind yourself of a situation in which 'something did somehow draw my attention'.

Search for a reproduction of this work or recall it from memory and try to commune for a moment with the emotions it evokes in you. Then try to name them and understand why it has such an impact on you. Perhaps this exercise will allow you to discover something important to you, or lead you to understand what you expect from art and what it can give you. Or maybe not. And that is fine too.

► EX. ARTISTIC POSTCARDS

If you want to give your loved one a wish of happiness, joy, love (for example, on a birthday, a holiday, an important anniversary or Valentine's Day, or – what can be particularly nice – completely without any particular reason), you can express these positive emotions in the form of a postcard depicting a work of art. Share your vision of the situation in which you would like to see the person receiving your postcard. Perhaps you will also find in art a suitable expression to convey other emotions/contents: compassion, consolation, longing, mourning.

You can also design a greeting card for yourself.

► EX. TAKE-AWAY ART

The conviction that contact with an original work of art is a prerequisite for fully understanding or admiring it limits the scope of

our contacts with art to works that we have a chance to see in the vicinity or during holiday trips. This approach also deprecates all recipients who have their favourite works of art on a coffee mug, notebook cover or on the smartphone screen. Meanwhile – like many of us do it with music or films – we can collect and store at hand images or works that impressed us, 'spoke' to us or moved us. Why? Because we may need them not when we are in a museum (that is, on vacation or just when we have time, are in a good mood and are focused on discovering the world), but in difficult moments when we are overwhelmed with sadness, we face problems, we are ill with ourselves and with others. This is actually when we need art the most! Let us search for works close to us and create our individual collections available at our fingertips. We can treat reproductions of works of art as containers for storing emotions: experienced joy, sadness, delight, reflection – so that we can take them with us and reach for them when we need it.

► EX. GALLERY OF ESCAPISM

Are there any paintings or other works of art you want to hide in? Do you want to winter over here, to wait for as long as it takes, or just stay a little there? Think about where, in the recesses of art history, your safe haven could be. Once you enter the selected painting, what would you like to do there? How would you like to spend time? Think about what is in this picture that is not around you right now. And the other way round: what is not there (fortunately, perhaps)? Does it say something about what you need today? Or maybe you need different hiding places? Create a folder on your computer with paintings that take you somewhere...



Mark Rothko, No. 3/No. 13, 1949, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Mark Rothko opposed calling him the creator of abstract painting. 'I am not an abstractionist... I am not interested in the relationship between colour and form (...). All I care about is expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, despair, etc. and the fact that many people cry in response to my images shows that I can convey these basic human emotions... People who cry in front of my paintings experience the same religious experience that I had when I painted them.*

* Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Mark Rothko. Pictures as drama*, Taschen 2003, p. 50.

Looking carefully

Not all forms of art have the same impact on us, and their value – measured by our personal response to them (or lack thereof) – is not limited to the emotions that they awaken in us. Works of art can also open our eyes and minds.

‘When I stop drawing’, Andrzej Wajda wrote in his notebook, ‘I return to the state of natural confusion, which consists in using my eyes enough not to stumble or hit my head when getting into the car.’²⁴ A similar observation could come to each and every one of us after a day spent doing routine activities, when, absorbed in daily duties, we hardly remember what the world looked like and what happened around us. The paradox of the image culture lies in the fact that we see so many of them everywhere, that we stop treating them as something meaningful; they accompany us constantly, we consider them a mere ‘property’ of reality – sight is, after all, our most important sense.

Images are ubiquitous, so we do not attach too much importance to them. They are carriers and providers of information – often manipulated or designed to attract our attention – but most often their reception is quite shallow. We do not even consider what we think about the pictures around us; something is simply cool or uninteresting, inventive or boring, spectacular or banal. Visual sensations create visual noise which stops deeper meanings from penetrating (alternatively, images simply ‘imprint themselves’ into our perception and remain in memory as frequently repeated

²⁴ Andrzej Wajda. *Japanese Notebook. From the Collection of the Manggha Museum*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Anna Król, Wioletta Laskowska-Smoczyńska, Kraków 2019.

views and messages. It is hard to find reasons to look at something longer – after all, why?).

David Perkins, Harvard researcher of educational processes and author of *The Intelligent Eye. Learning to Think by Looking at Art* drew attention to the deluded belief of most people that it is enough to direct our sight in the right direction in order to look. This way of looking can be compared to obtaining an image by a camera, which maps the visual characteristics of a specific object on the photosensitive material. However, this simple physical process does not reflect the specificity of our perception of the world. ‘A photographic film only captures the array of colours point by point. But when we look at the velvet chair in the corner of the room, we do not see a sprawl of colours. We see a dazzling spectrum of meanings.’²⁵

In general, when we look at a particular object, its function and meaning are understood almost immediately. We do not need to analyse its shape, position in space, size or weight to understand what we are seeing. All these qualities come into our consciousness as soon as we direct our attention to something. In the case of a work of art it is different – the artefact does not reveal its secrets at once. Viewing art requires thinking.

Perkins proposes dividing the work with a selected artefact into three stages: seeing (what do I see?), thinking (what do I think of what I see?), wondering (what surprises me when I look at this object?). This is a set of questions that should always be at hand when we face a work of art which remains unknown to us. In this way, by facing the various approaches proposed by the artists, we can stimulate the work of the mind, and by

²⁵ David N. Perkins, *The Intelligent Eye. Learning to Think by Looking at Art*, Santa Monica 1994, p. 7.

developing the habit of unhurried, thoughtfully entering into a relationship with a work of art, we support and shape our thinking abilities, which are necessary in other areas of life.

We live in a world dominated by images. Looking and seeing are two different modes of contact with the visual reality. Looking at and inquiring what we actually see allows us to break through the thick of images that surround us, which, perhaps, do not reveal at all the reality, but, on the contrary, they obscure it. By taking the time to carefully look at various objects, scenes, interiors, landscapes (these can also be newspaper clippings, works of art presented in a museum, the immediate surroundings or the life of birds), we gain the ability to observe closely. Stopping and asking the question 'what am I seeing here?' helps to feel connected to the environment, to form a habit of 'filtering' and questioning (or accepting) visual content, and to choose from the ubiquitous images those that may matter to us.

The ability to observe also plays an important role in developing empathy. An inquisitive attitude – looking at behaviours and emotions in their accompanying contexts, looking under their lining – can become our ally in dealing with others. Careful viewing of art helps to develop the ability to look beyond what is visible on the surface at first glance. It is not enough to look around and decide: I like this and I dislike that. If we stop at the work of art for a long time, we may notice an interesting detail that escapes fleeting attention – this skill applies to many aspects of life, not just art.

In the end, it is about slowing down and being aware of where we actually are and how we read the signals and messages coming to us. There are a lot of unseen, interesting things around us that 'flow out' as soon as we give them time to reach us and give them enough attention.

What activities can support and develop our ability to look carefully?

► EX. PHOTONOTES

The eye registers everything that is in the field of vision, but it is the attention we 'allocate' to the individual objects that determines what elements of the images we see get through and perpetuate in our memory. As there are many stimuli in our sight, we can support our attention by trying to guide it according to the key we chose. It is similar to the activities performed by the photographer – indeed, the camera lens and the photosensitive material will register everything that reaches them via the light waves, but the photographer decides what to turn the lens on.

Take your camera with you to the exhibition and record everything that attracted your attention for some reason. What impressed you? What is perplexing? What do you not understand? Keep these images for later, or else you will simply forget about them and you will not be able to recall them or even reconstruct them from memory. You can also record details that for some reason interested or disturbed you – keep them for later analysis, try to think about why they stopped you, bothered you, discouraged you. Look for information about the creators of the works and the contexts in which they were created. You can thus learn more not only about the works you see, but also about yourself.

When you return from the exhibition, look at your photographic notes, preferably within a few days: you will see how many of the images, details you saw seem completely disappeared from your memory – viewing them again will allow you to recall not only a specific image, but also your own thoughts and feelings that accompanied looking at them.

► EX. LOOKING THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

If we want to deepen our focus, we can direct our attention by limiting the area of the so-called peripheral vision, that is, everything that is beyond our interest, but is within our sight – including insignificant nuances, background, surroundings, other visitors or technical elements of the museum's equipment. Prepare yourself a small frame, it can also be a piece of cardboard with a cut-out hole in the shape of a keyhole – if you want to put yourself in the mood of 'peeping', discovering museum secrets. A similar function can be fulfilled by the rolling program of the exhibition, through which you can view the exhibits like through a telescope. The essence of this exercise is to see how distracted our attention is in almost every situation. By the way, we can discover that many details, painting and composition solutions, side stories, colour games that seem invisible at first glance, can be discovered when our eyes move gradually across the surface of the painting, each time covering only one fragment of it (we know this effect from films devoted to art, when the camera movement takes us on a journey through the image). That kind of encounter with a painting, sculpture or installation can be a source of a pleasant feeling of going deep into, immersing oneself in the presented world.

► EX. EXERCISES IN FRAMING

When using a frame or 'telescope', pay attention to what we avoid, what remains outside the frame. This exercise can be done (and will even be more interesting) in relation to the 'non-artistic' reality – try, for example, to look at your immediate surroundings (an interior or selected space outside) through a frame or using a camera frame. How does the character of the place change depending on what part of it you are looking at? Are there any places that 'clutter up' the picture? Can you find

a perspective which would make it difficult for a person looking at a given shot to recognize the photographed place?

Also, pay attention to how, by choosing cropped images of various parts of the environment, you can manipulate the later interpretations done by other people – exposing or ‘cutting off’ specific fragments of reality can make it seem, for example, neat, safe or, alternatively, chaotic and disturbing.

► EX. ‘INTERROGATING PAINTINGS’

Stand or sit in front of the selected painting (surreal paintings or seemingly ‘incomprehensible’ works of contemporary art, but also many of historical or generic paintings will work great in this exercise) and try to catalogue its content. What do you see? Do the individual elements of the work refer to each other, merge into presumed meanings? You do not need to have knowledge of history and art, or even know the work of the given artist. Put yourself in the role of an investigator, whose task is to investigate ‘what is actually happening here’. If you are accompanied by another person, you can take on the roles of good and bad cop, undermining each other’s observations and interpretations. Look carefully at everything presented in the picture, asking questions: What do I see? What is bothering me? What is missing? The information about what you see, gained this way, will tell you how the mechanism of interpreting the images (not necessarily works of art) works and will allow you to develop a habit of less superficial reception and processing of visual signals. If we use the representation of scenes involving different characters, while thinking about their role and point of view and the emotions that they can feel in a given painting or photographic scene, then the exercise of careful looking can also become a practical experience for looking at the world with empathy.

► EX. EXERCISES IN EVERY-DAY LOOKING

Take a few minutes to exercise your sensitive eye every day. You can do this on the way to work, while walking your dog (or spending time with children – they can become invaluable helpers). Try for example:

- to discover a new detail in a familiar environment – for example, a scratch on the ceiling, a slit in the floor, a nest on a tree, new earrings of your colleague in the office, a curled curtain in a neighbour’s window;
- to look in the mirror and discover something interesting in your reflection that escaped your attention so far;
- to look in an inaccessible place – behind the sofa, behind the fence, into the old wardrobe;
- to look at the world through a hole made in a piece of paper, the size of a keyhole;
- to look at the world through half-closed eyelids, through your scarf, through the lens of your phone;
- to briefly deviate from your daily route, following your curiosity (you can even enter the gate you pass every day, visit a shop that recently opened on your street, see where the street you never turn into leads, etc.);
- to scratch off any item on your desk and turn it into something else;
- to take scissors and a piece of paper and cut out any shape without planning, then look at it and think about what it might be;
- to change a detail in your surroundings (and try to remember what it was the next day).

Ask yourself: Why do you need a sensitive eye? What can you gain from these exercises? How can this translate into your life, into your work? Or maybe also to your relationship with people? And now try to draw your sensitive eye. How? As you like!

It is best to do it on a sticky note, and then stick it to your computer screen or somewhere else where you look quite often. It will remind you of the daily practice of careful looking.

Joanna Rajkowska processed the courtyard of Antoni Engel's tenement house on Piotrkowska Street in Łódź in the artistic installation *Rosa's Passage*. The walls of the buildings were covered with a mirror mosaic, arranged in patterns resembling the shape of flowering roses. The name of the passage also refers to the name of the artist's daughter, who was diagnosed with eye cancer. Reflections related to the disease and the process of vision itself were the inspiration for the creation of *Rosa's Passage*.

*'Looking as a process is a reference point here, but also a source of reflection and an object of fascination, while seeing is reduced to an almost physiological phenomenon of image reception. The intention of the artist was to stop the viewer at the level of enchantment with the very possibility of seeing. The architectural skin that the buildings have grown is nothing but a retina, a light-sensitive tissue with which eyes are equipped. Moving a millimetre generates a completely different reflection in the mirror mosaic, relativizes the notion of the image, and makes obvious our dependency on the possibility of the eye, the reference point, and the possible perspective.'**

* Joanna Rajkowska, *Pasaż Róży* [Rosa's Passage], <https://www.rajkowska.com/en/pasaz-rozy/> (accessed: 16 July 2025).

Joanna Rajkowska, *Rosa's Passage* (detail), 2014.

Photo: Zorro2212. Wikimedia Commons



Art on a daily basis

Looking at art does not necessarily involve going to a museum, we can find it in everyday life: on the streets, in the park, in the cinema. ‘Creators of the 20th century turned everything around people into an artistic material: their surroundings, space, objects of use, and even the artists themselves and their bodies.’²⁶ In this sense, art can be present in our lives all the time if we activate our aesthetic and emotional ‘radars’, if we want to look at the reality around us through the prism of non-obvious connections with selected objects and assign them individual, personal meanings.

We find beauty and harmony in art, but we also experience them every day. The light in the room, the sounds and smells that surround us – these are aesthetic elements that have as strong impact as the works of Picasso or Rothko. The colour, texture and temperature of the individual objects surrounding us are the ingredients that contribute to our aesthetic experience. They are also provided by nature, which is a rich reservoir of our aesthetic experiences.²⁷

If we would like to present art with a simple tool, namely a timeline depicting our ordinary day, instead of using the chronology of art development adopted by historians, perhaps we would find out that art is not a separate phenomenon, enclosed in museums, galleries or albums. As soon as we grab our phone in the morning, when we hear the alarm sound, the first image we see after waking up is the photo of a loved one, wallpaper proposed by the application or a visual theme chosen by ourselves. We

²⁶ Dagna Kidoń, *Społeczne uwarunkowania odbioru sztuki współczesnej* [Social Determinants of the Contemporary Art Reception], Łódź 2023, p. 36.

²⁷ Susan Magsamen, Ivy Ross, op. cit., pp. 71–72.

move through the home space we arranged, we apply make-up, arrange our hair, choose our clothes, jewellery and accessories, drink coffee from our favourite cup (ceramic from Bolesławiec? Cup with a cat? Italian glass?); somewhere during the day we find time to water our plant compositions, wipe out dust frames of photographs placed on furniture or hung on the wall, we sweep the poster of our favourite music group, bookmarks – all these are our personal, individual aesthetic choices, sometimes sentimental, quite often accidental, but fitting into a more or less harmonious aesthetic whole.

After leaving home, we also experience a world in which we can find examples of art: urban layout of space, architecture, signs, advertisements, fountains, monuments – they are treated by us as ordinary elements of reality, but it is worth examining them and assessing them in terms of their consistency and aesthetic expression. Do they put us in a good mood? Do we get a feeling of safety from them, do they make us feel secure? Do we like to be in them? Or, on the contrary: would we rather propose changes that would make the space around us more colourful, make it gain aesthetic value, harmony, to encourage us to stay in it more often and stimulate the sense of pleasure?

Looking at our immediate surroundings with a sensitive eye helps shape and develop our aesthetic preferences not only in relation to personal choices in terms of fashion, interior design or creative interests, but also fosters a critical view of the wider space in which we move.



Andrzej Kramarz, photograph from the series
Rzeczy [Things], 2008. Courtesy of the artist

Andrzej Kramarz made a series of photographs showing objects put up for sale at the flea market at the Grzegórzecka Street in Kraków. In the lens of a slow and attentive observer of reality, they acquire an extraordinary charm and invite to read new meanings in them.

‘There are metal objects on the blue foil, among them there are tightly arranged old keys in large numbers. Looking at them longer, we stop seeing them in their usual instrumental function, we begin to notice the intriguing ornament they create. Or the keys to the kingdom of heaven.’*

* Dariusz Czaja, *Remanenty [Inventories]*, [in:] Andrzej Kramarz, *Rzeczy [Things]*, Kraków 2008.

What activities can support the discovery of art in our everyday contacts with the environment?

► EX. ART NOTEBOOK

In the evening, or when doing observations (freeze-frames) during the day, try to think about whether – and also when and where – you came across a work of art. These can be motifs noticed in the press, on the Internet, used in advertisements, and so on. Surely you passed a building, a fountain, a monument or a ‘piece of nature’ (park, flowerbed, a picturesque row of trees). Are there posters, photographs, reproductions of paintings or your own creations on the walls of your office or home – children’s drawings, a painting you received from a friend, a napkin handmade for grandma, or perhaps a hand-embroidered wall hanging?

Write down on a piece of paper (or in your creative notebook) all the works of art you saw today. Which of them are particularly important to you? Which of them are you indifferent to? Which would you like to remember and return to or show them to someone?

► EX. GALLERY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

What in your environment has the potential to become a work of art? Browse your photos, travel souvenirs, items that make up your home interior, stroll around the area in search of interesting corners and architectural details. Identify the elements of the environment that soothe you and those that annoy

you, or that put you in a bad mood. Design a ‘sightseeing route’ of your private daily gallery. If you use a larger sheet of paper, you can draw or stick small pictures of individual ‘exhibits’ on it. The picture of daily wanderings will become a map showing the rhythm of your days, the imprints of your existence. Imagine the joy that such a document will bring to the researchers of our lives in the future – our children or even ourselves in a few years. It is an interesting form of a journal written with images.

► EX. ART OVER COFFEE (TO START THE DAY, TO END IT)

What if instead of sitting with your nose in your phone over your morning coffee, you spent twenty minutes drawing or creating mandalas, photographing a growing plant, watching the clouds, stacking LEGO bricks? It can be your nice morning ritual instead of disordered messages and stimuli that will not be useful to you anyway, because after a while you will forget about them. People whose mornings are usually hectic, running around getting the kids ready for school and hurriedly doing their make-up in front of the mirror in the lift, might want to try it at night, before going to bed. Giving yourself a moment of pleasant sensations reduces the feeling of anguish at being overwhelmed by the onrushing swarm of stimuli, and produces a calm, some peace and tranquillity, much more effectively than watching the next episode of the series or browsing the news on the web.

Multisensuality

Many exhibition institutions participate in the annual Slow Art Day, during which they encourage visitors to move around its premises and spend a little more time with the selected works of art. Such actions allow not only to get to know the objects we are viewing better, but also to relax, get rid of the tension associated with the fast, nervous pace imposed by the modern lifestyle, in which even the time we can rest is more valued if we spend it actively. Since we are living at such a fast pace that it is really difficult for us to slow down and take a deep breath, if we finally decide to stop for such a moment, it is worth using a way of contact with art which is seemingly perverse, but in fact close to many types of creative exploration: take a rest from viewing!

Our perception of the world is based primarily on seeing and hearing, which is why we generally diminish the importance of other senses: touch, taste, smell. It is thanks to them that a huge amount of sensory information reaches our brain. The brain recognizes them, interprets them and responds to them. The correct cooperation of all our senses enables us to function in a harmonious way. According to various classifications, in addition to the basic classical five senses, there are others: the sense of temperature – responsible for the feeling of temperature inside and outside the body; the sense of balance – responsible for the position of the body in space; proprioception – the feeling of the alignment of the body parts relative to each other and the muscle tension (thanks to which the person knows where their individual parts of the body are located, even without seeing them); perception of time – the sense responsible for measuring time. According to Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, although we usually think of ourselves as thinking beings, as suggested by our species' name *Homo sapiens*, it is

worth, when dealing with art and with ourselves, switching at least once in a while to understanding ourselves as sentient beings.²⁸

Many artists create works and installations using unusual 'materials' such as light, water or air temperature. For many of them, the creative process consists not only in presenting original visions or shapes, but also in researching and experimenting in areas related to the multi-sensory feeling and processing of the space in which they are located. Their projects often involve the viewers, to make them aware of the role of all the senses in experiencing reality, and above all, that perception is not an objective experience.

²⁸ Cf. *Your Brain on Art*, op. cit., p. 49.

What activities can support multisensory interactions with the environment?

► EX. A DATE WITH ONESELF

Plan (and then perform) a 'date with yourself', that is, one afternoon (or, if you prefer, morning or night) that you will spend in what for you is a very pleasant way. During this time, it is crucial that you focus strictly on yourself. Of course, you may be accompanied by other people, but for this one particular moment think only about yourself.

Think about how to plan this 'date' so as to make each of your senses happy (one after the other, or all at once).

- What can give you visual pleasure?
- What will your touch do?
- How will you satisfy your taste?
- How will you please your hearing?
- What smells will accompany you and where will you look for them?

Does any activity have anything to do with art? If so, ask yourself, was this the artist's intention? Could this type of meeting with art have a similar value for others? And if your 'date' included no art – because that can be the case – ask yourself, if you looked for sensory experiences elsewhere, why did you do it. Did art-related places or activities even enter your mind when you were planning the 'date'? Did you take them into account? Could art, in a broad sense, offer you some soothing sensual experience? What did the others think of it? Ask how your friends or loved ones would spend a date with themselves!

► EX. THE ART OF SOLITARY PLAY

If you have already recognized your preferred sources of sensory experience, experiment with them, allow yourself to play and explore activities that involve other senses – not just your sight and hearing. These can be manual activities, such as doing jigsaw puzzles, colouring, crocheting, embroidery, making figurines from plasticine. If you care about fashion, you can get interested in the techniques of hand dyeing fabrics. You can create flavour or fragrance compositions that will accompany you in the form of potpourri during work or evening relaxation, or you can simply put them on a plate (this work can be ephemeral – when it disappears from the plate, you can recreate and compose it again).

► EX. MULTI-SENSORY MAP

If you tried to complete the task from the previous chapter ('Gallery of Everyday Life'), take a look at the map of your (non-)everyday walks and estimate their potential to influence your senses: are there places where you can immerse yourself in the subtle smell of the trees and grass, or sit on a sunny day for a brief sunshiny siesta? Where can you hear the sounds of the school pitch, and where can you hear the church bells? Which buildings cast intriguing shadows? Which bakery is overflowing with the aroma of bread?

Use the knowledge of your individual multi-sensory preferences and try to add to the map places where you can look for the satisfaction of your senses. Will there be a gallery or museum on your map?

One of the most famous projects referring to the multi-sensory perception of the world is *The weather project* by Olafur Eliasson, realized at the Tate Modern in London in the Turbine Hall in 2003. It was a giant sun created from a system of several hundred yellow lamps and mirrors. Eliasson used it to transform the vast public space of the gallery lobby into one of the most popular meeting places in London, as well as a space for fun, relaxation and spontaneous activity such as yoga exercises and poetry slams. ‘What surprised me was how people became very physically explicit’, the artist recalled. ‘I pictured them looking up with their eyes, but they were lying down, rolling around and waving. (...) I liked how the whole thing became about connecting your brain and your body.’*

* Tim Jonze, ‘How we made Olafur Eliasson’s The Weather Project’, *The Guardian*, 2 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/02/how-we-made-olafur-eliasson-the-weather-project> (accessed: 1 June 2025).

Olafur Eliasson, *The weather project*, 2003

Installation view: Tate Modern, London, 2003–2004.

Photo: Andrew Dunkley & Marcus Leith | Tate Photography

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin;

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York © 2003 Olafur Eliasson.



Who is me?

In an attempt to demonstrate the elusive and puzzling phenomenon of illusion, the renowned art historian and theorist Ernst Gombrich proposed a simple experiment:²⁹ stand in front of a steamy mirror in the bathroom and draw on it the outline of the reflection of your face, and then clear the misty centre of the image. Compare the resulting portrait with the actual size and shape of your own head – you will find that the resulting image is twice as small as the actual ‘object’ and, of course, flipped 180 degrees; the right side of the face is on its left side and vice versa – left on the right. And yet we have no doubt that it is our faithful reflection. Or maybe we do have a doubt?

Do we ever really see ourselves? Who are we to ourselves, and what makes us perceive ourselves as a fixed, definite being in time? What role does knowledge play in our external appearance? Where do we get it from? To what extent do we succumb to the illusion of getting to know ourselves and our surroundings by recording and processing visual stimuli? Can we trust sight as a tool for recognizing and defining the physical reality we are experiencing? Art constantly explores and questions issues related to corporeality, identity, feeling, and to experiencing our own subjectivity.

In the old art of painting, self-portraits could serve as a satisfying study – also of a psychological nature – of one’s own character. However, the development of the philosophy of art and the change of its function, as well as the growing reflection on the ways of self-knowledge, makes the inability to capture one’s own nature by means of visual representation of one’s

²⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion, A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Polish translation by Jan Zarański, Warszawa 1981, pp. 16–17.

appearance become more and more obvious. As the philosopher Robert Piłat aptly observes: 'genius and passion no longer help'. Children easily cope with the task of drawing themselves, presenting the body schematically, and the colour of the eyes or hair is determined by the crayons or paints, but when we offer this exercise to adults, they will demur and try to avoid it. 'For the adults know how great the difference between what they paint and what they see, feel or think about themselves; they fear that their self-portrait will not show their person, but only their painterly incompetence.'³⁰

Paradoxically, the need to perpetuate one's unique character, to look at oneself, to create a desired image, consistent with our image of oneself, became a characteristic sign of contemporary life dominated by the social media. Nowadays, selfies are produced automatically and massively, and this is a sociological rather than artistic phenomenon. Its primary function is the egocentric depicting of here and now, while self-portrait is about sharing what is most important, so that it does not belong only to us, that it remains after us.³¹

The contemporary obsession with the image serves us as a form of personal expression, satisfying the need to celebrate and emancipate our own identity. However, when we are alone with each other, at home, away from the stimuli that stimulate and inspire us, but can also distract us, we face

³⁰ Robert Piłat, 'Autoportret i samowiedza' ['Self-Portrait and Self-Knowledge'], 15 September 2021, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/autoportret-i-samowiedza> (accessed: 21 February 2025).

³¹ Zofia Ozaist-Zgodzińska, 'Jak artyści tworzyli selfie przed wiekami' ['How Artists Created Selfie Ages Ago'], 26 July 2016, <https://niezlasztuka.net/o-sztuce/jak-artysci-tworyli-selfie-przed-wiekami/> (accessed: 21 February 2025).

our inner world, our longings, dreams, anxieties, recurring themes. We can look at our thoughts, reflect on our needs, but also choose to travel to the world of imagination showing how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves. Such a moment of isolation is the best opportunity to make oneself... the subject of creative activity.

An important element of feeling, experiencing and constructing our identity is continuity and duration in time. The artists suggest some clues that can help us organize, live, save our own memory and experience – how can we do it and with whom can we share it? How to make our memory visible and understandable, perceptible to others, how to convey the emotional charge associated with it?

To capture this multidimensional and time-changing person we are, we need to process and develop our own experience, devote creative time to it, re-enter it; consolidate experiences, incorporate close places, objects, people into them.



Félix González-Torres, *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* Art Institute of Chicago, 1991.
Photo: Ken Lund, Wikimedia Commons

Félix González-Torres created a moving portrait of his deceased partner, consisting of candies packed in colourful foil. Sweets are the equivalent of his body weight before he contracted AIDS (total dimensions may vary depending on the installation; ideal weight: 175 pounds, or about 80 kilograms). Visitors to the gallery can take candy with them, making this unusual portrait constantly shrink and disappear, imitating the passing of a real person. However, each viewer carries a small particle of memory with them. The mound gradually disappears; then it is recreated, and the cycle of life and death continues.

What activities can support us in searching for and discovering meaningful elements of our image and identity?

► EX. SOUL MATES

When visiting a museum or gallery (it can also be a virtual journey through on-line art collections), try to find characters with whom you feel any kind of connection or similarity. Which of them could have something to do with you – the type of beauty, the way you express your emotions, the interest in one's work? In whose company would you feel good, who would you like to ask a question? What can connect you to them? And why?

► EX. IN SEARCH OF YOURSELF (BUSINESS CARD / TATTOO)

How do you describe yourself differently than in words?

Start with reflection: write down five nouns that define your identity. Yes, only five – although we assume that you are a much more complex personality, the idea is to check out which of your aspects would you choose in a situation of limitation. That says a lot about you. These can be functions that you perform in your family and in your immediate surroundings (father, sister, neighbour), belonging to groups (age, social status, profession, hobby, religion), important character traits (muddler, perfectionist, dreamer, homebody, adventurer).

I am:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

And now try to design a tattoo that symbolically expresses each of these five identities (if you do not like tattoos, you can design your business card instead).

Defining yourself through metaphors, symbols, attributes (but also: colours, compositions – dynamic or calm, balanced, subdued in expression) helps to capture and express individual characteristics and preferences that complement your external image.

► EX. COLLECTION ABOUT ME

Imagine that you have the task of creating an exhibition... about yourself. Yes, about yourself – you will be its theme. You can consider as exhibits only the material objects that belong to you. In a simpler version, you can assume that the exhibition will have a chronological order and will simply move through the subsequent stages of your life. Each period (set it as you like!) can be represented by up to three exhibits. Of course, you can also choose a different format – for example, organize an exhibition around different areas of your life. The number of exhibits remains unchanged.

Your task is to plan this exhibition – you can search, gather items physically and play with their arrangement or use their photographs – and if you do not have them, try sketching them. Play with it until the exhibition is complete and you are fully satisfied with the result.

When you are done, you can imagine exploring your exhibition, viewing the works in a direction that you yourself determine. Ask yourself questions about the emotions that accompany you. Which elements of the exhibition evoke your nostalgia? Tenderness? Gratitude? Regret? What title could you give your exhibition? Who would you like to show it to?

► **EX. CREATIVE DIARIES**

What can we use as a storage medium for memories and experiences? Taking and collecting hundreds of photos from travel and everyday situations paradoxically makes it impossible to capture them in our memory. The excess and ubiquity of photographic images makes them insignificant, which is why it is so important to choose the motifs closest to you and develop them in such a way that they trigger a whole range of memories and emotions and preserve particularly important

moments in your life. The photograph itself may be insufficient: collect and store objects that, like the Proust's famous madeleine, can become a trigger of memory, move you back to an event from the past, make the memory three-dimensional, multi-sensory, more complex. You can make collages from tickets, coffee napkins, clippings from local newspapers or shop flyers, complementing them with a record – preferably handwritten – of remembered situations, meetings, conversations.





Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

interview

Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

Art is there to make us try – an interview with Dobromiła Olewicz

DOBROMIŁA OLEWICZ

Painter and graphic artist, art therapist; on a daily basis, she works as a visual therapist at the Dr Józef Babiński Clinical Hospital in Kraków. She is a member of the Board of Psychiatry and Art Association (Stowarzyszenie Psychiatria i Sztuka). She is the organizer of several workshops and art exhibitions, as well as many initiatives dedicated to women, nature and the city.

ELŻBIETA KAPROŃ: How does it happen that art, which we freely and spontaneously use in childhood, experiencing and organising our world, ceases to occupy us almost completely in the later stages of life; it moves to galleries and museums, which we somehow do not find particularly interesting?

Dobromiła Olewicz: A long time ago, when I was in Sweden for the first time, I was surprised that in royal museums – where, according to the Polish standards of the time, one should walk in felt slippers – children lie on the floor and draw. I was looking at teenagers who came to the museum on a date, and I thought it was so cool, but impossible to do in Poland, because it is just a different perception of teaching, contact with art and generally being in culture. Our detachment from art is almost literal, we do not see it around us, so it disappears from our field of attention.

I think that for several years we have been undergoing transformation in this area, we wonder why we invite children, youth or adults to museums. What do we want to tell them? What do we want to interest them with? Basically every museum offers interesting activities. I love watching people

who participate in them. It does not matter if someone is twenty or fifty years old – when they are at the exhibition for the first time, they always feel some emotions, even if these emotions manifest in ridiculing the whole situation with the words ‘I’d be able to paint something like that myself’. I perceive such reactions as defensive: we feel something, but we do not quite know what to do about it.

Are we complaining about not being able to comprehend something, or are we protecting ourselves from what we feel?

I think both, because for most of us, the last time we were in the habit of going to a museum was when we were schoolchildren. I mean: you went there with your school class, but most of the kids did not know where they were or why they went there, do not feel that anything touched them there. No one ‘approached’ them properly, no one tried to interest them, so they did not give a damn.

You talk about children, but, at the same time, it is a perfect description of the adult’s problem in contact with art. We do not know what to expect from a visit to the gallery. What is supposed to happen there?

There is to be joy or sadness or wonderment, or a halt in time, or colloquially speaking: we are to get an energetic kick. Different things can happen, that is unpredictable. The curator always has a way to show a certain idea, and people visiting the exhibition can consider or ignore it. If they receive a well-written narrative about what they are viewing, they might be interested in it, but they can also put it in their pocket. You do not have to worry so much about ‘what the author meant’, because they already expressed it in their works or in the arrangement of the exhibition. The reception of art is about what it does in us.

It is well known that we have very different views of ourselves. It depends on education and individual sensitivity, because you can be completely uneducated in the field of art and have a wonderful gift of absorbing it like a sponge. You can be a very simple person who has never been to a museum in one's life, and then see something on a poster or in a newspaper, and suddenly get the impression that you are encountering something important to yourself.

You mean feel like we have seen something that we carry within us?

We notice something, we think about it, and then we have to do something about it. A person who is closer to art will begin to translate all these impressions into a painting, a film, a theatre performance or an embroidered napkin.

Is it not enough to just carry it inside?

Until we do something about it, it will be unfinished. At some point, we may feel frustrated that we do little with our personal experiences. Of course, this remains largely unconscious; a small percentage of the population decides to educate itself in this direction because it feels that something is pushing it there. These people develop their workshop, their thinking about art, by choosing artistic professions. However, many people have a sensitivities and predispositions, which, unfortunately, they suppress throughout their lives.

Or they do not see them?

Unfortunately, I think that this is very often suppressed either by ourselves or by the environment, most often already during the period of school

education. If we teach a child that a Christmas tree is to consist of three green triangles, and we do not encourage them to experiment with, for example, coloured, luminous spots that give the impression of flickering bubbles and candles, the next time that child says: 'OK, I am not going to paint what I have seen or remember, or as my imagination tells me, I am going to paint the way it should be.' People learn to adapt to the rules given, and at the same time become convinced that deviation from them is wrong. This is very limiting. Lack of one's own experience with creative processing of reality results in a distance to art.

It seems to me that there are two firmly established beliefs in society – that art reception requires special abilities and that art is a separate field to be dealt with by the artists. We do not question the reason for the existence of museums and galleries, but on the other hand, we believe that art is not for everyone. I basically do not know why I should go to the museum if it does not apply to me.

Either we submit to external constraints because someone told us we are not familiar with art, or we have these blockages in ourselves. I often hear from my friends with whom I go to an exhibition: 'Tell me something about it, because I do not know what to do about it.' And we are talking about people who, at least, are interested in art, otherwise they would not go to the museum at all. I think that an average Pole entering a gallery feels reluctance bordering on panic, because they do not know how to behave there, whether to pay for admission and what to do if someone asks them something. That is already a barrier. Precisely because people are not taught, that art exhibitions are simply to be visited and that it does not require special preparation...

That you can just walk through the gallery?

We can go to the gallery as we go to the store. We can see what is there. But many people are afraid that they will do something ‘wrong’. Especially in our society, which is very judgemental and often negates behaviours that deviate from the so-called norm; the problem is that no one knows what that norm actually is. In my opinion, our norm is greyness and blandness – it is safer if no one notices us. Of course, this is also changing, because now young people are more expressive, right?

I think that these are the aftermath of the post-war and later years: that it is safer to be grey, bland, and keep your own views or interests to yourself, or to share them with friends or ‘insiders’. Therefore, only selected groups went to the gallery, it was a kind of cultural code. It does exist today and probably will not disappear, because we know that we have different education, different family histories, different sensitivities. I would like the average Pole, first of all, to not be afraid to enter the gallery. Secondly, I would like them not to succumb to the desire to escape as soon as possible, even if they do not fully understand what they see, but to give themselves time, sit down in front of the work of art that did something to them and think about it. Does this art make them happy or sad? Or does it cause concern?

So that, when looking at art, they meet with themselves?

So that they want to dig into themselves, think about what they feel. Of course, we find it easiest to deal with storytelling art. We incorporate it into a system of references to the reality we know. Abstraction is more difficult, but it can, in turn, trigger us indirectly, when we see beautiful colour combinations that give us visual pleasure. People are also simply mammals that react to certain things instinctively: colours and shapes affect us at the neurological level. Most of us respond positively to the orange-red composition of spots. We feel good energy and warmth, a bit like

being next to a fire. The same applies to shapes – if we have something soft, round, it does not matter whether it is small or huge, even stone blocks with rounded corners are perceived by our brain as something safe. In turn, all angular, thin, unpredictably bent forms always cause some anxiety.

Is this our reaction to a potential threat?

Absolutely! It is similar to the fact that we tend to see faces everywhere. Nature shaped us in such a way that we are the first to see the mouth in the grass and judge whether it will eat us or whether it will be us eating it. This is one of our most basic reflexes. Sight is a very important sense for people; that is, by the way, why we are afraid of the night, because when it is dark, we do not see anything. These are characteristics common to all people. Many who struggle with mental problems put an eye motif on their paintings – in this way they tell about the fact that they feel observed or that they are constantly observing themselves.

Can dealing with art created by people in a mental crisis make it easier for us to reach the universal dimension of creativity? To understand the importance of what we all carry inside us, but pushed aside, suppressed?

To understand or simply to accept. It happens that people with mental problems find it easier to throw out certain visions or anxieties, because on the one hand they experience them intensely, and on the other hand they feel less intensively the social taboo that forbids talking about these matters. They reveal something that we do not see, and what is even worse, something with which we often have poor contact. We do not care about our inner world.

British philosopher and education theorist Herbert Read called the modern human a crippled bird that wields the wings of intellect and reason while his wing of feelings and imagination remains neglected, broken. Does art and creativity help us to balance our need for rational perception of reality with this invisible inner world which is so strongly shaping us?

In the 21st century, we value more things that are measurable, that can be precisely named, about which we know how they work. And our second wing – we can call it psyche, soul or subtlety – cannot be measured reduced to a set of parameters. Although there are different psychological tests – for example, we try to measure intelligence – fortunately, there is no single measure that is appropriate for all people, even those who are similar in age, gender, culture – everyone is a little different.

Moreover, our second wing is often injured. For example, by comments expressed as reaction to our open manifestation of enthusiasm or joy: ‘Why are you grinning like an idiot?’ In response, we not only neglect this sphere, but also deliberately hide it, so as not to expose ourselves to pain. One cannot show that one is sad, or that one is too cheerful, thoughtful or melancholic, because it makes other people feel discomfort and pressure. As a result, we ‘retract our wing’.

Until there is a crisis? Only then can you see that something is broke inside and you have to intervene...

Yes. Then we take care of our ‘soft parts’. Each and every one of us has them, they are only packaged differently. Some have a thin layer on them, and others have a thick, impermeable crust. In this sense, viewing the art of people in a mental crisis is a special experience, it is as if they peeled

away the masks hiding their sensitivity in front of us. Art reveals what is soft in us, but it does not do it for effect.

It does not deceive us, it does not want to impress us?

It does not emerge for applause. However, it is often difficult to perceive this art, because it is not 'pretty'. There are strange or disturbing colour combinations. Although, of course, these are sometimes calm, quiet works, because people strive for harmony. We are aware that these paintings were created by people in crisis, which is why they are devoid of their protective layer and we can enter them more easily. And at the same time, we have the comfort of allowing ourselves an honest reception: we wonder what scares us, what attracts us, what calms us down. In a professional gallery or museum, we tend to tune in a different perception, focusing more on whether we like something, instead of focusing on what we feel. I think we can see in this case how far we moved away from our nature. We have only one wing – the measurable, rational one. It would be good if we returned a little more to ourselves, see little better what we are made of.

Do we reach for art therapy when it is too late? Could we use it preventively?

Yes, indeed, or simply as a self-development tool. Although, of course, such processes should be controlled – not everyone can 'mess with one's head'.

In the process of art therapy, a work is created, but if we focus on the process of its creation, these will be only art classes. Meanwhile, the therapist accompanies the person in a mental crisis and talks to them. If we work in a group, it is a good rule to make everyone aware that we are in a place where we create, and need to forget about subjecting our work to academic

assessment. We do not speak about others, but about what we see as the result of our work. About what it causes in us.

Do you need a minimum of skills and abilities to participate in art therapy? Let us suppose I have a strong vision haunting me and I feel like putting it on paper would help me get rid of it – but what if I cannot draw? Do you need to test your skills before you start art therapy?

No! Art is not about testing. Art is about trying.

Fine, let us call it a try – everyone can try if they find themselves in some medium, right? Would I get paints or pencils to see if I could use them?

Yes. And then we begin to look for what that might be. We take paints, for example. Dry pastels rub well, but for some they can be annoying, because they stain your fingers or creak on paper. Then we give them up. We can try oily pastels that have an intense colour. Inks give an interesting multilayeredness. Different methods and media can be mixed. This is all about – to put it very trivial – finding a child's curiosity in ourselves. It is about breaking away from the fact that we are a manager in the company or a worker with fifty years of machining experience. It is about simply being ourselves.

To focus attention on something other than persistent thoughts?

Yes. Or on the fact that I need to have some particular attributes, fit into a certain image of myself – created by myself or by others.

Mental illnesses are very different, so I do not want to generalize, but they often deprive people of some part of agency, sense of value, control

over the here and now. However, at the same time they very often let go of the desire to control. So, you have to 'scratch' and reach such a place to anchor this tiny hook in reality. This is done on the one hand through creativity, and on the other through paying attention, through time, conversation.

Can this be useful to any person who is not necessarily going through a crisis?

Very often I use art therapy techniques in open workshops for different groups. We spread out the pieces of paper, drawing tools and we close our eyes – it is best to be blindfolded, because it makes it easier to enter the process. We take a pencil or crayon with the hand that we do not use every day to write, and we try to draw something. The first reaction is usually to say simply: 'But it will not work.' But it will! People are constantly afraid that they will go beyond the piece of paper, that they will do something wrong, or that the final drawing will not reflect their intentions. That is true – it will not reflect them! I sometimes also see that someone has a large piece of paper and draws only on a tiny part of its surface. I then say: now we turn the paper and draw further. Because many people still want to control what they do. Letting go of control is very difficult because it means a certain exposure. 'What if I accidentally draw something stupid?'

Are we afraid of what we can incidentally learn about ourselves? Especially if someone associates therapy with the Rorschach test, the test with the inkblots, each of which is assigned a codified interpretation.

Let us take for example a tree test: if someone draws a tree with a hollow, then they certainly have quasi-erotic thoughts. That is not even the point!

Not every black image is a sad image. It can reflect fascination with black or with depth. It does not have to relate to trauma or loss. Not every frame means isolating oneself from reality. A human is really very complicated. And creative action can activate this retracted wing...

Do these crisis situations show explicitly what is wrong with us in general?

Yes. Of course, it would be utopian to say that therapy would help us in everything, just as aspirin would not always help everyone. Art therapy is a very capacious concept, it can be realized through theatre, graphics, *body painting*, writing, singing, dancing... But we have to distinguish dance therapy from dance lessons. Dance therapy is about someone using their body as a tool and then you have to tell them or encourage them to jump like a frog or walk like a flamingo – and to make them think that it is okay. And if someone sings, let them sing with a hoarse voice and making a mess of the rhythm.

I believe that there should be as many art therapists and music therapists as possible, not just instructors who teach, for example, how to play a given instrument. This, of course, is developing, but teaching how to play and carrying out music therapy are two different things. I think people need to be encouraged to use it.

Could this be the role of cultural institutions? Should they, in addition to presenting the art itself, invite the question: Why do we need all this? What is hidden under our visible skin?

I think that is how many people who run workshops in museums work. This requires a certain social competence, which I would call attracting

people to oneself. You have to be a bit excessively open to encourage those who are in shells to step out of them, or shed them. It does not have to mean some emotional experience or creative expression, sometimes it is enough for someone to say, 'I don't know' or 'I have to think'. To free ourselves a little from the conviction formed in us by school processes that we always have to know everything and know the answer to everything. Or worse, give an answer for someone else...

It is also important to be fine with the fact that people will do something differently than we think. For example, if we design a rag bag, we want it to come out nice, symmetrical, consistent with some pattern. And then someone comes and daubs something in one corner and...

...and it is ugly.

And it is not as it was supposed to be, is it? But maybe someone just likes to have a lot of colour in one corner, and have the rest be empty. Not everything has to be in a precise pattern. Art is not about fitting into a pattern. This is the characteristic of craftsmanship.

Crafts are much more popular than art.

Because they are safer. But also because we are overloaded with plastic stuff, with all the repetitive things, with things which are fashionable and owned by thousands of people.

The time spent on creating your own unique work is also important.

Yes. We experience the revival of spending free time together with craft, for example, there are girls who meet to embroider. Sometimes it even

has the dimension of artistic creativity. Besides, in the men's ward where I work, gentlemen also make me very beautiful embroidery. You just have to give them a sense of security that no one will laugh if they sew pink hearts.

Is this laughter also an expression of getting lost in our imagined and accepted social roles?

Yes, and this is also reflected in art, because very often only when you allow a man to paint flowers, or allow a woman to make a very hard, 'male' sculpture, various commands and prohibitions – your own and imposed by the environment – begin to break. Though, we, women, have the advantage that we are allowed to cry with impunity (but then we are called weepers or hysterics). And men, why do they cry when they are drunk? Because they finally lose control, right?

Is art also meant to make us 'lose control'?

Absolutely!

I think that is the wish of every educator – that people experience something. The question is how to reach this? Should we work under the slogan that we help people go beyond the frames?

It is not even that. We should simply help people be themselves in their own way. For example, for both of us, the slogan 'go beyond the frames' is nice, we know that it develops us, and that it is what we want. But going beyond the frame is an act of courage.

Especially if I feel that the frame is all I have got.

Yes. And maybe sometimes you do not even have to go beyond the frame, just dig more carefully into yourself.

We all went through the experience of confinement during the pandemic. What allowed us to survive in that period? People watched films, listened to music, some visited virtual museums, and so on. Of course, we can argue about whether a romantic comedy is a work of art, but it was invented, played, directed by someone – it is a manifestation of creativity. We can evaluate it differently. According to critics, it is kitsch, but we took some advantage of it. But we do not look at visual arts this way. Because, as we said at the very beginning, people often think that art is elite, niche, does not belong to their lives. No one calls what is around us a kind of art, even though there are beautiful flower beds in parks, architecture, every day we see hundreds of photographs and so on. This is also art.

We also arrange our own surroundings, combine clothes in some style, we put on make-up.

Of course we do! We choose eyeglasses, handbags, hairstyles – all this is a manifestation of art. Or in other words: people have great aesthetic needs. This aesthetic need is our first step towards art. This does not mean that art should always be aesthetic. The two are not equivalent. It means that the deeper we go into art, the less predictable it gets. But it is no coincidence that we are talking about the art of gardening or cooking. What does this mean? It means that someone had a vision that they turned into something that is incomparable with anything else.

In lots of areas of life we encounter aesthetics, proportions, a pleasant composition or, on the contrary, a disorder to which we try not to pay attention. We distinguish these everyday experiences from the concept of art,

but they can actually introduce us to the sense of creating and processing reality. It is like a tiny catch you can pull on – even if just out of curiosity about what might happen next.

Art between us





Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

The world of art does not open up to us automatically, and a work of art 'begins to live its life only when it finds a resonance in us' - it becomes a mirror in which we see the world and experience it anew.

Developing creativity and empathy

Already in the 1940s, the British philosopher, poet, art historian and education theorist Herbert Read portrayed the modern human being as internally torn and mutilated, 'like a bird with one wing clipped'. Deprived of their inner balance, they cannot find the spiritual contents of their existence in a world that 'commands human to use the wing of the intellect, while the wing of feelings and imagination remains crippled'.³² The concept of education proposed in response to this state of affairs assumed the formation of all mental, cognitive and social dispositions of the human being: sensitivity, intellect, imagination, creative forces, as well as the aesthetic, moral and social feelings, and the ability to communicate with other people. Harmony was to be ensured by art, restored to society as a tool of integral development.

The importance of art for the development of the human personality was also emphasized by the Polish researchers of creativity and authors of pedagogical concepts – Irena Wojnar and Stefan Szuman. They consider that deeper contact with art teaches us to perceive and feel reality, as well as to understand the essence and purpose of human life – art is a mirror in which we see the world and experience it anew. Through art, we can explore, analyse and transform it in a more complete manner, and as a result, enrich our personality.

Understood in this way, the process of learning through art tends towards the formation of a creative attitude, that is, an attitude of an 'open mind', thanks to which the passive perception of external reality is overcome,

³² Quoted in: Irena Wojnar, *Teoria wychowania estetycznego* [Theory of Aesthetic Education], Warszawa 1980, p. 185.

and a dynamic, understanding approach to relations with the other people and with oneself is formed. A necessary condition is to transform the encounter with art into a process involving both an in-depth study of the artistic message of a work of art and a gradual discovery of the language by which art allows us to communicate with the environment – in a way that goes beyond strictly rational cognition. Art is therefore not so much a work but an action: it involves not only the artist's creative process, but also their own expression and the way of life expressed in their open attitude.

The concept of active contemplation proposed by Irena Wojnar³³ assumes that art should activate in the recipient their mental dispositions (especially imagination), so that they complement and add the meaning of the work they are dealing with, using their own experience, by including the viewed content into their individual inner world. The recipient thus initiates the process of creative translation into the available language of emotions, images and feelings, by entering the work into familiar contexts and experiences. The apparent paradox of this term allows us to see in the creative act its dual nature: 'reflecting oneself in' the presented painting, scene or shape, while engaging one's own internal resources in launching a dialogue that leads to the creative development and updating of the vision and message proposed by the artist.

Meanwhile, adults who did not have the opportunity to learn and develop skills of understanding and using the language of art are often helpless in the face of the artistic works presented to them. They do not know how to start viewing works, what to look for in them, what to focus attention on. Such unskillful contacts with art may resemble an attempt to watch a film in an unknown language – without dubbing or subtitles. Some layer

³³ Irena Wojnar, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

of the film (mood, meaning of scenes and situations, emotions) is certainly reaching us, but it is difficult to call it a comfortable, full reception.

There is a common belief regarding visual arts, that the work – unlike film or literature – is supposed to have a direct impact. Due to the lack of a verbal layer, which could affect the understanding of the meaning contained in such a work of art, we assume that it will be legible in its expression – it will somehow establish a connection with the recipient, it will open to them a whole spectrum of hidden meanings. However, recipients often feel lost in the face of a work of art (especially the contemporary art). Where does viewing a work of art actually begin and where does it end? Is it about what is visible or what is hidden behind the artefact and is trying to reach us indirectly?

The American philosopher Nelson Goodman compared an art museum to a library, assigning the two types of institutions similar tasks: collecting and storing important works, as well as popularising them and making them available. However, he also pointed out a significant difference between the two institutions: 'There are at least two reasons that prevent a museum to be run like a library: firstly, museum works cannot be in circulation or be displayed on a bare shelf; secondly, while most library users can read, most museum visitors cannot view.'³⁴

While children and young people participate in educational processes, in which various elements of art and creativity can be introduced to the curriculum, adults usually do not participate in such continuous processes

³⁴ Nelson Goodman, *The End of the Museum?*, [in:] *Muzeum sztuki. Antologia [Museum of Art. Anthology]*, Maria Popczyk (ed.), Polish translation by Maria Korusiewicz, Kraków 2005, p. 123.

anymore. Museums, galleries or cultural centres thus become places where an adult person has the opportunity to fully use the exhibition offer, but the assumption that it is enough to expose the works and invite people to view them does not always provide a satisfactory effect. The language of art, despite its direct, sensual pronunciation, concreteness or accuracy in expressing content, is not understandable for everyone and requires learning its specific code. Each discipline of art 'speaks its own language' – it expresses itself in its shape and its colours, in its sound, word, movement or gesture. Brought up to use a rational, utility-oriented and efficient way of thinking, we may feel lost or even irritated when we have to switch to a perception of a work that requires the involvement of emotions, senses, imagination.

The world of art does not automatically open up to us. A work of art becomes alive and understandable as we enter it, we get to know it more and more and experience it more clearly. The task of educators (and institutions within which they operate) is then, on the one hand, to make art available – to ensure that works become the object of direct impact on the recipient, and, on the other hand, to make it accessible – carrying out all actions by which we can induce the demand for art, the interest in art, and the ability to properly perceive, understand and experience art. Sharing one's own judgements and knowledge, conducting conversations about how one can perceive and understand a work of art, is supposed to stimulate curiosity and make it easier for less skilled art recipients to reach the message of the given work.³⁵

³⁵ Cf. Stefan Szuman, *O sztuce i wychowaniu estetycznym* [On Art and Aesthetic Education], Warszawa 1969.

People know the world with their mind and also directly, through their senses and their own actions: they see, hear, feel and discover through specific images which constitute the content of their perception of reality. Goodman warns us: 'If the museum does not find ways to inculcate the ability to view and support the exercise of that ability, then the other functions of the museum will become useless, and its works will become as unused as books written in an incomprehensible language or isolated from readers. If the works are to function, the museum must act as an institution for preventing blindness and treating insensitivity to what we see.'³⁶

Sounds harsh? This expectation stems from the concern for all of us – people are generally focused on achievements in life that can be measured, on professional success, and are not necessarily interested in nurturing their artistic sensitivity. However, by marginalizing the realm of art, we deprive ourselves of access to unused creative resources, which can only be accessed by practising and exercising various ways of creative thinking and acting. Going beyond the patterns of everyday life requires non-rational modes of communication, expression and interaction along with the co-creation of knowledge about what is important to us and what can provide us with better, more satisfying conditions for living together.

The value and meaning of the language of art was aptly expressed by the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, who once confessed: 'If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.' Indeed, communication through art allows us to communicate in areas where the possibilities of verbal language are limited. Words convey ideas in a linear way, and even their most careful selection does not allow one to go beyond the realm of abstract thinking by means of concepts. Art, on the other hand, has the

³⁶ Nelson Goodman, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

ability to grasp complexity in a way that words ignore. Image, line, colour, shape, gesture, sound – all of them have the ability to simultaneously have many different meanings and to convey emotions and engage the senses and the body.

Therefore, the answer to the question ‘why do we need to know the language of art?’ should be sought not only because of the desire to increase the attendance in cultural institutions, but also in order to gradually introduce it to our daily social practices. Art should be both an object of external cognition allowing for the skilful reading of works and artistic gestures, and a process of testing and gradually acquiring proficiency in the use of artistic languages. Communing with art is supposed to help us to learn its languages, so to make us want to speak those languages ourselves and teach us how to do it – just as foreign languages are not taught to enable us to talk about them, but to enable us to use them to express ourselves, to communicate.

What activities can support the acquisition of skills in using the language of art?

Viewing the artwork together

The encounter with art does not guarantee a lively reaction, nor does it promise an immediate sense of understanding of the content being conveyed. And yet it happens (we emphasize: it happens, and it is not an obvious phenomenon) that some painting, sculpture or other work of art will make us stop before it. It is a moment when the vision or object presented by the artist crosses the threshold of our inner world, when it comes face to face with our imagination, experience, emotions, thoughts and enter

into a dialogue with them. They trigger, touch something inside us. It is not so much that we see a work of art, it is rather that we experience it.

When viewing the artefact, we establish a bond with the work as well as with ourselves and with other people with whom we share our experiences, thoughts, associations. The best way to find out is to invite a group of people to a joint visit to the gallery or an informal meeting, during which we will view the art and share the reflections and emotions evoked by a specific work. Looking at art as a research tool that allows us to search for answers to the questions of who we are and what a good life can be, Norwegian philosopher and art critic Kjetil Røed aptly observes that 'we need both a community space and a space of solitude. And, let us not forget, an understanding of how these different roles work together.'³⁷

Every time we present art to the group, we can treat this situation as an invitation to discover personal reactions to the art works being viewed. The role of the person conducting such classes is to accept both the interest in and rejection of individual works, to open oneself to the emotions and stories evoked by the participants. The time spent with a work of art can be longer or shorter; if one of them prompts no reaction, we can calmly move on to the next artefact. When visiting a gallery or museum, it is important that we have many different works, so that we can capture different people's interest in different topics and dimensions of art. It can be a colour, an era, a movement, a theme, a word, or a symbol. It is to be a common entry into the unknown to see what resonates most strongly in us.

³⁷ Kjetil Røed, *Art and Life. A user's Manual*, Polish translation by Karolina Drozdowska, Sopot 2022, p. 72.

‘I would never adopt a posture of thinking that I could teach someone how to look at art,’ says Stephen Legari, an art therapist from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, ‘I like to think that I help to create a space where people can allow the way they look at things to change.’³⁸ He sees the sense of seeing art together in creating the conditions which allow the participants in museum classes to develop curiosity about their own choices, experience empathy, and see how others see art. When we meet art with other people, we learn not only different ways of feeling and reacting to it, but we also learn to pay attention to details and aspects of works that would not seem important to us. The more time we spend viewing and talking about art together, the greater the change in our process and experience of seeing.

³⁸ Una Meistere, ‘Museotherapy – the museum as a prescription, An interview with Stephen Legari, art therapist at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts’, 1 September 2021, https://artterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/25738-museotherapy_-the-museum_as_a_prescription/ (accessed: 8.11.2024).



Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*, 2010.
Photo: Marco Anelli. © Marina Abramović Archives

The Artist Is Present, a performance by Marina Abramović, organized in 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the artist's retrospective exhibition. Over the course of the three months during which the action took place, for six of seven days of each week during the museum's opening hours, Marina Abramović sat motionless in a chair set in the middle of the hall. In front of her was a chair for visitors, who could sit down and silently exchange glances with the artist. 'I do not think we try to look inside ourselves every day. We try to avoid all confrontation. But this situation was completely different. First, you had to wait to sit face to face with me. Then the audience watched you. You were photographed and filmed. Watched by me. You could not escape anywhere but inside yourself. And that is what it was all about.'*

* Marina Abramović, *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, Polish translation by Magdalena Hermanowska, Anna Bernaczyk, Poznań 2018, p. 360.

What activities can support the formation of personal relationships with the works of art we see?

► EX. STORY CIRCLES

Telling each other what we see and feel is an exercise in translation: not only from visual language into the verbal one, but also from the content we see into our own experiences.

Invite a group of people to walk through the gallery and search for works that for some reason arouse their interest – the key may be the subject of the given painting or the emotion expressed in it. Ask each person to write down their own history, created by the influence of the selected work of art. These can be pleasant memories or something that worries them at the moment. Then, in small subgroups (3–4 people), share the stories.

Working with your own stories, enriched by the reactions of the listeners, can lead to a change of perspective, a deeper understanding of your own situation, drawing conclusions from your own story and the experiences of others.³⁹

► EX. TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE/DRAW

WHAT I TELL YOU

Are we able to convey in words the content and appearance of a work of art?

Prepare a set of printed reproductions of various works of art, these can be realistic or abstract paintings, photographs, sculptures. Place the participants in pairs, so that people in each pair sit with their backs turned to each other. Give one a reproduction, and the other – a sheet of paper and a pencil. Their task will be to reproduce in the form of a drawing, as faithfully as possible, the work presented in the reproduction. Only one person in the pair can see the reproduction, their

task is to describe the work of art in such a way that the drawing person can sketch the most faithful copy.

After completing the task (time should be limited to a maximum of 10 minutes), the drawing person transmits the drawing to the representative of another pair. The next task will be to draw this work on similar principles, i.e., on the basis of verbal instructions and without seeing the initial image. After completing the task, create a gallery in which reproductions of the originals will be accompanied by their drawing interpretations. Take a look at which elements were reproduced in a relatively faithful manner, and which ones are far from the original. Share your impressions about working together: what was most difficult for those who drew, and what was most difficult for those who spoke? Could it be possible to clarify the verbal description of the reproduction being seen in order to facilitate the task of the drawing persons? After doing this exercise, no one will doubt that the language of words – with all its richness, flexibility and diversity – does not exhaust our possibilities of expression and communication.

► EX. MEETING BEYOND WORDS

Museum looking exercises may concern more than just the careful viewing of the presented works of art. Organized at the Museum of Modern Art in New York during the Artist is Present exhibition in 2010, a multi-day session with Marina Abramović gained the status of a classic work in the field of art performance. During the three months of the action, six days a week, during the opening hours of the museum, the artist sat motionless in a chair set in the middle of the hall. In front of her was a chair for visitors, who could sit down and silently exchanged glances with the artist.

³⁹ Cf. Jadwiga Joško-Ochojska, Ryszard Brus, Joanna Sell, op. cit., p. 67.

Try to get people to sit and look at each other in similar sessions. It can be very difficult when we find strangers in front of us, but it may turn out that also maintaining eye contact with a friend (with whom, however, we do not have an intimate bond) will also cause difficulties. In everyday social contacts – on the bus, train, in a shop queue, in a lift – we usually look away and feel awkward when our eyes meet accidentally. We do not want to be watched? We have nothing to say to each other? We feel too exposed and threatened? We do not want to leave our safe world and our own thoughts? We are afraid of assessment? Why is it so difficult to send a selfless smile in such situations?

Note: we must remember that there may be people in our group who are sensitive to certain stimuli, so before we invite participants to this exercise, let us explain what it will consist of, and make sure that only those people who feel curiosity and are willing to face someone else's gaze and the direct, close presence of the other person are involved.

► EX. LOOKING IN THE SAME DIRECTION

You can try as a warm-up (or another variant of this exercise) the joint looking at selected works – stopping with someone in front of the selected work and passing on impressions and thoughts that come to our mind while looking.

You can prepare some kind of conversation cards to help you express your feelings. Write on them the beginning of sentences,

such as: 'I don't understand why...', 'I enjoy looking at...', 'I feel anxious when I see...', 'I would like to know...'. By asking participants to use them, you will give some structure to the conversation, avoiding awkward silence, and the participants will feel more confident when the conversation – at least initially – follows certain rules.

► EX. DRAWING WITH AIR

Divide people into pairs, whose task will be to create invisible portraits. Sit down or stand in front of each other and try to paint a portrait of your partner with the movements of your finger in the air (you can also use a brush, the trace of which will only be present in the air). After a while, switch roles: the portraitist will now become portrayed. Try to observe how your attitude towards the 'portrayed' person changes. You will see that the gesture-supplemented look becomes a carrier of emotions – you can express cordiality and tenderness, break indifference and get rid of the feeling of being judged in favour of the feeling of being noticed and accepted.

In the second part of the exercise, invite the participating couples to create a joint invisible work. Without exchanging verbal messages, spontaneously decide what it will be: a sun-lit landscape, a cottage with a garden, popular emoticons? You will probably not go beyond the children's repertoire in the expression of drawings, but that is the point – your drawings will not be judged, nobody else will see them, and by drawing them, you will establish an emotional dialogue with each other.

Personal interests / individual interpretive clues

Very often we assume that enjoying contact with art or even to find oneself in its surroundings requires specific knowledge. This sense is reinforced and confirmed by the ways of presenting works proposed in most art museums – artefacts are shown divided by eras, painting schools, artistic achievements of individual countries and nations, which introduces viewers into a peculiar trap of chronology and categorization. ‘The effect of such arrangement strengthens the viewer’s awareness of the temporal distance that separates them from the work, thus hindering direct communication with the work; as a result, the work does not get updated, it does not come to life.’⁴⁰

The educational programs built around the exhibitions also concern mainly expanding knowledge about the era and artists operating within specific trends. The value of such knowledge is inestimable and many museums are great at presenting it in an attractive way – through lectures, thematic tours, walks, during which traces and references to the topics presented at the exhibitions are sought in the area. They can bring us closer to the subject matter and revive the cultural and social background in which the artists acted, but they do not suggest ways and do not offer the possibility of the non-knowledge-related contact with the exhibited art. ‘Narratives proposed by the museum are based essentially on the foundations formulated by the art history. Putting the works in the right order, it gives them meaning as examples of style, trend, era. Works become merely

⁴⁰ Jarosław Suchan, Małgorzata Ludwiak, *Muzeum jako narzędzie edukacji* [Museum as a Tool of Education], [in:] *Edukacja poprzez kulturę. Kreatywność i innowacyjność* [Education Through Culture. Creativity and Innovation], Dorota Ilczuk, Sławomir Ratajski (eds), Warszawa 2011, p. 239.

illustrations of the concepts that the traditional art history once developed. (...) Such a story, similarly to the chronological framework, only adds to the impression that the museum is dedicated to what happened before and that it does not concern the reality in which the contemporary viewer functions.⁴¹ As a result, the viewer, left alone and wandering through the museum premises, may feel insufficiently competent and unprepared to use the presented collections. They can read the signatures explaining in which year and in what technique the work was made, but remain completely confused about the ‘silence’ and the mysteries of the paintings that somehow cannot speak to them.

Alain de Botton rightly points out that when it comes to music, films, fashion or culinary arts, we usually have no trouble determining what we like about them, what we are interested in or not. We are happy to talk about our musical or film preferences, we recommend interesting works and names of creators; we do not expect talks about musical, film, culinary or literary preferences to be performed with expert knowledge or some special competence.⁴² For many of us, contact with music is completely natural: we listen to what we want, when we want, we create our own playlists. Very often, music serves us for specific purposes: we listen to it when we want to elevate our mood or calm down; when we are cheerful or sad, when we want to break away from reality or intensify our focus on the activity we are engaging in, and it is completely indispensable to dance or when we feel like singing at the top of our lungs – music expresses and stimulates emotions; it accompanies us every day. The same applies to for

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² *Art as Therapy*, interview with Alain de Botton on one of the exhibitions from the *Art as Therapy* series at the Art Gallery of Ontario, which he co-curated, 9 July 2014, <https://youtu.be/HkT5WolzoxU?feature=shared> (accessed: 28 March 2024).

our culinary tastes: we need no expertise to want to try different flavours and decide what suits us or not. However, in contact with visual arts, we are accompanied by a kind of 'block' – as if we needed more than our eyes and our own ability to see...⁴³

⁴³ Ibidem.

How can art be taken outside the framework of history, of theory and purely aesthetic issues?

► EX. ESCAPE FROM ART HISTORY

As part of this exercise, organize a trip to any art gallery. You can do it yourself, go with friends or invite a group of adults with whom you work as an animator, librarian, teacher.

If you need a justification for this expedition, you can use this: your creativity, like a growing plant, must be constantly nourished – otherwise it will wither and it will be of little use to you. And it so happens that art is a great nutrient for our imagination. So, visit an art exhibition, but this time do not focus on experiencing beauty or expanding knowledge about painting (but do not exclude them, either). Go there knowing that you are doing it specifically for your imagination. Below you will find some tips on what key we can use to organize our impressions.

► EX. STEALING WORKS OF ART

What value can works of art have for you? In your imagination, play the role of a thief. If you were Breitweiser – the famous French ‘gentleman burglar’ – which work of art from this gallery would you choose to steal? Justify your choice. Think about what you would do with this painting and what consequences it might have for your life.

Note: after this exercise, pinch yourself three times to make sure you are back to reality.

► EX. COVER OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

If you had to decide what visual theme will be put on the cover of a book dedicated to your life – where would you look for inspiration? What could express your values, tastes, philosophy of life, your personality? Probably none of the presented works will meet all

your expectations, but sharing with other your reasons, as well as possible doubts about the appropriateness of the visual theme you choose will allow you to tell something about yourself that is important to you and that escapes in everyday contacts – it can also enrich them and take them to a different, less formal level. This type of interaction with art promotes building relationships not only with artistic creativity, but also with the people around us.

► EX. WHAT DO THE CHARACTERS ON THE PAINTINGS / SCULPTURES FEEL / THINK?

Viewing paintings (and other works of art with characters – not necessarily human) does not have to be limited to the ‘absorption’ of the presented colours, poses, costumes, scenery. However, pay attention to all these elements when you think about what these people are actually doing and why they are present in the given painting. It is not necessary to know the real names and biographies of individual (real or mythical) figures. In their depiction, we will look for all clues and traces of emotions, relations with the surrounding world, presumed feelings and thoughts that we can read from poses, gestures, facial expressions. You can propose a game popularized by the creators of the *Sztuczne fiołki* [Artificial Violets] fan page, that is, add statements or thoughts of the characters presented on the works of art.

► EX. HOW DO YOU FEEL TODAY? COMMUNICATING EMOTIONS THROUGH PAINTINGS

Propose that each person find at the exhibition a work, through which they will be able to tell the group about their mood today or about a matter that is currently important to them. Maybe someone will notice a Madonna leaning over the child, or maybe someone will find expression for their melancholy in the picture of a muddy road in the countryside...

In art we can see our own reflection, although it will not resemble the image we see when we stand in front of an ordinary mirror. Looking at works of art, we find images of moods, landscapes, premonitions captured by others that will lead us into ourselves, allow us to look into the world of our own experiences, memories and fantasies. In the frame drawn here, you can paste (or imagine) a work of art with which you feel personally connected. Note: Choosing only one piece can be very difficult!

Creativity / imagination

One of the most influential 20th-century artists, Joseph Beuys, an artist and social activist, published in 1972 a famous manifesto titled *Everyone is an Artist*. He presented the vision of human as a creative being who creates the social order, creates history, and whose knowledge comes in its entirety from art, because 'every human capacity derives from capacity for art, that is, the capacity for creative action'.⁴⁴ He thus granted every person who activates their creative potential a status equal to the artist. But where does our ability to be creative come from? And what makes many of us not feel, much less attribute, such talents to ourselves? If we agree that the most obvious expression and manifestation of creativity is art in its various incarnations, why do so many of us not only not practice it, but even pass by it indifferently? How can we verify if there is creative potential in us?

The most common reason for not using one's own creative potential is the widespread belief that creating valuable, interesting and original works, ideas, and inventions obligatory requires some 'natural' talents. This belief usually results from the lack of creative experience, as well as from the depreciation of imagination and daydreaming as activities allegedly suitable for children, which are not suitable for an adult, because adults are expected to take a rational and serious approach to their tasks. Moreover, widely available forms of entertainment rarely engage us in a way that allows us to explore our inner creative resources. Many of these activities somehow create immersive stories and imagined worlds (of literary, film,

⁴⁴ Joseph Beuys, *Everyone is an Artist*, Polish translation by Krystyna Krzemień, [in:] *Zmierzch estetyki – rzekomy czy autentyczny? [The Decline of Aesthetics – Alleged or Authentic?]*, Stefan Morawski (ed.), vol. 2, Warszawa 1987, p. 268.

theatre, gaming nature) for us, leaving little room for our own imagination to work – which would not require effort but rather the willingness to engage and explore, as well as develop interesting motifs, process the creative resources that lie within us, but are rarely used.

Austin Kleon, an artist, writer, creator of ‘blackout poems’ (created in the process of drawing over or crossing out words in newspaper articles), and a tireless advocate of everyday creativity, has accurately captured the sense of indulging in creative activities every day: ‘In my experience, it is only in the process of creating things and doing our work that we discover who we are.’⁴⁵ Thanks to frequent and regular performance of even the smallest creative activities, we give ourselves the opportunity to wander around our inner world, discover how our own individual associations work and where they lead us. We practice the ability to transform impressions into images, stories and meanings, the existence of which we did not even suspect. What is unknown emerges during the creation process – otherwise we simply do not have access to it. Such creative plays require switching to a kind of carelessness, agreeing that we will create without preconceived assumptions about the final effect of our action. It is only in this process that we can gradually discover where our imagination leads us.

Viewing art can be an extremely helpful source of inspiration for our own creative activities, provided that we allow ourselves to have free contact with the visions presented by the artists – unlimited by the framework of historical, aesthetic, or academic discourse. The search for inspiration is not about copying the solutions used by someone, but about carefully looking at our own reaction to them: what moves me here, what delights me, what scares me, what seems strangely familiar and close to me. It is important

⁴⁵ Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, New York 2012, p. 27.

not to give in to the sense of technical incompetence and powerlessness in the absence of proper preparation and experience – in fact, we do not know anything about our own creative predispositions and skills until we try to use them. Each of us, as a child, had the opportunity to express themselves through creativity, unconstrained by conventions and fear of judgement. At that period of life, we all processed our knowledge of the world in this way and shared it with others. This potential is always within us – we just need to start using it. So, if you ever thought, when seeing a piece of art: ‘Pshaw, I could paint something similar myself’, maybe it is worth taking this reaction seriously. Maybe the main difference between you and the artist is that they take on creative work, and you do not?

Creativity is the ability to discover where our imagination leads us; it acts like a vehicle; the stories or images we make up lead us, if only we put them in motion. Movement is meant literally here: stimulating the imagination needs impulses from simple activities performed by our body – it can be drawing with crayons on paper, forming shapes of plasticine, knitting, writing words that come to your head... It is therefore essential to find a way to incorporate them into your creative work. ‘Our nerves aren’t a one-way street—our bodies can tell our brains as much as our brains tell our bodies. (...) That’s what’s so great about creative work: If we just start going through the motions, if we strum a guitar, or shuffle sticky notes around a conference table, or start kneading clay, the motion kickstarts our brain into thinking.’⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 54.

What activities can support the creative work of our mind?

► EX. HYBRIDS

Popular building blocks and creative materials are usually well designed and comfortable to use, but they support our imagination in a very rigid framework. Meanwhile, to practice free creativity, we do not need special objects at all. You can release your imagination by reaching for a variety of materials, which we have around us in abundance – this is various ‘useful’ stuff kept in drawers: single buttons, an old key, beads, coins of low face value, shells, cinema tickets.

Ask participants in the group you work with to bring such small treasures and then invite them to use these items to arrange a composition – on a sheet of paper, in a frame or on a plate – that will express their emotional attitude towards these objects. Give yourself time to carefully look and think about their form, their colour, the properties of the material from which they are made. Then use them to make your compositions. Similar creative exercises can be done using natural materials while walking through the park or forest; then you can use sticks, leaves, pebbles, feathers.

Combining diverse elements and orders is extremely helpful to stimulate our creative associations and explore the visual pleasure of creating our own images. During that activity, no one will be able to tell that they cannot paint or sculpt: it is only about exploring how your curiosity works: what arouses it, how does the arousal happen, and what makes us arrange certain elements in original compositions of our own devising?

► EX. IMAGINATION MACHINE

Invite a group of people to create with their bodies and gestures an imaginary machine that would serve to... produce new ideas. It

is forbidden to communicate with each other in words or prepare a plan. You all stand in silence (although you can also suggest a musical theme as a background to this activity). The leader creates the first element of the machine, for example, makes a gesture with their arm resembling a flywheel that moves the engine or begins to swing like a pendulum. The subsequently indicated people ‘add’ other elements – they can puff their cheeks to produce the necessary ‘steam’ that sets the machine in motion, jump, support, run, speed it up, step on the brake – whatever comes to their mind as a development or complexity of the jointly created mechanism. You will see how much joy such a collectively played machine produces, and that ideas for its development are born spontaneously, as if suggested by the body, without the perceptible work of the mind. This is how we can stimulate and train our poorly used creative ‘cues’ coming from the nerve connections between the brain and sensory receptors spread throughout our bodies.

► EX. THE PLANET OF ADULTHOOD

Show the group a reproduction (if you work in a gallery, you can do this exercise in front of the original) of the selected abstract painting. It is important to choose a multi-element work, presenting unobvious and ambiguous shapes which are difficult to be immediately named (the paintings of Joan de Miró or Paul Klee will work well here). Look carefully at the reproduction. What do you see? There will probably be a lot of spontaneous ideas or – equally likely – confusion and complete lack of interpretive clues. Suggest the group to assume that this is a map. A map of the planet called Adulthood. Your task will be to create a legend for this map – an attempt to imagine that its individual areas and elements correspond to real emotional states, fears, knowledge that as adults you would like to name and convey in the form of its ‘topographical’ representation.

You do not know where to start? Treat the repeating elements as symbols – just as the two-dimensional trees on real maps symbolize forests and the rectangles symbolize human settlements. Or divide the map of the planet into areas and give them names: ‘crater of heartbreak’, ‘islands of laziness’, ‘coast of worry’, ‘ocean of uncertainty’, ‘highlands of professional success’, ‘shifting sands of parenthood’, etc. Look at the lines – if you decide they are roads, what starting and ending points they connect? Or maybe these are boundaries? What do they separate? As the animator, do not assume any expectations or interpretative key in your head, allow the associations and impulses brought by the group to flow freely. Take down the ideas that come up, and after exhausting them, think and talk about the reflections that this exercise caused. Is this planet a friendly place? How do you feel as a resident? Do you ever want to leave it? And if so, where would you go? Are there any escape opportunities? Or maybe you want to create a different map and arrange this planet differently?

► **EX. IF I WAS TO ACQUIRE
A SUPERPOWER IN THE GALLERY...**

One of the ways to use inspirations coming from art in a creative way is to walk through the exhibition with the intention of finding, in the works presented there, features and elements that we can somehow connect with ourselves, relate them to our own dilemmas and anxieties or find application for them in life situations in which we currently find ourselves. If you could ‘borrow’ one element from each painting to strengthen your sense of value, improve your image, increase your impact on the environment – what would you choose? What would you borrow from a noblewoman portrayed in her drawing room – self-confidence? interesting hairstyle? erect posture? What application could you find for the household

appliances collected in the picture, the power attributes presented, or perhaps interesting elements of costumes?

Walk through the exhibition in small groups (2–3 persons) and, giving your voice to another person next to each work you see, create a story about how your imaginary self transforms and enriches itself with the ‘superpowers’ taken from individual works.

► **EX. GOING BEYOND THE FRAMES**

Prepare an empty painting frame, it can be the simplest wooden frame or a frame made of rigid cardboard of a size close to the average size of an adult. Invite the group to ‘pose’ in the space of this frame: what pose they want to take? Will they become a seated, reflective figure? Which of their many life roles will they choose to play? What attributes will they need to emphasize their status, emotional state, stage of life? You can improvise them with simple elements such as a globe, a lamp, a book, or – if they are not available – use their substitutes drawn on or cut out of paper. Capture all these ‘portraits’ in photographs.

Then move on to the next challenge: how would you like/how could you go beyond your current role? The search for a creative answer may consist in different ways of ‘playing’ with the real, visible painting frame in which you portray yourself (not fitting into the frame, deciding whether there is place in our role for our heart, passion, dreams – for example, our wings of imagination may go beyond the frame), or focusing on ways of escaping beyond the frame – creating triptychs, multi-panel paintings, in which there is space for our loved ones or various roles that currently make up our image.

Together, think about the things that limit you, and ask yourselves: When do we allow

ourselves to abandon the framework set by our roles in life?

► EX. CALLING OUT GHOSTS

In the process of exploring ourselves, it is important to bring out our inner qualities and preferences; we have them, but we often do not realize it. How to make access to them easier? If you are curious about what lies dormant in you, reach for tools that will help you draw your 'spontaneous self-portrait': try drawing something blindfolded, play with making coloured inkblots (apply coloured patches of paint on half a page, then press them firmly with the other half of the page) and take a look at the resulting pattern – what do you like about it? What do you associate with the shape created? What emotions does it express? Colours and shapes will be random, but in this case, it is important to observe your own reactions to them and 'read' your emotions from them. Similarly, you can use the fun of pouring dissolved wax into the water and watching the shadows cast by the resulting shape. You can also try drawing on paper with a candle – the image will be invisible until you cover it with a layer of paint.

► EX. NEW LIFE OF A PEN CAP

Look around and find five small objects in your immediate surroundings that seem useless. It can be a bent office clip, a non-writing pen, an outdated calendar card, an old receipt or an eraser. Try combining them together (e.g., using glue or adhesive tape, or placing them on a piece of paper) to create some new quality – it can be, for example, a prototype of a device, a mini-toy or an artistic installation. What is very important is not to start with an idea or expectation of the effect, but instead allow yourself to experiment in various ways.

Allow your senses to work and give yourself time to trigger different associations and contexts.

Finally, write down on a piece of paper all the emotions that appeared during the course of work. Think about those that supported the creative process and those that discouraged you. Think for a moment: which of these observations are clearly 'yours' (e.g., they result from how you feel today, from previous experiences, your character) and which may be more general in nature. Think about how to use this observation in working with the participants of your classes.

► EX. POEM FROM A NEWSPAPER

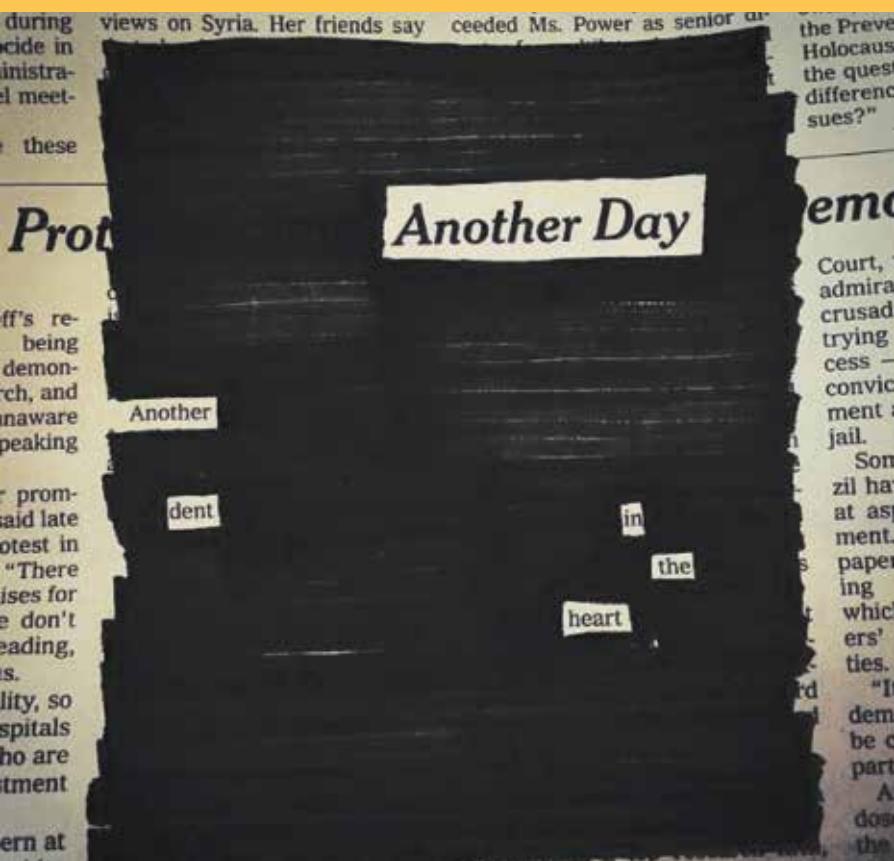
Take any newspaper, brochure, or printout of an article, and cut out 30 words. Choose and combine words in a free manner to make a sentence that could support you in difficult days. If you work with a group, you can use a hat or a box from which participants will draw words and arrange them in sequences based on their own associations – they can be absurd, what is important is to be guided by one's own intuition, mood, sense of humour. You can put the sentences created this way on a piece of paper and hang them over your desk or make a postcard from them and send them to a loved one.

You can also follow Austin Kleon: take a newspaper and strike all the words with which you have no connection at the moment. It is very likely that, as a result, you will see a set of words suddenly emerging, which will form into a sentence, and it will express some thought important to you, or at least bring a smile of amusement with its carefree, lyrical absurdity.

Austin Kleon encourages you to 'detach yourself' from the screens of your computer and phone and experiment with your own creative responses to small sensory experiences.

'Every poem in that book was made with a newspaper article and a permanent marker. The process engaged most of my senses: the feel of newsprint in my hands, the sight of words disappearing under my lines, the faint squeak of the marker tip, the smell of the marker fumes—there was a kind of magic happening. When I was making the poems, it didn't feel like work. It felt like play..'*

* Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, New York 2012, pp. 57–58.



Austin Kleon, *Blackout Poetry*, still from *How to Make a Newspaper Blackout Poem*, 2015

Playground for adults

‘It is worth trying to express the paradoxical thought that the task of art is to liberate a person from a task-oriented mode of thinking’⁴⁷ – this is how Jakub Woynarowski, creator of comics, visual essays, films and installations, answers in a perverse way the question about the purpose and role of art. This statement can be treated as an indication not only related to artistic creation, but also to ways of communicating art to its recipients, as well as helping people invited to an exhibition, cultural centre or library to go beyond the generally binding rational and goal-oriented way of thinking about their relations with the world.

The vast majority of adults need explicit justification for dealing with ‘nothing important’, indulging in trivial but pleasant activities, which the psychologist Natalia de Barbaro calls – half jokingly, but aptly – ‘happy-go-luckying’. Referring to the popular term describing someone acting in a carefree manner, she draws attention to the need to look for ways to cope with the stress and sense of being overburdened, which will help us to free ourselves from its oppressiveness and make us feel easy.

Art (and creativity in general) provides many possibilities for selfless, care-free actions, going beyond the area of rationally understood utility or necessity. Just as we do not need special incentives or excuses for playing sports, travelling, spending time with friends, so too, in dealing with art, we do not have to give in to the rigour of striving for our own development, innovation, originality. We can treat it as a space of joy and expect

⁴⁷ Jakub Woynarowski, *Jakie powinny być zadania sztuki?* [What should be the tasks of art?], [in:] *Artyści z Krakowa. Generacja 1980–1990* [Artists from Kraków. Generation 1980–1990], Kraków 2018, p. 175.

nothing more than the experience of happiness, spontaneous expression, and having fun.

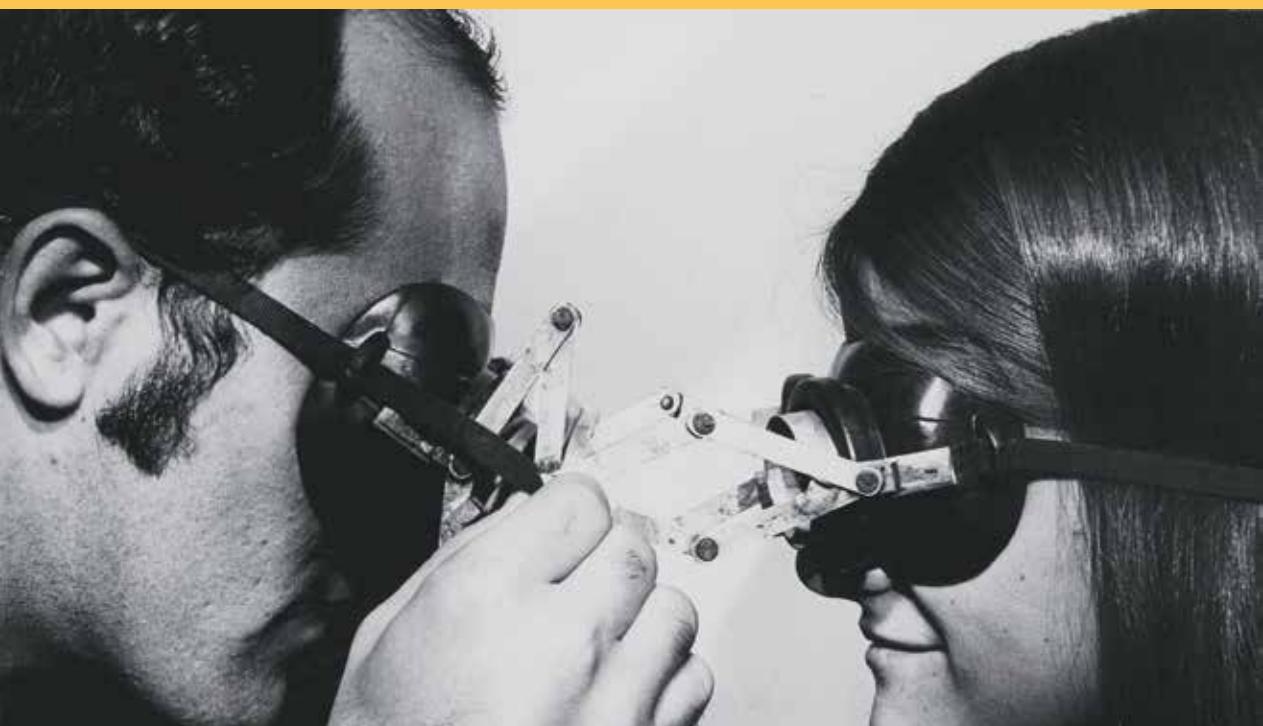
We need an incentive to work without fear of judgement, and free of pre-conceptions and expectations that are both self-imposed and imposed on us by others. This is a difficult task, because most of us reject proposals for creative activities, based on the conviction, acquired in the education process, that we already can or – in most cases – cannot draw. Those who say they cannot do something usually abandon it forever. But our skills are secondary; the important thing is whether we want to open ourselves to multisensory research and experience contact with various materials and techniques that we have not yet paid attention to.

Literally everything that is in our surroundings can be the natural treasure of typically neglected and unnoticed sensations. A group of adults can easily follow children and, with magnifying glass in hand, peer at the surface of the bark on a tree, or at stone sculpture, snow-covered door handle or a window pane ornamented with elaborate designs created by frost; examine the refraction of images in lenses with different optical parameters set at different angles; create patterns that reproduce rough surfaces.

Lygia Clark, *Dialogue: Goggles*, 1968. Photo: Eduardo Clark.
© O Mundo de Lygia Clark – Associação Cultural

Lygia Clark, called by the critics the goddess of the Brazilian avant-garde, questioned the division between artist, work and recipient, and also rebelled against the elitism of the museum and gallery institutions. Her works served as sets for training in releasing the senses or creating new ways of experiencing the presence of other people and the reality around them. She called the process they triggered 'nostalgia for the body'. The artist drew materials for creating works from everyday life. An important element of her search was not only expanding the field of individual experiences, but also non-verbal communication.

In later years, Lygia Clark devoted herself to art therapy, working with people affected by psychosis and depression. Many critics at the time considered that she had abandoned art in favour of psychotherapy, while she claimed that she was rather using the therapeutic potential of art.



What activities can encourage free exploration of the reality that surrounds us?

► EX. TINKER SPACE

Invite adults to play with a variety of materials and objects; it is like setting up a DIY studio accessible to all visitors who want to experiment. You can look for ideas in the studies on chemical, physical, optical and kinetic phenomena. Such an exploration workshop can offer, for example, a console for composing music, a workstation for creating animations and a place for playing with electrical circuits. Each set allows free exploration in which there is no one good path, but a space for curiosity and learning through creation to emerge. Here, visitors can think with their hands, and produce items from cardboard, wood and elements of kinetic art.

► EX. FABULOUS

WORLDS OF CHILDHOOD

Invite adults to meet the heroes of children's adventures – of course, the ones they themselves met in childhood. Try to remember toys, because in a way they played in your life the role of the first works of art. Here, we follow the thought of Charles Baudelaire,⁴⁸ who considered toys as mysterious inanimate figures but endowed with the power of existence and adventure.

You can use as a pretext for reviving forgotten worlds visited in childhood the illustrations in popular books from years ago. Encourage participants to share their favourite characters and childhood spaces, invite them to reconstruct old games.

► EX. ALTER EGO

German writer, poet and cabaret artist, as well as one of the creators of Dadaist art, Emma Hennings, made puppets that played an important role in her career as an artist, poet and performer. From time to time, she performed with her dolls, which she treated as her alter ego; she used to be photographed with them and recalled them in her texts: 'I'm sitting in front of the mirror watching this doll. I know I can double myself.'⁴⁹

Organize workshops for creating (sewing, sculpting, gluing, cutting) puppet alter egos of the participants. Ask each person to assign them their own, selected characteristics and together create a story (fairy tale, horror, utopia?) in which each and every participant will be able to use some of their superpowers. Apart from the joy of creating and fooling around, you can also discover what and how you think of yourself. What limitations are bothering you? What internal or external resources can you count on in difficult situations?

⁴⁸ See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art since 1900: Modernism. Antimodernism. Postmodernism*, Polish translation by Małgorzata Szubert, Dorota Skalska-Stefanśka, Anna Cichowicz, Warszawa 2023, p. 232.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.





Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

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TRZESZNIKI
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DIAZ. WROCŁAWIA

Art is a tool that helps to connect with oneself and with others – interview with Maja Dobkowska

MAJA DOBKOWSKA

Teacher, animator, educator and trainer; she works with children and youth, as well as with adult groups, e.g., with teachers and cultural staff. She published two books for children: *O Nowej Hucie twórczych zabaw kilka* and *Koniki Koninka*, she is also a co-author of the *Myślanki* series. She heads the cultural education team at the Małopolska Institute of Culture.

ELŻBIETA KAPROŃ: You work with both children and adults. You help them develop creative abilities, deepen their relationships with the environment, and help them to search for interesting paths to get to know themselves and the world. What do you think is the line that separates adults from non-adults?

Maja Dobkowska: To put it a bit perversely, that line is determined by the approach to playing. We do not divide ourselves into adults and children, only those who can play and those who find it difficult to feel confident playing. It is not just about someone being sad, not having the mood to play, but about the limitations that come with age and the emerging belief that it is no longer for us, that we should finally start dealing with serious things.

Have we all been competent in this field before, and then this natural ability disappeared?

We all used to be professors of playology, and after that... it varies. For adults, the concept of play has rather negative connotations – it seems related to messing with other people, to a party lifestyle. And my approach to play is to treat it rather as pure joy, a kind of carefree activity that may seem

like a waste of time, or – as Natalia de Barbaro calls it – ‘happy-go-lucky-ing’. We need a space in our life where we can get away from the idea that no matter what we do, there has to be a reason to do it. We do not have to constantly look for justifications. Obviously, play is always ‘for something’, but asking yourself what it means is not a good starting point; I would encourage you to ask that question in the past tense. What was the reason for that? What this led me to? What did it give me? How do I feel after this?

Everything that we experience, especially in contact with art, somehow builds us, enriches us, opens us – in this sense, it is always ‘for something’. But the search for reason or even justification, is a trap at the very beginning; it causes us to give up selfless, carefree actions, because we cannot easily say what they serve. In contact with art, it is very important to think that we are going on the road and to not worry about where it will lead us. Meanwhile, as adults, we live within a certain framework that rarely allows us to take this approach.

A good ‘justification’ for dealing with art and creativity is participation in classes for people working with children and young people generally. During such training, teachers, animators, museum educators learn new tools and methods of work, but at the same time – under the pretext of acquiring professional competences – do they themselves experience something new, do they join exercises in their own name, as it were?

This is exactly how it works. My many years of observations, especially from training for preschool teachers, tell me that it is not difficult to invite adults to try the exercises that I call play for preschoolers. I use the following ‘master key’: if you want to understand how it works, know how to carry out such exercises – you yourself have to try it first. Participants

are happy to get involved. Sometimes the organizers of the trainings ask, what we do, when everyone comes out crying with laughter; is it really an educational class?

Equally interesting are the reactions of adults to contact with workshop materials – almost everyone says that they cannot recall the last time they had plasticine in their hands, and touching it is so pleasant that it is difficult to understand why we do not reach for it more often. So I guess that is what it is all about with the joy – giving ourselves the right to knead plasticine, cut things out, walk barefoot, arrange bouquets – whatever works. These can be very different things, but they share a carefree approach, without a focus on creating something that is supposed to have a dimension broader than simple pleasure. Because everything that stimulates the senses of children develops us, too. We tend to rationalize everything, we say: 'I have to think about it.' However, sometimes it is more important to experience something – both in the world of emotions and in the world of senses.

The creative thinking techniques you rely on during the workshop are a valuable tool for developing the out-of-the-box thinking skills that are so sought after on the labour market. Less often we think of them as a way of reaching for our own inner resources to reflect on what our experiences and emotions are for ourselves.

By reaching for our different resources, we become more creative. The distinguishing feature of a creative attitude is the ability to find inspiration to think and act in many sources, including – and perhaps even above all – in one's own diverse experiences. All the exercises involving drawing elements to a 'set' figure or inventing unusual applications for utility objects are connected by the fact that they refer to the characteristic of our mind

that we call 'flexibility'. The flexibility of thinking lies in the fact that we can step away from thought patterns, look very broadly for associations, draw upon various stimuli and transform them in a creative way. In doing so, we are practising our creativity.

I really like to use the term 'creativity training' because – by referring to sport – it illustrates that creativity can be perceived as a muscle. We all have it, but you need to get it moving and regularly exercise it to make it work as it should and not strain it every time you try to use it. Some people can do such exercises without any effort, others have to exercise it a lot and are still dissatisfied with their achievements. However, the effects always appear as soon as we devote enough time to regular exercise.

There is another important aspect of this sports analogy. There are many people who move for their own pleasure. They run, sail, climb – because they like it. They treat physical activity as a pleasant way of spending free time, alone or with others. And there is also a slightly narrower group of people who, in addition to the fact that they like it (I hope!), train with a focus on achieving a specific result. I think the same is true for creativity. Some people use it to increase their chances on a job interview, and I am glad that such a quality is appreciated. However, just like in sports: a relatively narrow group will become professionals, for whom creativity will become a superpower, the tool used every day. If we want to join this group, it is worth to really focus on training, to studiously improve one's performance. However, let us remember that we are creative not only at work, but also when we choose a gift for a loved one or plan dinner. Such activities help us deal with stress, produce joy, get us out of the routine. I would like to highlight runners – people who go jogging, because they like it.

Many exercises to stimulate creativity are based on a similar principle: draw, add something to a story. Do we use the scheme to go beyond the schemes?

I love these exercises and I do them often. Yes, they are repetitive, but when we do a warm-up consisting of simple bends, we also copy a scheme. But what is great about creativity is that we can develop in different directions. If someone is bored with repeating a similar exercise, they can go beyond the scheme: draw something next to a shoe on a sheet of paper, to their own initials, to the pasta that fell off the plate.

In the study of the psychology of creativity, its effects are also examined: works are judged to be more or less creative. And in this sense, striving to be creative in drawing something next to the conventional square can be a bit pernicious. It may lead to the question: how to go beyond the warm-up phase? How to improve your ingenuity?

But this exemplary square is a way of developing creativity, reaching out to unusual ideas. It is about stretching, making our approach to the task more flexible, overcoming limitations.

Should we not treat creativity exercises as a test of our creative abilities?

The expectation that our ideas will always be unique and extraordinary comes with one of the traits related to creativity and called 'original thinking'. It is obviously a very positive concept, but the pitfall is that the more we try to come up with something original, the more we get stuck. Because originality is inseparable with huge expectation.

One of the most disturbing statements I can hear from someone or from my inner critic is: 'Think of something original!' The level of expectations contained in these words makes me immediately think: 'I have already thought of something, but it is not THAT original yet, it is actually common.' So, the more we try, the harder it is to achieve it.

It is easier to look back. If you look after classes at what the children turned the schematic stamps into, you can immediately see which ones are original. Most of the children turned the wheel into a sun or an apple. But one of them turned it into a square and even signed it like this: 'round square'. This idea is definitely striking, you can see that someone thought of a completely different path. So, it is easier for us to assess originality after the end of the activity, but if we make such an assumption at the beginning, it hinders our creative process.

No pressure? The original idea is supposed to come up or not?

Yes, you have to take it easy.

I would like to say something to defend common solutions. They also exercise our imagination and creativity. What matters is even the fact that we use this 'muscle'. This is not wasted time. We need a number of common solutions to consider one of the solutions original compared to them.

Of course, if we work in a group where someone has common ideas and someone else has original ideas, this can lead to frustration. Therefore, it is very important not to announce in advance: 'think of something original'. But when you think of something yourself, it is much easier to take it easy, to say to yourself: 'I can probably create twenty ideas; and if it goes

well, maybe three will be worth further development.' That means that the other seventeen will not be used, because that is the price of creativity. But I have to write them all down, because if I say to myself: 'I will wait for three original ideas to come to my mind, why waste time on the common ones?' – this will not happen. When you wait, your inner critic will say: 'Wait, it is not that! You really want to write it down? It is a cliché! Is that the best you got?' As a result, you will not write anything.

We have to blurt out everything that comes to our mind?

The principle is: to have good ideas, you need to have a lot of ideas. And this is perfectly normal. Even when your ideas turn out to be trivial and you turn a circle into a sun, everything is really fine with you. You are doing a good job because you are using your brain.

Practising such warm-ups in life can protect against falling into ruts. We stop working automatically. Can we treat it as our benefit?

Yes, of course! This is why I recommend doing these exercises every day. I am aware that when we write down all our daily resolutions, we may run out of time to implement them. However, let us try to allocate at least 5–10 minutes every day to activate our creative muscle. A little to 'improve our performance', and a little to relax, relieve stress, draw inspiration.

It is difficult to maintain such discipline. To do something regularly, you have to set a clever 'trap' for yourself. You once told me that before you start work, you look at the fence opposite the window with painted figures which seem to float around in the air, and you think: 'Where are you flying today, Maja?' Can finding something that will be a reminder and trigger help in implementing such exercises in life?

Absolutely yes. And here again we can use an analogy to sport: what is nice is that you can choose how you will do the given dimension of exercises. For one it will be a walk, for another it will be a climb, for someone else it will be skating – it takes all kinds. The same is true of creativity: think of something that can become a pleasant ritual for you. Not an exercise, not a training, but a ritual. It is easier to take a moment out to go through a ritual.

The act of looking at the painting of a lady on the fence outside my window is also about a stopping for a second. I always do it in the morning, before I start work – and it is a moment of contact with myself, before the day begins and brings all the e-mails, calls, meetings, stress. It is a moment to pause and ask myself where am I and what is carrying me, which really means: where will I get the strength for all that stuff.

Once we take care of ourselves and train the creative muscle, it is time to ask about our relationship with the creativity of others. Why do we need art? If we are creative ourselves, can contact with art give us something more?

I have a problem with this ‘if’, because art inspires us, moves us to worlds where we can experiment, we can feed our creativity and imagination. Art makes us better at naming things, make sure that I am not the only one experiencing something. Sometimes it allows us to communicate, because it is easier to say something with a picture: ‘This is about me, this is how I feel today.’ Sometimes we really cannot find the right words to name something. I see art as yet another language, thanks to which we can express with an image, a sculpture, or an installation all the states, impressions and feelings, which we cannot express with words.

Do artists express things that are important to you as well?

Yes, but when it comes to creativity, you are an artist yourself too. For me, an artist is anyone who processes something, creates a new value in the world. So, basically everyone. The only thing is to realize that.

There is also a thought behind that – probably a bit controversial – that I can put myself on a par with the artist. I do not have to think so much about ‘what the artist meant’. Contact with a work of art does not consist in accepting something that is already closed, elaborated and interpreted by experts. I postulate and make active contact with the work of art: I constantly process, combine, separate the artefact, cut it out from the background, merge with something else, interpret. Not always in the real dimension – sometimes these are mental activities. I call it a collage approach to art. I take from art all that speaks to me, describes my world, moves my emotions.

I have no sense of guilt if I pay attention to one painting in a museum and ignore hundreds of others. It is important for me to have a personal experience with it. You can say that I treat art in an utilitarian way. It is a tool that helps me connect with myself and others.

Undoubtedly, works of art somehow change our perception of reality, but what does it mean that art can make you a better communicator? Are the experiences of the creator and the viewer not separate?

From the perspective of my work, which serves me to deepen my relations with the world and with myself, I am more interested in the experience of the viewer than the creator. I think that if I were an artist,

I would still prefer someone viewing my painting to experience or discover something new for themselves, even if it is something different from my intention.

In this approach, art seems to be a mirror in which you see your own reflection. Meanwhile, it is often said that art is an exercise in dialogue, it develops our sensitivity to others, it helps to 'grow' empathy in ourselves. How can we use the potential of art to focus on something other than individual experiences? How can we open ourselves to others through art?

Art is always linked to a story. Someone is telling it, someone else is listening to it. And this is the meeting you have mentioned. If we were to put our favourite paintings on the table now, I would like to ask you: what moves you in them? what do you see in them? what do they mean to you? Talking about art is a way of conveying your story. I want to tell it, but it is important that someone hears it.

I sometimes conduct group classes where being together is more important than training creativity. We take a painting and discover that for everyone it is about something slightly different. Or the other way round, everybody thinks the same about it. This is when the dialogue takes place. Working with art is a lesson in diversity. Art evokes surprisingly different emotions in different people. Talking about them is often a moment of enlightenment – we find out what others are experiencing. It is an invitation to look into someone else's world.

Conversations about art also shape the ability to analyse and synthesize, that is, to search for what is common and what is unique, individual and one-off. What do we all see similarly? How are we different? And in this

sense, art builds bonds within yourself, and allows for better understanding other people.

Conversations about emotions caused by art are not a common form of activity offered by galleries or museums. Should we encourage these institutions to make such attempts to interact with visitors?

For me, the perception through emotions is more important than any other way of communicating. That is why being in the exhibition space loses all its meaning without the question: 'What do you feel?'

Note that on the one hand, we live in a world where emotions are depreciated, we say: 'Do not be upset, deal with it'; we often hear such words from others and from our own inner critic. On the other hand, there is a kind of expectation that contact with art will help to trigger emotions in us, we would even wish that a visit to a gallery or museum inspire us to feel emotions, allow us to open ourselves to signals reaching us through our senses and feelings. But if no one asks us about it, all this is of no consequence.

This is slowly changing. There are many initiatives in the world of museums that serve to ask the questions: what does it do to you? what do you experience? Let me recall the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, where, at the end of the exhibition, there is a place where you can leave a note saying what solidarity means for you. The idea is to reflect on what you experienced at this exhibition, name it, verbalize it – for yourself and for others. Before you go to the café or to the seaside, stay for a little bit longer in what the exhibition opened in you, in what it drew your attention to.

For me, the most important goal of the workshops in the gallery is to get people to talk about what they experienced; to encourage them to

individual reception. Of course, I can imagine that other goals are possible, too. You can work with a group to identify different techniques or artistic motifs, or make sure that people can identify different periods in the work of the chosen artist and properly name them – this is a strictly educational approach. But when I do classes in a museum or a gallery, I have a completely different purpose. I want to hear others and to let them hear each other; see what it leaves them with, what it moves in them. I will say it again, because it is important to me: it is very difficult to imagine a visit to the gallery without asking: 'What do you feel?'

**How does this work in practice? You take your group and suggest:
'Come on, let us talk about what you feel.'**

Sometimes people open themselves in such direct conversations. But you can do it differently: ask everyone to talk about one painting. Sometimes you need to give them a key, for example: 'Point out one picture you would like to take out of here – which one and why? What would you do with it?' Or: 'Imagine that you have a hard day, a difficult time in your life – in which picture would you like to hide? In which of these worlds would you choose to look for consolation?' This is another way of asking about emotions. Sometimes it is difficult to talk about them directly, then you need to use such auxiliary prompts.

I remember workshops for women, during which we talked about our own image, which, on the one hand, we protect and build, and, on the other – we hide behind it. I used Ewa Juszkiewicz's painting – portraits of women which never show faces. Reproductions of these paintings were hung in various places in the room, we walked through our improvised gallery and viewed them in silence. Later, I asked each of the participants to stand by one painting that scares her, or by the woman she would like to hug. It was

a meeting with one's emotions; not to show off, not to analyse it in the forum, but rather to invite spontaneity.

The second stage was to write a few words to these women, as if we wanted to pass them a note...

Speak to a painting?

Exactly. And then we turned to the main question: 'And what are you hiding behind?' This was where very personal stories opened up; it turned out that for some reason we were hiding behind very similar patterns of thinking and behaving. But there were also completely isolated threads and reactions, sometimes funny ones; the calibre of these things was very different. For example, participants suddenly said: 'Hey, if we are all hiding behind Instagram filters, it means nobody looks how they want to look, so why do we do it to ourselves?' There was a therapeutic dimension in it; we could realize something, talk about it, or at least laugh together.

We touch here the symbols and metaphors present in art. Entering the area of understatements and inviting people to share their personal emotions and experiences may be associated with the risk of crossing someone's boundaries of safety and comfort...

Such a situation may trigger very different emotions and associations, sometimes difficult to cope with. I always try to build a safe and responsible relationship with the participants on the basis of respect and empathy. Even if these are short-term, one-off meetings.

It is important that they trust in me as a leader, we need proper transmission of the intention and purpose of the meeting. However, there are, of

course, situations when people come up with things which are very difficult to control. Because people sometimes experience trauma, and art has the power to trigger strong emotions.

It does not have to be a trauma, just a feeling of discomfort that you cried in the presence of others, because some theme in the works you viewed touched you...

When I run a workshop, I embrace all emotions, including anger. I can suggest all those who want to learn this kind of work that you should not run away from emotions, but at the same time you have to be careful. We should definitely not play therapist if we do not have the right skills. If you feel that this way of working is not for you – just do not get involved.

I can only share what works for me and what I can do. I know people who conduct wonderful classes in their own way, but when I watch them, I know that I would not be able to do it myself. I will not even try it, because I would not find myself in it at all. And it is very important to give yourself permission to do so. Yes, it is worth looking at different methods of conducting classes, searching for elements useful in your own work, trying to adapt them to your scenarios, but it cannot be enforced. Feel free to choose: ‘This is cool, this is not, I will take this one, but I will do it differently...’ But if something does not convince you or repels you, do not do it just because you read it in a book – it simply will not succeed.

From a practical point of view, what else could you suggest to people conducting art classes?

I spoke earlier of using art according to one’s own individual emotional and interpretive key; that we do not necessarily have to follow the

interpretations provided by experts, critics, and art historians. Sometimes, however, certain contexts can prove to be important and helpful as 'lifebuoys' that will allow us to set the direction of our search. This role can be performed by an interpretive lead or the title of the work. Take, for example, the famous sculpture of Louise Bourgeois, which depicts a spider many times larger than a human. Imagine our reaction – it may arouse fear, associations with the fantastic world, while the work is called *Maman*, meaning 'Mommy'. It is hard to ignore this fact; it changes everything. Or it opens everything.

It can change the perception of the spider, but also the perception of the mother.

Similar keys can sometimes be found in the life of an artist or in the specifics of the given era – because we should not necessarily take everything out of context. The work could suffer as a result, including in terms of eliciting personal experiences and answers from us. It is also important to refer to concepts and phenomena that are already known to someone and can anchor a new experience in their life. Adults need such lifebuoys no less than children do.

If in the course of school or after-school education we have not experienced such a personal contact with art, do we have to educate ourselves as adults in order to be able to view art with commitment? To know the range of possibilities and start using them?

We do, indeed. If I were to describe the dynamics of art workshops, I would see this pattern: first we explore a little – and here is the important surprise effect, this moment of enlightenment, when we discover in art something that we have not seen before or did not know, we experience a certain

freshness. Sometimes in such cases you have to throw a lifebuoy and sometimes you do not – we tell each other how each of us receives what we see. And then, what I really like – and what I consider a sensible but not obvious clue – we move to the phase of creativity. ‘It is your time to do something. It is your time to process it.’ And this is not about instructor skills, such as paint a landscape or portrait in a specific technique. The point is to relate what was the subject of the classes to yourself. It is at this point that we meet the most fully with art.

Art around us





Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

Cultural institutions act in a similar way to a photographic image in the sense that they frame reality.

Building a social environment

Museums and galleries are usually seen as specialized institutions where art is stored, studied and presented. They work with collections that they hold or with temporary works selected for a specific exhibition – they preserve them, make them available, explain technical and historical details related to the creation of individual works, and often create thematic narratives about them. The obvious message addressed by the exhibition institutions to the recipients and accepted as a ‘natural’ reads more or less like this: ‘Come and see the treasures of art from a certain period; see how they were created then, learn about the different kinds of ideas about the world, and discover something for yourself.’ However, from the perspective of many ‘ordinary’ viewers – people who do not deal with art professionally or in a hobby manner – this kind of message can be perceived as unconvincing and unattractive. If in the course of their life experiences they have not had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with different types of art and with the ways it affects them, museums and galleries will remain specific, separate places where art hangs or stands – and it is not very clear what they will obtain from this.

The American philosopher Nelson Goodman in his famous, provocatively titled essay *The End of the Museum?* drew attention to factors that hinder the perception of art or even the feeling of interest in the works presented in museums. He described the circumstances of viewing art in the spaces devoted to it as abnormal for the functioning of our ways of reception and not conducive to their stimulation. ‘The viewer cannot touch the work, try out what it would look like in another light, place it next to other works for comparison, take it home, look at it when it is illuminated by the rays of the sun reflected by the snow, contemplate it in comfortable conditions. (...) All this leads to rather ridiculous behaviour.’ The typical image of a museum

visitor was described bluntly as a disturbing image of a person ‘standing still and staring at a wall where nothing happens’.⁵⁰

According to Goodman, the main problem in dealing with art is the difficulty of conceiving an artefact as a comprehensive visual proposition. When we stand in front of it, we do not know how to approach the viewing. ‘Where does the painting begin and where does it end?’ he asked, comparing the situation of viewing a painting or sculpture to reading a book or listening to a concert, i.e., to activities which we perform without the need for special instructions. ‘There is no such thing as stepping back or moving forward, there is no beginning or end. One can take all of this at once, briefly, at a glance, and the average time of viewing a work, resulting from the number of images per person, must be about five seconds. Not matter how dynamic is the expression and form of the work, it remains physically immobile, while human is a living and moving being (...). And you have to somehow reconcile this motionless work and the moving viewer.’⁵¹

All this is done with the basic assumption that what we see in the work and what we get out of it depends largely on what we bring ourselves: our own experiences and skills involved in the process of viewing. Goodman saw the main meaning of museums in promoting the acquisition of competences needed to bring pleasure and benefit to the contact with art. ‘Your task’, he spoke to museum and gallery managers, ‘is to make the works interact in the worst possible conditions, that is, in the museum.’⁵²

⁵⁰ Nelson Goodman, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 128.

How can museums and galleries respond to this challenge? Where can they find inspiration for the real initiation and support of the processes of engaging in dialogue with the art of people and environments that do not make use of what they offer, but could open themselves to a live contact with art that enriches their life experiences?

In search of answers to these questions, let us consider how the collections we present could arouse the interest of different groups of recipients, what is it that we have in our collection that might attract people, and on the other hand, which of our objects would probably inspire no more than an indifferent shrug of the shoulders. In many exhibition facilities art is presented according to type, era, school, technique, and so forth. A single room or even an entire wing is devoted to works completed within a given period. What does this tell us about the works and the intentions of their creators? Why did they paint these pictures? What were the reasons for their creation? Whose taste and wealth are they supposed to depict? We basically ignore what are we supposed to discover and experience while visiting a particular gallery.

How to transform the stereotypical perception of a museum, i.e., as a treasure trove that makes its valuable collections available to the public, into a source from which different groups of recipients could draw not only knowledge but inspiration for their own creative activities, for motivation to go beyond the framework of personal experience and world-view, as well as support for interpersonal contacts and encouragement to step away from and out of the daily routine?

Canons

In the process of education we learn about a canon of art recognized by the creators of textbooks as universal, we learn about which artists and what works are particularly important and outstanding. However, there is a big difference between prestige along with the value of a particular work as determined by experts, and the impact it has on viewers. In the first part of the book, we discussed the issue of individual reactions to art, resulting from the specificity of individual associations, preferences and experiences. The second problem may be that the reasons for considering certain works to be particularly noteworthy usually have nothing to do with the needs or individual interests of today's viewers.

The fact that contact with art can cause resentment, indifference or boredom should not surprise us; on the contrary, it is precisely the assumption that every object of art is supposed to intrigue or delight us that is fundamentally false. Alain de Botton and John Armstrong rightly point out that much of art is the product of sensibilities and world views quite different from our own perception of the world. Why should we actually show a special interest in religious art, portraits of aristocrats, or ritual masks from Africa? The negative or indifferent reaction to many objects of art, expressed in the belief that 'this work tells me nothing', is perfectly understandable and even rational, especially if we agree with de Botton and Armstrong that 'beliefs in angelic orders, aristocratic entitlement and magical intervention are at odds with most reasonable views of modern life'.⁵³

Museum and exhibition creators usually assume the existence of viewers that actually already like the kind of art they present, and only need

⁵³ Alain de Botton, John Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–45.

support in getting to know the details of individual works. Meanwhile, we have to be aware that many recipients might be reluctant to embrace the entirety of an aesthetic category of the works in a gallery.⁵⁴ Considering how diverse and multicultural our present – especially urban – environments are becoming, it is also worth remembering that the functions and tasks of art, as well as its historical development, are assumed on the basis of the Eurocentric point of view. Oil painting triumphed over several hundred years, and subsequent revolutions in the role of art and the means of expression used by artists form a story of artistic development animated by the subsequently created ‘isms’. But this is not a universal image of human creativity.

Nowadays, when thanks to digital technologies and international art circulation we have access to forms of artistic expression practised in various cultural circles, we can question the belief about the possibility of establishing and defining the canon of the most outstanding works as well as the construction of a closed catalogue of the meanings contained therein. The power of their influence depends rather on how they are present in the field of vision and awareness of the recipients, what they serve, how they fit into the value systems and aesthetic sensitivity of various age, gender, or ethnic groups.

‘Cultural institutions act in a similar way to a photographic image in the sense that they frame reality’⁵⁵ – correctly observes Agnieszka Pajączkowska, who, in her book devoted to peasant photography, consistently separates the image of the folk world presented in photographic shots, created

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 48.

⁵⁵ Agnieszka Pajączkowska, *Nieprzezroczyste: historie chłopskiej fotografii* [Opaque: Stories of Peasant Photography], Wołowiec 2024, p. 159.

by photographers from other social layers, from the image coming ‘from the inside’, seen through the lens of a peasant photographer. Looking at the archival and exhibition practices of institutions, she draws attention to how they shape and disseminate the order of values that is binding in public discourses. ‘They select, choose, set criteria and limits for what is within them. They have their reasons for it, they pursue specific goals that are never simply neutral and obvious, because they serve to construct the world in a way that expresses some belief about it. ‘Some’, because they are chosen from many possible ones. For example, that there are stories worth knowing, that there are valuable and valueless photographs, that something should be remembered and something else can absolutely be forgotten.’⁵⁶

The orders and hierarchies proposed by museums and galleries can – but do not have to – be taken into account by visitors. The various aesthetic and thematic concepts presented can – but do not have to – translate into real impressions and experiences of the viewers.

Conventional criteria for recognition of works of art often refer to thematic and aesthetic innovation as well as technical innovation or progressive attitude of creators. Alain de Botton and John Armstrong propose a different criterion: A work can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on how well it serves our inner needs. Getting something out of a work of art will not only mean getting to know the work itself – it will mean getting to know yourself.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Cf. Alain de Botton, John Armstrong, pp. 59–67.

To illustrate and personally check how our individual systems of valuation of the surrounding reality (not just the world of art) work, we propose the following task:

► **EX. BEAUTY AND UGLINESS**

We feel the meaning of these contradictory concepts intuitively rather than understand them. And that is fine! But once in a while, it is worth taking a little look at your own way of feeling and evaluating. Below you can see the table – complete it with your examples. You can search for them in your memory, in books or on the Internet. Instead of writing down answers, you can paste a photo or link to its source – whatever you prefer.

Beautiful thing	Ugly thing
Beautiful place	Ugly place
Beautiful face	Ugly face
My beautiful portrait	My ugly portrait
Beautiful sentence	Ugly sentence

Did you find this task difficult? What emotions did it cause? Now look at your choices. What in your vision of beauty is repeatable, consistent? Can you draw a conclusion about how you define beauty? What about ugliness?

You can try to complete the sentences: “I find beautiful something that...”, “I find ugly something that...” What about the opposition of beauty and ugliness? Does it work, or not?

If you want, ask someone else to do the same. Share your conclusions. Find out what you feel the same way about and what it is you feel differently about.

You can also do a small experiment. After completing the photos, do not stick them to the paper, but put them in one envelope and mix. Then ask a few selected people to divide them into ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ according to their intuition. I wonder if the way they do it is similar to yours. Talk about it.

► **EX. IMPORTANT/NOT IMPORTANT**

And now do a similar exercise, replacing the BEAUTIFUL/UGLY categories with terms IMPORTANT/UNIMPORTANT.

What do the ‘canons’ say about me and others? What values and individual preferences do they correspond to? We live in a very judgemental society – that is why we need to question the uniform canons (imposed mainly by the media and show business), and certainly we should not take them on faith, solely on the basis of the current mainstream norms.



Yinka Shonibare, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, 2010. Photo: Mike Peel, Wikimedia Commons

British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare questions the construction of national or cultural identities and explores their unclear boundaries: 'I can't be defined without the British-colonial experience of my birth and background. I don't exist without it. My biggest preoccupation is with the idea of universal humanism. We all influence each other. Can you imagine Picasso without African art?'*

In the work *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, the ship was equipped with sails made of material characteristic of West African clothing, produced and disseminated by the Dutch during the colonial era. The work represents the diversity of London as a multicultural city created by European expansion. It also reflects the story of the sailors on the real ship that was under Admiral Nelson's command, whose crew included men of 22 different nationalities, illustrating the symbolism of today's diversity in Great Britain. According to Shonibare: 'For me, it's a celebration of London's immense ethnic wealth, giving expression to and honouring the many cultures and ethnicities that are still breathing precious wind into the sails of the United Kingdom.'**

* Fiona Maddocks, *In the studio with Yinka Shonibare RA*, 29 February 2016, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/yinka-shonibare-ra-studio> (accessed: 16 July 2025).

** *Fourth plinth art with a lot of bottle joins Nelson in Trafalgar Square*, 12 April 2012, <https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/fourth-plinth-art-with-a-lot-of-bottle-joins-nelson-in-trafalgar-square-6472844.html> (accessed: 16 July 2025).

Multiculturalism / social diversity

Who is talking about whom and to whom in a museum or gallery?

Although the variety of art and narrative types presented in museums and galleries seems to include and incorporate different voices and perspectives, significantly less attention is paid to the diverse aesthetic sensitivities of the visitors. This is an interesting issue that is worth looking at, because – paradoxically – it is easy for, on the one hand those who create the exhibition and the narrative, and on the other their standard audience, to fall into the trap of uniform assumptions.

Most of us are deluded by what the researcher of human perception, David Perkins, called the illusion of completeness of perception. It seems to us that just turning our eyes to something is enough for us to see and understand a given object or situation. We do not realize how selective and incomplete our vision is and how our perception of the world is in actuality highly structured.⁵⁸ Most of the images we see on TV, in newspapers, and now especially on the Internet, come from our own cultural circle, and most often they are also close to us in time. In fact, we need no help understanding them. The content they provide is clear and understandable to us. This is because we draw on a common fund of knowledge.

But experiencing the intelligibility of world on a daily basis can lull us into a dangerous state of complacency – we no longer realize how much our way of interpreting the images we see is based on what we already know and take for granted. So, when we face a work of art from another era or another cultural circle (or an unfamiliar society or a far distant past), it

⁵⁸ David Perkins, op. cit., p. 24.

turns out that we are completely unprepared for its reception. We often blame the works we see for this state of things (claiming that they are incomprehensible and their message is ‘vague’), while we ourselves are not sufficiently prepared to see them fully.⁵⁹ And even if we try to understand what actually came before our eyes, we usually fall into the trap of stereotypical thinking – we use primitive, incomplete knowledge, without even trying to put the viewed work in its proper, native context (often we simply lack a real possibility of knowing the contexts, because we do not know where to seek help or find explanations).

Apart from the standard programme accompanying the exhibitions, it is worth organising public discussions and/or workshops during which the persons taking care of the exhibition (curators, educators) will be able to learn what different groups of viewers see in the presented works. Entering into such a dialogue not only gives a chance for a stronger, more personal reception, but also allows us to go beyond the ‘enchanted circle’ of expert discourses, which leave very little room for exploring the ways in which art does or does not provoke a reaction on the part of the viewers. The postulates of perceiving perspectives and experiences of various groups, including those socially marginalized or isolated, which are inscribed in many artistic projects, rarely go beyond the narrative generated by artists or curators. It is worth confronting it in direct conversations with the people to whom they are directed and on whose behalf they are created.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, pp. 25–26.

In 2022, for the first time in the more than a century-long history of the Venice Biennale, the national pavilion was represented by a Roma artist. The work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas is an attempt to find the place of the Roma community in European art history. The paintings, sewn from colourful, patterned fabrics – often from clothes worn by people close to the artist – depict scenes observed from within the Roma community. They defend the right to their image and to construct a visual narrative about the identity of minority ethnic groups. 'Someone who was not a Roma took over our image. I interpret it in my own way. It is our right to talk about ourselves. It is us who are talking about ourselves; not someone else who just sees us from the side.*

* *Przeczarowanie. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas [Overenchantment. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas]*, documentary film by Anna Zakrzewska, produced by: Kijora Film, Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2022.



The exhibition *Wirujące obrazy. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas*
[*Moving Images. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas*],
International Cultural Centre in Kraków, 2022–2023, Photo: Paweł Mazur

► EX. STAKEHOLDERS

Imagine possible tour groups that could visit your museum or gallery (we treat as groups people who visit the exhibition together because they have something in common). For example: Chinese Slavists, Icelandic feminists, a unit of paratroopers, students of a catering school, miners, Castorama employees, the illusionist trade union, residents of a sanatorium on an optional trip, mothers of quadruplets, Sisters of the Sacred Heart, activists fighting for animal rights... Work with a brainstorming method that assumes that you can afford a lot of – more or less rational – ideas without subjecting them to self-censorship. And especially not separating the ‘stupid’ and the ‘frivolous’ from the ones that sound reasonable. Imagine a whole catalogue of such very ‘niche’ but inspiring groups (one editor from our own institution even saw in her imagination a trip of ants).

Then randomly select one of the groups and consider a strategy that could make the museum collection accessible to it, as well as provide an engaging, valuable experience, free from frustration and the feeling of being ‘out of line’. These can be small and large things – from the organisation of locker rooms, types of tickets or visual communication, to the visiting paths, selection of exhibits and temporary exhibitions.

Where will this take you? It is highly probable that, among the many funny, crazy ideas, you will find a few that will make you think and that will reveal a new perspective.

► EX. WHO AM I?

Invite to the gallery representatives of groups with diverse experience, age, background. They may be people from

organizations working in the area of cultural and social integration. Hand out the sheets of paper with a drawn circle divided into eight fields and ask them to enter the most important terms that define their identity (e.g., mother, student, Cracovian, runner, fashion blogger). Each person fills their sheet individually, and does not share their written thoughts with the others. Then read out aloud the general categories by which we usually define our group affiliation (family, work, origin, nationality, hobby, sport, gender, religion, politics, etc.), and ask those for whom the given category is relevant – i.e., they referred to it in their individual choices – to stand up. You do not have to reveal your choices, but you will certainly notice that participants will spontaneously begin to share their feelings and difficulties in defining their own identity fields. How do they prioritize their choices and their membership in different groups? Who do they share them with? Which features are most important to them? In this way, during the exercise, you will create a map of interpersonal references that can fascinate you.

Then walk around the exhibition together: Which of the works presented are nearest to their heart, that are the most understandable for each person? Do they say anything important about any of the groups they feel they belong to?

► EX. LETTER TO THE ‘BARBARIANS’

Recall from memory and write down on a piece of paper five communities or groups of people with whom you do not get along at all. I assume everyone has someone like that. It is about communities that share values that are far from yours, or a passion that you do not understand. Or maybe they have a habit of acting in a way that irritates you or makes you

afraid? For one person, the RPG fans can be such a group, for someone else – fans of Taylor Swift or any local celebrity; another person can indicate children under three years of age, dog owners, supporters of one of the political parties or politicians in general, people on the bus talking loudly on the phone, airplane hostesses or... their own siblings. Honesty is what counts. After all, you do this exercise only for yourself, and the sheet of paper can be destroyed afterwards.

Now choose one of the groups and formulate one sentence that you would like to pass on to its members. It can be a proposal, a request, a question, a wish... Consider in what form this sentence could

be passed on to a given group – so that the message would reach it. It is an exercise in imagination, so do not limit yourself – plan it as if anything is possible. What work of art or what kind of artistic intervention do you think could interest this group and become the starting point for you to meet its members?

Finally, ask yourself: what is the outcome of this exercise for you? What was the biggest problem for you? At what stage was it the hardest for you? Do you take anything from this exercise to your daily life? Also, pay a little attention to the message itself and the form of its expression. What emotion hides behind it? What does it say about your needs?

Invisible barriers and thresholds

Making museums and galleries accessible is a much more complex matter than adapting the facilities to accommodate the needs of people with various disabilities or those who are neuroatypical. There is a lot of talk about the cultural and social mission of museums, that they should take into account the changing conditions and lifestyles in a globalizing world (which, at the same time, struggles with stratification, polarization and migration). Sometimes we forget, however, that it is crucial to pay attention to the composition of the museum viewers, not just the attendance figures. Who are the people who visit us, and – equally important – who does not come to us?

Stephen Legari, author of art therapy programmes at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, talks about the process of bringing his institution to the current profile of activities; he emphasizes the importance of looking carefully at the immediate social environment of art institutions. ‘And like a lot of museums, we asked ourselves – who are the people who aren’t coming to the museum? And why aren’t they? How do we reach them? How do we change the perception of museums as being institutions for the elite, for the rich? How do we reach the communities that surround the museum? What are the themes that are going to be most important to our participants? (...) What other health care workers and educators need to be part of that team, to support that group?’⁶⁰

In search of answers to these questions, it is worth noting the huge potential of art and exhibition facilities for breaking social isolation – it concerns not only the elderly, the lonely, the disabled, inactive persons, but also

⁶⁰ Una Meistere, Museotherapy – the museum as a prescription..., op. cit.

younger generations, who are experiencing difficulties in direct contacts (they are more likely to use text messages than make a call), transferring a significant part of their daily practices to the web, and to take note as well as the fear of an uncertain future and the lack of a permanent reference framework.

One of the practical ways to enter into meaningful relationships with groups that we would like to attract to cultural institutions is to invite their representatives to co-create exhibitions. However, this requires a large amount of time and lots of personnel. In 2016, the National Museum in Warsaw presented an exhibition entitled *In the Museum, Anything Is Allowed*, prepared by six groups of children that were invited to cooperate in the project. Under the supervision of educators, they selected themes and exhibits for their own exhibitions, developed a narrative and tasks for visitors, designed promotional materials and then invited the viewers to come. Similar initiatives – with the participation of volunteers of different ages, with different professional profiles, interests and experience – are implemented, among others, by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

Such activities enrich the substantive resources of exhibition facilities, expanding them with perspectives, knowledge and experiences of various professional, age and passionate groups (what will a psychologist find in our collection? what will attract the attention of an economist? what will a teenager be interested in?). Thanks to direct interactions and consultations with specific groups of people, it is easier to go beyond the frames of historical and artistic message, and thus to ‘unseal’ the boundaries between the world of art and the reality in which we feel immersed, about which we argue and which together we shape on a daily basis.



Znikam z Twojego życia [I Disappear From My Own Life],
a photograph of the heroes of the Avalon Foundation campaign
The Age of Accessibility, photo: Maciej Krüger.
Courtesy of the Avalon Foundation.

Accessibility is usually associated with architectural barriers, but in reality it is a much more complex issue, affecting almost every human activity. Many of us experience various forms of exclusion in the form of communication, technological, educational, financial barriers. For a few months in 2025, visitors to the Gallery of 20th and 21st Century Polish Art at the National Museum in Kraków could see works prepared in co-operation with the Avalon Foundation and Agencja Nie Do Ogarnięcia, symbolizing various types of barriers that prevent many people from participating in cultural and social life.

The photograph shows the heroes of the Avalon Foundation campaign *The Age of Accessibility*. Agnieszka Kizinkiewicz, who, due to problems with the availability of a personal assistant, could not participate in the project work that day, is missing.

How can we eliminate accessibility barriers?

► EX. CROSSING THE MUSEUM THRESHOLD

Imagine a situation in which different groups found themselves in front of the entrance to your museum, gallery, cultural centre, library (if you did the STAKEHOLDER exercise, you can use the types of visitors indicated there). It is best to go out in front of the building yourself and imagine yourself as part of the group of visitors. What do you see? What do you feel? Do you feel invited to look inside? What encourages you to do this? What intimidates you or makes you hesitate? Write down all your observations and feelings.

What can hinder the decision to enter? Price of the ticket? Uncertainty, what will I find inside? How should I behave there? What will I gain with seeing the exhibition? How long will my visit last? Why should I be interested in the exhibition? How does it affect me?

The analysis of one's own impressions may be an impulse to conduct a survey among representatives of various groups who rarely appear at our exhibitions or never visit them at all. However, because we find it difficult to ask them anything – precisely because these people do not come to us – a good way of doing it will be to contact organizations and institutions that work with various groups (teachers, migrant organisations, psychotherapists, animators operating in local communities,

librarians, senior carers, etc.) and organize a visit to the museum dedicated to getting to know each other: participants will be able to look around our space and provide us with direct feedback on what appeals to them and how, what may cause discomfort, etc. For many people, especially those who have no habit of benefiting from cultural offerings, such a personal invitation is the best way to encourage them to visit the gallery.

► EX. DESIGNING THE MESSAGE

Prepare task cards with different 'personas' (i.e., imaginary types of people who use to come to your institution or, on the contrary, do not visit it) printed on them. In couples or small groups, try to imagine the motivation, mood, financial resources, life situation of each of them. You can make it easier to imagine these 'personas' by giving them names, determining their age, inventing individual interests and education. Then propose a message with an invitation to visit your gallery or museum, formulated in such a way that it refers to the specific characteristics of these individuals.

Try to start with the basic question: 'What can a tourist from the Middle East / a car mechanic from the nearby street / a job seeker / a teenager in love / a retired postman, etc. find in our place? What can they do here? Why would they come here? How to use the collection?'

Museum on prescription

One of the strongly developing trends in museology today is museotherapy, i.e., the conscious use by art therapists of the positive impact of art accumulated in museums on the mental and physical well-being of a particular person. This form of therapy, which supports the classic treatment of somatic and mental illnesses, reduces the harmful effects of stress, improves the quality of life for those who suffer illness increases the likelihood of a positive prognosis, and even promotes recovery. Museotherapy increases mindfulness, and thanks to the participation of an art therapist, who establishes a bond with the patient, it makes the patient more open, makes it easier for them to tell their own stories, share associations and express their feelings.⁶¹

In Canada and France, there is a practice known as ‘museum on prescription’ – you can visit the museum without a ticket but with a prescription recommending museotherapy as a therapy supporting conventional treatment. Actions carried out in this formula affect creativity and well-being, help reduce the level of anxiety, pain and depression, reduce loneliness and insomnia, facilitate overcoming life’s difficulties, increase self-esteem, and help one to achieve self-acceptance.⁶² In Poland, the National Museum in Kielce is a pioneer in museotherapeutic activities, which includes specialists in various areas of museology, medicine, psychology and cultural sciences in the process of building the programme, while the conferences organized there since 2019 introduce the methods of the contemporary use

⁶¹ Cf. <https://annales.sum.edu.pl/Muzeoterapia-nowy-kierunek-terapii-zaburzen-emocjonalnych,147401,0,1.html> (accessed: 17 November 2024).

⁶² Cf. *Ibidem*.

of the museum to 'heal' personal relationships and postulate the taking care of human well-being as an important task of museums.

'Today, therapy in a museum seems to be an obvious process', writes Dorota Folga-Januszewska, researcher and co-creator of museotherapeutic programmes, 'which takes place wherever the museum acts as not only a place of meetings with the past, but above all a place of exchange of thoughts and emotions. In the context of the ever-changing digital communication technologies, universal immersion in virtual reality and blurred boundaries between reality and fiction, museums play a new role. They teach us to nurture our imagination, discover and define our identity, recognize our preferences. When in a museum we meet with material and intangible values, the causes of many of our ailments are revealed. (...) Contemporary museum becomes a self-conscious *emotioneum* – a space for reflection, imagining and feeling emotions.'⁶³

The museum is a specific space, different from our everyday surroundings. The museum objects evoke various emotions, opinions, reflections and memories. Works of art function as symbols of identity, helping to return to memories. Each visitor comes here with all their baggage, which translates into an individual interpretation of exhibits and narratives. If during a museum visit, less emphasis is placed on classical teaching about what fine arts are and more on listening to the experiences of each participant, a kind of collective experience is created in which each person can feel appreciated and heard, and can find in the personal experiences of other

⁶³ Dorota Folga-Januszewska, *Museotherapy*, [in:] *Museotherapy. How Does It Work? Museum as a place of therapy*, Robert Kotowski, Elżbieta Barbara Zybert (eds), Kielce 2020, p. 23.
See also: Dorota Folga-Januszewska, *Emocjoneum: muzeum jako instytucja emocji* [Emotion: Museum as an Institution of Emotions], Warszawa 2022.

participants a reflection of their own anxieties, thus breaking the sense of loneliness and social isolation.

Difficult existential themes – illness, death, transience, loneliness – are not only presented in art, they are experienced by its recipients. Sometimes we want to delve into them, see how others deal with them, and sometimes we want to get rid of them, break away, forget about them for a moment – then we look for delight, joy, relaxation. Focusing on positive emotions and experiences improves mood, allows you to go beyond the realm of recurring unpleasant thoughts about one's difficulties. Stephen Legari emphasizes that museum participants 'often describe flow states – qualitatively, they will describe feeling that they have stepped outside of time, they have stepped outside of worry, they have stepped outside of preoccupation with their symptoms, family concerns, job, etc.'⁶⁴

Based on data collected from more than 3,000 studies, a World Health Organization report from 2019 provides evidence of the importance of art in improving health and maintaining well-being. It also points out that the beneficial impact of art can be enhanced by promoting involvement in art at the individual, local and national levels and by fostering cross-sectoral cooperation.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Una Meistere, *Museotherapy – the museum as a prescription...*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Jadwiga Jośko-Ochojska, Ryszard Brus, Joanna Sell, op. cit., p. 63.

How can we go beyond the framework of aesthetic perception?

► EX. SOCIAL DIAGNOSTICS IN MUSEUM

Together with your team, think about how the art and activities offered by your museum or gallery can be beneficial for personal development, education, stress reduction, creativity and empathy for diverse recipients.

When doing this exercise, it is important to go beyond thinking in terms of current art discourses, i.e., to not focus solely on how artists present, define

and question selected aspects of social reality (e.g., politics in art, sport in art, freedom in art, etc.). We are interested in creative, entertainment, therapeutic activities in which participation can help specific groups or individuals engage, experience the multidimensionality of interpersonal relationships and facilitate insight into both their own motivations and the motivations, desires and problems of others.

What kind of encounter with art would you offer politicians, migrants, parents of teenagers, lonely people, unemployed, etc.?



Thomas Iser, photograph from the *Universal Humanity* series, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

French-Luxembourgish street artist Thomas Iser photographs people he encounters, asking them to put on their faces a postcard depicting a fragment of his painted face and tell him about their dreams. 'I was inspired by Kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing pottery with melted gold and then accepting the piece is more beautiful and stronger after having been broken and repaired,' Iser says. 'This art resonates in me, I feel like a Kintsugi object in a way because I knew how to rebuild myself after all the things I experienced with my family.*'

* Cassandra Tanti, *Passing Through Monaco Life: Thomas Iser, Universal Humanity Photographer*, 13 March 2018, <https://monacolife.net/passing-through-monaco-life-thomas-isser-universal-humanity-photographer/> (accessed: 13 June 2025).

Around the ‘third place’

In 1989, the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg formulated the concept of a ‘third place’,⁶⁶ which is a place for meetings and rest – not only from work, but also from routine activities. This idea refers to the commonly experienced human need to be in an informal space (other than home – our ‘first place’, and work – referred to as the ‘second place’), where we can be at ease and feel comfortable. It is a neutral space where we spend our free time, meet friends, relax after work or doing chores and running errands, take a break over a cup of coffee or tea, observe life, do some people-watching and be watched in return. ‘Third places’ strengthen our sense of belonging to our surroundings and our connection with others who are known to us or who could become close to us.⁶⁷

The concept of the ‘third place’ is also used in relation to the changes taking place in museums and galleries, which want to be perceived not only as an area of acquiring knowledge or aesthetic pleasure, but also as a meeting place.⁶⁸ Many institutions presenting art attempt to transform themselves into accessible and friendly places for groups of recipients with different needs. The purpose of a visit to such an open institution is not necessarily to get acquainted with the collection, exhibition or story

⁶⁶ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*, New York 1989.

⁶⁷ Cf. Agnieszka Koszowska, „Trzecie miejsce” według Raya Oldenberga[‘Third Place’ According to Ray Oldenburg], 26 June 2009, <https://sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/956342/edition/854241/trzecie-miejsce-wedlug-ray-a-oldenburga-koszowska-agnieszka> (accessed: 27 December 2024).

⁶⁸ Cf. Katarzyna Jagodzińska, ‘Muzea poza murami w kontekście koncepcji trzeciego miejsca’ [Museums Outside the Walls in the Context of the Third Place Concept], *Muzealnictwo*, no 59, 2018, p. 123.

presented there, but the fact of spending time together in an interesting, not too formal place – with loved ones, friends or alone, just as we freely decide with whom and when we want to sit in a café or in a park. It is a place where our paths intersect and where we go beyond personal networks of relationships.

One of the possibilities for museums and galleries to take the function of a ‘third place’ is to open their spaces for all kinds of activities supporting being together – the presented exhibition or collection then becomes a pretext for leaving ‘virtual bubbles’, and have contact with real objects, be surrounded by living people (instead of network ‘friends’), it gives a chance for a kind of reset, going beyond the sphere of experiences mediated by everyday digital practices.

What activities can encourage visitors to come to the museum not as a recipient of art but out of curiosity or as a place to relax?

► EX. A GALLERY FOR EATING, LISTENING, WRITING, EXERCISING

Think about what kind of activities – apart from viewing art – you can offer people who are looking for ways to spend their free time in an interesting and pleasant way. In addition to the collection entrusted to your care, you have an interesting, usually quite spacious premises, you work with staff with broad cultural and social interests, co-operate with numerous communities and organizations or participate in the events proposed by them. Sit down with your team in front of an empty wall, hand a few sheets of paper to each person, and allow yourself to list all the different ways, even the most unusual, to use your premises, or suggest events that could take place in or around your gallery space. A feast in the gallery? Listening to music or reading books in the gallery, yoga in the museum, a night of romantic comedies, or maybe a picnic with art?

Then write down on the sheets of paper all the organizations and institutions with

which you could cooperate. Group them according to the types of activities – did any of these connections seem to be particularly ‘lucky’?

► EX. SPECIFIC SKILLS

One of the participants of the School of Crafts run by the Cieszyn Castle said that the science of handicraft broke overcame the detachment that had always distanced her from her everyday activities. ‘For me, a lace is something tangible. In my everyday work, I never see any concrete results of my actions. I work in a bank where even money is virtual.’⁶⁹ A similar experience for many people can be learning how to knit, embroider, learn the details of different artistic techniques: how to choose paints, how to print a bag or a shirt; or make practical use of a photography workshop: how to frame photos in interesting ways, how to use a pinhole camera, or how to use software to edit or enhance your own digital photographs. Consider what specific skills, craft or artistic techniques are associated with the collection of your institution. It is worth inviting visitors to give it a try with their own hand – for many of them, involving themselves in a creative workshop can be a more powerful experience than simply viewing the artwork.

⁶⁹ Quoted in: Marta Mazuś, ‘Rozmowy przy wyplataniu koszyków’ [Conversations at Weaving Baskets], *Polityka*, 2024, no 4.

Thanks to the Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanij, a steel cube was erected in the Bródno Sculpture Park – a pavilion resembling a spaceship. Its walls reflect park greenery, thanks to which the *Tea House* almost blends in with the surroundings and reflects the figures of people passing by. After some time, the pavilion was returned to the artist, but in 2010, on the initiative of Paweł Althamer and Michał Mioduszewski, a replica was made – it remains in the park to this day. Since then, it has been the smallest cultural centre in Warsaw, a spot for workshop activities and neighbourhood meetings.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Tilted Tea House with Coffee Machine)*, 2009.

Photo: Bartosz Stawiarski,
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

Cooperation and flow networks

‘Culture lives in circulation or does not exist at all’ – this is the motto that guides us at the Małopolska Institute of Culture in Kraków in our need to constantly set ideas in motion, initiate and maintain vibrant networks of cooperation, as well as to bridge the gap between communities and organizations involved in creating conditions for creative development. From the perspective of an institution supporting cultural staff operating both in large urban centres and in small towns, we observe significant inequalities in access to cultural offerings in the field of art and creativity. While in the case of the cities that run their museums and galleries, it is possible to talk about a certain natural ‘familiarization’ of residents with the presence of art institutions, other places have limited opportunities to interest their communities in meetings with art. In such places, the dissemination and promotion of art as well as education in the field of creativity are handled by the local cultural centres, libraries and organizations, together with people who see creative activity as an opportunity to broaden their cognitive horizons, foster sensitivity, and build empathetic interpersonal bonds.

In view of such diverse possibilities of access to art, it seems necessary to combine forces and competences as well as to facilitate flows between institutions and environments that perceive reality differently and have ‘trodden’ alternative paths through reality (and often do so in very distinct ways). In this context, the issue of ‘radiation’ to the environment – i.e., the role of art institutions in projecting art into circulation beyond the museum – is particularly important not so much because they make their collections available, but by attracting the cooperation of animators, educators, and designers – especially those who operate in places with no galleries, museums or local art collections – who use art in their work. Opening up to the diverse needs and expectations of those who visit museums or galleries

also means the opportunity to co-create a programme and share art with different environments.

If art – even the one that is actively involved in currently important social problems – remains closed within the domain of artists and experts, it simply has no chance to act; most of the society does not even pay attention to it. Art isolated from social circulation has no influence on the society.

Of course, we can individually develop our powers of observation, work at collecting objects that thrill or amuse or delight us, inspire ourselves, create our own ‘museum of imagination’ that supports our artistic endeavours or where we can feel joy or find solace in our sadness, but in art alone, we will not find:

- meetings with others,
- dialogue,
- cooperation,
- and the democratic processes that unfold when people facing different realities, with different backgrounds, experiences, and very different world views, come together on the same ground.

Although it is often said that art contains all the categories and types of influences necessary for social functioning, they are usually systematized, present as a discourse or narrative, but it rarely ‘triggers’ real experiences or leads to authentic relationships and interactions. Art has this power, but it remains hidden and unused. It is closed as in a vault – like untapped capital. This gives a sense of potential wealth, which, however, does not multiply and does not pay off, is not invested in the area of social relationships, does not become a source of inspiration and does not contribute to going beyond the framework of everyday experiences.

The outside world needs art no less than do museums and galleries. Art needs to be given places and opportunities where it can come closer to people. That is why we see a special value in the project work in the field of popularizing art and creativity, as well as in involving different groups of art users – this means, among other things, organizing conditions and obtaining financing for participation in a way other than the purchase of a one-time admission ticket. It is important that these be long-term activities, because only then do people create bonds and opportunities to develop conversations, ideas, and to consider matters from different angles.

This approach requires a change of attitude and expectations – you have to learn to look at people not as recipients, but as users, participants and contributors. If we are to attract busy adults to creative activities and meetings with art, we must find a way to make them switch from a trip to the city or a coffee meeting in favour of visiting the gallery together with friends (or alone, for a contemplative visit).

‘All these difficulties notwithstanding,’ writes Iwo Zmysłony in his reflections on today’s understanding of art, ‘let us not miss one thing: the encounter with art is above all an adventure for our sensuality and imagination. It is to be a source of inspiration and emotions for us. The world of art – artists, curators, critics, institutions – is here to help us with this. We have the right to expect that from them.’⁷⁰

However, it would be difficult – and inappropriate – to expect the staff of exhibition institutions to carry out these tasks on their own. It is an area

⁷⁰ Iwo Zmysłony, *Co trzeba zrobić, żeby rozumieć dzis sztukę?* [What Do You Need to Do to Understand Art Today?], [in:] *Sztuka w naszym wieku* [Art in Our Age], Warszawa 2015, p. 48.

for all those who see, at the centre of their work, the wholly natural human need to seek meaning, joy and connection with others, should meet and act together. After all, art itself is not about the pious cult of its products, but about a deeper, multidimensional experience of the world.

If, as we deeply believe, art combines all the themes and experiences that have touched and which move us today, then we need to notice art, use it and deal with it when it hurts us, but the condition for the art to work is its constant and direct presence, so that it is at hand whenever we need it.

There is something paradoxically contradictory in the assumption that art is a sphere of freedom – postulated and practised – but one inhabited primarily by the creators of art. Does this freedom resonate socially? Does it radiate beyond specific expert groups? If we see in the artists guides to the worlds of meaningful human experience and discoveries, it is equally important on the part of the institutional order to ensure not only that the record of their creative path is preserved and passed on, but that the viewers can also learn to undertake a sensitive, attentive exploration, experience, and understanding of reality. This applies to us all.



In 2007, the famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei completed the *Fairytale* project, a huge conceptual and logistics initiative, in which 1001 Chinese citizens were invited to participate in the prestigious European exhibition of visual art *Documenta 12* in Kassel. Chinese tourists – for many of them it was their first trip abroad – divided into groups of two hundred people spent a week experiencing life in Kassel and visited an exhibition where the artist installed 1001 wooden chairs as a metaphorical record of the project's message. Ai Weiwei focuses on issues of identity, memory, love, dreams and the possibilities of cultural dialogue. 'Stories, dreams, fantasies', explains the artist, 'can all become means of expression. In our materialized world, their spaces narrow; the world lacks imagination and meaning. That is why we want to find a new way to establish a connection between art and the fabric of human life.*'

* Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale: Documentary*, 2008.

How can institutions open up to their surroundings?

► EX. MAP OF THE CITY OF ART

Invite your team to draw a map of an ideal, dream city – depending on the range you intend to take into account when analysing the capabilities of your institution, it is ok if it is a smaller town, or an entire region. Prepare a large sheet of paper, use coloured markers, and if you want a little creative mess, then also newspapers, plasticine, smaller and larger boxes, yoghurt cups, rolls of toilet paper, etc. Work on your project in such a way that the city whose plan or mock-up you create can be shamelessly advertised with the slogan, 'A City Where Art Is Literally Everywhere', and next to the plaque with the place name you can without exaggeration place the honorary title 'City of Art'.

Ask yourself questions:

- In what unusual places can art be created, exhibited and admired by the inhabitants?
- What institutions are utilized to enable the residents to meet with art?

Make it fun for yourself and give vent to your imagination.

Not all ideas need to be 'serious' or 'realistic'.

In order to stimulate the imagination, you can also have fun in giving famous urban institutions or architectural fragments new functions related to art. For this purpose, you can write on the cards of one colour places/institutions characteristic of the city. Then take cards of a different colour and write words associated with art. Finally, put the cards together, creating surprising but interesting connections. What could the Sculpture Pharmacy be? The Bridge of Art? The University of Scribbling? The Performance Promenade? The Escalator of Dialogue? The Contrast Estate? The Park Collage? etc.

When you finish the creative phase, talk about your reflections. Identify those ideas that inspired you and could stay with you for longer. It may happen, after all, that among many nonsensical and funny but useless ideas are some clues that, after reflection and discussion, have the potential to actually be implemented.





Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

interview



Fot. K. Schubert, MIK 2025 ©

It is good to give a choice – an interview with Anna Mokrzycka-Wagner, Ph.D.

ANNA MOKRZYCKA-WAGNER

Lecturer of the Faculty of Industrial Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. She designs exhibition and public spaces for cultural institutions. She is the author of several exhibition projects, and she also designs the interiors of museum buildings. Currently, she is associated with the area of pro-social, inclusive and empathic design. She is interested in designing for emotions and experiences as well as the cognitive and sensory development of elderly people. As part of her doctoral thesis, she designed an urban park space for people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease called the Garden of Memory, where she turns her research assumptions into reality. The Garden of Memory project was implemented by the Board of Greenery in Kraków.

ELŻBIETA KAPRON: Many people associate design with aesthetics – with the appearance of objects and interiors, visual aspects of the environment, with the creation of a certain style. In your approach, it is rather a kind of meeting, a processing of certain experiences, a response to them.

Anna Mokrzycka-Wagner: The mere aestheticization of the environment is not enough for everyone. If we focus on creating forms that are to attract attention or delight people, we stop at the surface of the problem. I think this is a fatal approach.

You say about yourself that you design experiences and emotions. Your project, the Garden of Memory,⁷¹ an urban green space for people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease, is the best starting point to try to understand what design is.

The idea of the Garden of Memory was born out of the need to create a safe, friendly, sensory-stimulating environment for people with dementia, but it also has broader social goals – it is an attempt to make this demographic visible and present in our daily lives. The garden, embedded in a public space, gives an opportunity to escape the isolation endured at home and go outdoors, but it also serves a therapeutic function and, through references to landscapes known from the past, it supports cognitive processes, especially for people affected by dementia disorders.

In order to direct the work on the project, at the very beginning it was necessary to refer to the experiences of the people for whom this space is created. For people over sixty years of age, the strongest experiences were those of childhood and early youth. These are the key experiences that shape us, which build our perception of reality. I asked my research group about their important moments of contact with nature: the elements of the scenery of their childhood and youth that their memory had preserved so well. These experiences are often stored as images, but they are also related to smells, experiences, the sense of being in a three-dimensional world – the experience of its spatial aspects.

⁷¹ The Garden of Memory is a project of urban park space for people with early and middle stages of dementia and Alzheimer's disease, run by Kraków's Board of Greenery. The project was created as part of a doctoral thesis under the supervision of Professor Czesława Frejlich and under the scientific supervision of Dr hab. Halszka Kontrymowicz-Ogińska, at the Faculty of Industrial Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków in 2024.

The atmosphere of these meetings was very moving. The emotions revealed throughout the entire duration of the research became a compass enabling navigation through the areas that I hoped they would recognize gradually, and which I had to give a specific, material form. This is precisely what I call a non-aestheticization, that is, design, which is based on very 'soft', elusive, vague things...

Which, at the same time, are part of us.

Yes. The key theoretical assumption was the concept of familiarity. We showed different types of landscape and asked: 'In which of these places would you feel good? What seems close to what you experienced, or is familiar to you?' In the sequences of presented images, these people most often chose views related to the Polish landscape. Strong reactions were caused by images of flowering apple trees, Polish meadows or a rural garden with classic mauves, chamomile; they had an element of chaos, disorder, of not being designed. They turned out to be images-keys, tunnels to connect to the memories of childhood and youth.

The idea was to find plants and elements of the natural environment that are 'memory triggers', which means, that when they are touched or seen, they evoke a whole series of positive associations with one's own life. In the case of people with Alzheimer's disease, we are dealing with identity disorder, i.e., problems with the integration of one's personality, manifested, among other things, by the inability to remember oneself in various situations. But in the case of these familiar images of nature, such problems did not manifest themselves – these primary experiences are deeply stored in the permanent memory.

This allowed us to create bridges to their contemporary interpretation – because it is not an attempt to reconstruct specific images or forms. I assumed that closeness and familiarity will make people who visit this space feel better, safer, as if they were in their place. A little different than in a visually beautiful park, where plants from the outside of our cultural landscape are planted. In designing for this group of people, it was important to reach for old, native plant species in order to restore and use what they remember from allotment gardens, holiday trips to the countryside, gardens, walks in the forest.

The research was also conducted in a group of younger people, and it seems that regardless of the generation, there is a common denominator of what we can consider familiar.

I was curious how important these icons of the Polish landscape are for the generation of twenty-year-olds. It turned out that some elements are preserved in their minds thanks to holiday trips to aunts or grandparents. Perhaps the biggest difference was that young people simply have more openness to new experiences. It is not that older people do not like to experience new things, but it is a little less important to them.

The research process allows you to become aware of areas of ignorance, reflect on your own preferences, possibilities, limitations. The person researching and designing certainly benefits from that, but does this process also increase the sense of agency of the people involved?

Absolutely yes. For the first time I had the opportunity to test my hypotheses directly with the people for whom I design – it was an incredible experience for me. I was glad when it turned out that my beliefs were accurate,

and at the same time many hours of conversations with these people cleared my head and reorganized my way of thinking about the project.

Sometimes, as designers, we want to be ambassadors for our audience – and that is dangerous, especially if we do not really know them, we have never talked to them. We want the best for them, but it would be good for them to tell themselves how they want to be supported. This is a transformative experience for a designer. It teaches humility. Humanistic design, focused on a particular person, cannot be based on rumblings, turbulent creative workshops, pleasant excitement when creating an exhibition or project, when we are almost sure that everything was perfectly designed and our proposal will greatly help people or provide them with an amazing experience. Often, we are just wrong.

This is especially important in the design dedicated to neurodiverse people. It is a little easier to design for people with motor disabilities; they usually know well where they are uncomfortable, and it is relatively easy to check it out. However, when it comes to these ‘soft’, ‘fluent’, invisible and intangible preferences or needs, I cannot imagine not talking to the audience.

How do we draw conclusions from such studies and translate them into a specific project?

I think it is crucial to develop very good research forms. The ones that will contain that one right question. I had great support in the form of consultations in the field of research and project with Dr hab. Halszka Kontrymowicz-Ogińska and the supervisor of my doctoral thesis, Professor Czesława Frejlich.

First of all, as a designer, I have to realize what I do not know. This cannot be the question 'what is this space supposed to be?' because it is too broad. It should be asked specifically: 'How should the pathway look like: can it fork, or will it be too stressful?' This key question must be precise, and at the same time create the possibility of extension, justification. For example: 'In which of these landscapes would you feel good and why?' This 'why' opens up the whole area of narrative; we begin to understand how the other person sees their choices. 'I chose this forest. And why this particular one? Because I went to such a forest, I spent hundreds of hours there as a child, because I love the smell of moss and the forest mood; I used to get up at two o'clock in the morning to collect mushrooms.' There is a private story connected with the image. Putting these stories together later, I began to understand how personal experiences are related to larger images or metaphors. Some complete elements can be separated. Strong reactions to the forest or the Polish meadow made me realize that in my Garden of Memory, I have to implement fragments of these 'internal' landscapes, that these will be the 'links' through which we will establish contact.

A map of the garden emerged?

Places where these fragments of the landscape can be embedded slowly began to appear. It is a work on the level of symbolic references – certain objects and items move us somewhere, serve as tunnels that connect us with private experiences. It is important to find the commonalities. These experiences will not be identical, but they have something – similarities – that keep reappearing. And when this 'something' materializes in the case of forty people, we are on the right track: it is there that we must look for concrete solutions.

Emotions and experiences appear before the choice of forms and means of expression?

Yes, they appear first. And this is the difference between aestheticization and in-depth work with emotions, memories, experiences. In the case of designing a museum exhibition, this process may look similar.

The idea is to determine what people could experience using a given collection, and only then look at the exhibits – choose them properly and plan their placement?

Exactly. I am fascinated by working on such exhibitions, but it is a rare approach to build an exhibition according to a scenario developed on the basis of people's experiences. This is how the exhibition *Passage et repassage / Przejścia i powroty* was created in cooperation with the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, under the direction of Antoni Bartosz. First, the museum team shared their private stories about their important childhood memories, and then we selected exhibits adapted to them. This allowed us to share some common experience. The exhibition was shown in Kraków, Marseilles and Berlin, i.e., in contexts in which the factor of familiarity was completely different, and yet it turned out that contact with the presented objects moved the viewers, because the situations created with the help of these objects had certain characteristics that people's experiences seemed to confirm as being quite common.

Such exhibitions seem particularly valuable to me. In this case, we worked with a specific collection, which consisted not only of works of art, but also objects of material culture. And yet, we managed to create powerful spatial metaphors that people were able to associate with their own experience.

The proposed path of interpretation turned out to be so broad that it was possible to join it in an individual way.

By presenting objects of material culture, we can focus on the fields of meaning, contexts and narratives. But what about art exhibitions – should museum institutions and exhibition creators prioritize the viewer's experiences, or should they become the spokespersons of artists and try to dig the tunnel you mentioned from the other side – helping to reach the emotions and meanings contained in their works?

I think that an adult person does not need to be specially helped to understand a work of art. If we are viewing a painting by Rembrandt, it does not necessarily have to be accompanied by a film about the artist. I think this diminishes our reception. Nowadays, we can see such a trend – because we are constantly dealing with screens in our culture of the ubiquitous image, it is assumed that we can no longer stand alone with a painting or with a sculpture. And this is not true.

In my opinion, each of us is equipped with unique instruments for the reception of art. It is a kind of a special telescope, the interior of which is lined with everything we have experienced, what is important to us, our experiences and dilemmas – we have there encoded all aesthetic experiences that left a mark on us. What the interiors looked like in our childhood, whether we had contact with nature, how many works of art we saw, whether they are able to move us or not. It seems to me that we cannot do too much to support a person in understanding a work of art – after all, it is not necessary. Sometimes it is enough for someone to see something that relates to their life. It does not have to take place on a very deep level, it does not have to lead to transformation.

Another thing is that you cannot disturb the viewer. By disturbing, I mean, for example, a poorly constructed space, that is, let us say, a gallery arranged in the classic 'white cube' style, where there are rows of quite similar paintings hanging on the walls in five subsequent rooms. No one can stand it. People will simply not stay focused. People need to refresh themselves somehow, we need 'sluices', after which we will see something else. Such a perceptual refreshment is necessary, because it cannot be expected from the viewer that they will receive the art in a state of constant high intensity. And yet there are certain features of space that we like as humans, that help guide our attention.

What are these features?

For example, the fact that we cannot see everything at once – otherwise we are bored, we have nothing to discover. Just like in a park, we need the path to have a curve which leads to an unknown place – we are excited by the mystery. In the gallery, we cannot see everything right away either. Moreover, if the light is wrong, even the best painting will not attract us. The way exhibitions are displayed – the hierarchy of works, their arrangement and, above all, the organization of the space in which they are presented – is extremely important. Often we want to take a step back, sit, hide, think calmly.

In order to intensify the recipient experience, museums organize the so-called immersive and multimedia exhibitions – on the one hand, they give enormous opportunities to influence the senses and direct attention, but at the same time they probably disrupt the kind of intimate experience you are talking about...

I think immersion can be achieved without multimedia. A well-designed space can draw us in, evoke a sense of immersion in the environment. This can be achieved in many ways: by colour, appropriate heights and widths of individual elements of the exhibition, the arrangement of rooms. Personally, I do not like literal support – which is supposed to support the viewer, but can actually impose an interpretation or hinder one. However, I like to use on a one-shot basis multimedia that gives the impression of movement. This is a good measure, you just have to use it with great consideration. It can ‘raise’ a fragment of the exhibition that seems boring or difficult to perceive, intensify something, lure us somewhere in a given space. However, when exhibitions are built with the intensity maintained at a high level all the time, I usually am very tired when I leave the exhibition. The space of the exhibition has its own dynamics – there must be a beginning, a middle part and an end, which usually does not have to deliver a final, parting shock. Grading the impressions with screens or sound is a wonderful tool, but first of all we have to stick to the theme of the exhibition and the goal that we want to achieve.

Sometimes, however, the recipient is unable to get involved and then they may ask themselves: ‘What is wrong with me?’ When I look at an album of the works of art while listening to music, and I am comfortable, I feel moved, but when I have to stand in front of the same paintings hung on the wall of the museum, their effect on me is much less intense. Does helping to activate other senses while viewing visual art distort this art? Does it disturb something in the perception of art, change its meaning, impose interpretations?

I would say that it diminishes our reception. But you can also look at this issue differently: there are works of art that are ‘self-sufficient’, for example Mark Rothko’s painting – because of the scale; these paintings are simply

bigger than us, so they take us in, we easily let them 'absorb us'. It seems to me that 'supporting' them with special ways of exposure is excessive and unnecessary, it is even a faux pas. Or let us take the painting of Jerzy Nowosielski, which is so internally complex and constructed that no 'additions' are needed. On the other hand, many works look better against a background of a particular colour – such exposure will make them act a little more 'immersively' on us. Introducing a discreet lighting can also put us in the mood of discovering the mystery, looking into another world.

I see that it is a thin line and that it is dangerous to get too close to the boundary, because you can achieve an effect that will be the opposite of your intentions...

Or you can impose an interpretation.

Many museums apply solutions in the form of separate stands – most often intended for children, but adult viewers also use them – where colours, textures, shapes can be manipulated. Such experimentation helps to draw attention to the composition of the image, to see the movement, depth, dynamics captured on it. It allows you to understand why a given painting interacts in a certain way. It is a kind of 'lifebuoy', a clue or hint on how we can discover different works for ourselves.

I think we are talking all the time not so much about what is better or how to reconcile different needs, but about the fact that it is good to give people a choice. Personally, I would like to take into consideration both the recipients who easily enter into contact with art, and those who need a lifebuoy, or rather a connector. Such experiments with forms or, for example, the artist's story about their own experiences related to the creation of a given work can tell us how we can communicate with the work.

Because we always communicate with it somehow. The only question is why this should come easily.

It seems to me that designing for everyone, which appears as a kind of leitmotiv of our conversation in the context of neurodiversity, is not universal design understood as design perfect for everyone, but as creating different possibilities.

This is also what I wanted to ask about: should we universalize or diversify? Since we already know a lot about how diverse our audience – or the one we want to attract – is, how can we respond to these different needs?

I do not know if there are simple answers to that question. It all depends on the theme, the idea of the exhibition and its purpose. If we talk about an art exhibition, I immediately have a doubt: can we help adults to contact art? Do they need it so much? I don't know. I would be in favour of giving them different options, and I would probably like to see how these options work in practice. However, it is also important that we do not get used to always having some kind of assistance, and not develop a dependency. Visiting the exhibition of a given artist, we do not have to understand them completely. We can take something else out of this space, we do not necessarily have to look for the meanings that the artist wanted to convey, we do not have to identify with the artist, we do not even have to feel moved so much. Maybe it will simply be valuable for us to be in a special exhibition space, completely different from the spaces we usually experience.

And what about solutions that do not involve interference in the scenario or the space of the exhibition? I mean various animation activities,

e.g., the fact that with a given group you can go through the exhibition while listening to music. Or lie down among the paintings and see what that brings. This does not disturb the idea of the exhibition, it does not introduce any permanent elements to it.

This is exactly the point: to give the opportunity to lie down, but to leave it at that. And that is a good key. Offering different possibilities is great; if we give only one, part of the participants will give up. Some people will not want to interact, take notes, or move around as instructed, right? Give them the opportunity to choose, and then respect their choices. The design of the so-called flexible spaces is about not creating a single path without any alternative.

Because when designing exhibitions or educational paths, we kind of think primarily of healthy, positive people who came in a good mood, have a good day and are willing to be dragged into touching, lying down, looking at the ceiling and so on. But there is always a group of people who will join in with great resistance or simply will not want to do it at all, and then you have to find a place for them as well. So that they do not feel bad about not wanting to do something. We just all have a different psyche.

The well-known designer Magda Mostafa often invokes and challenges the use of the ‘phantom statistical viewer’ – this term refers to the belief that every human person is typical, which means that it can be parametrized and that we can design with a quasi-random, averaged individual in mind.

Yes, it is about a symbolic human model, which in fact reflects a very small percentage of the population: a man 1.83 meters tall, white, fit and healthy.

Similar patterns persist in thinking about the psyche. We assume that the answer to the proposed offer will be enthusiasm and a willingness to watch and to experience emotions. Meanwhile, it must be admitted that it may be different, that the resources of mental strength may be weaker in one or another group; that the group of our recipients includes not only this resilient, curious person, but also someone completely different. This is a breakthrough in design, a great discovery of recent times. The change of the model we refer to as designers takes place at the level of the body and psyche, we begin to understand that people are different, have different bodies and different brains.

It is also necessary to design a message that goes out and says: What can be done here, at our place. Including a message saying: you can come and not be moved. [Laughter]

Absolutely! You can come and not be moved.

I once attended a workshop where educational staff in a contemporary art gallery explained to teachers that contemporary art does not have to be liked and understood. It was somehow liberating: we got the message that everyone, not only art experts and passionate dilettantes, is welcome in the gallery...

Is it not wonderful?

Yes, but then a question came up: 'If I do not like something and I do not understand it, why should I come here? I will come and be bored. And I will have to pay for the ticket.' Maybe it is necessary to focus not only on what the exhibition and educational programme should look like, but also to make sure that the various groups that we invite

to the exhibition hear and feel, when they come, that there is a place for them.

Maybe you just have to base your discourse on the fact that the very coming, the experience itself is always valuable, even if it is not complete. This reduces the pressure. We offer different solutions, but sometimes people have to find their own path. And they must be allowed to do so. It is fatal to think that we must make everyone happy.

I think of a situation from a contemporary art gallery whose educators tried different ways of approaching seniors. It turned out that for the older people with whom they made contact, it was important that in addition to viewing the exhibition, you could sit down, drink coffee or tea, talk, and not necessarily about this exhibition. Is this a signal that exhibition institutions should try to reach, explore, experiment with different groups and environments?

Yes, I think this is a lesson for us that we just need to be more attentive. These people probably did not need to go to the gallery, they just got motivated by the possibility to satisfy the need for contact with others. It turned out that contact with others was the more important thing for them, and the exhibition was a good pretext. It is great to find out what people need, how we can respond to it, even if we do not achieve our 'lofty' goals, like 'enlightening' someone with art.

It would be good if we moved away from the evaluation of the ways of receiving art and allow ourselves to think that someone might not be satisfied with the given space, not benefit from the exhibition, even though we put so much effort into it. You have to admit to yourself that sometimes, something cannot be achieved.

This awareness translates into a social benefit. Adaptation, flexibility of access and expectations make cultural institutions offer something on a human scale. Not adapted to the typical ‘Vitruvian Man’, but to the one we really are.

These are still things that we all have to get used to slowly, but fortunately something is changing in the society, and it increasingly happens that the ways of using space, including the exhibition space, do not assume fixed scenarios. Designed spaces gradually take into account the different needs of people, the needs related to functions, but also the needs related to the psyche of the recipients.

You have to be very humble towards your own desire to design. I also struggled with it in my work on the Garden of Memory, because we designers have the kind of ambition to create super attractive spaces, to show our capabilities, our personal style. And I had to fight it a lot. You have to change your thinking, give up your modernity and the desire to make improvements where they may be completely unnecessary.

Designing the thinking – what a great example of creativity!

Absolutely! The question is: what is the sense of design? It is important to ask ourselves why we are doing this. To consider whether it makes sense to design new things, or rather to seek solutions for people with different needs, limitations, possibilities, sensitivities.

Such moderation and humility are often lacking – people prefer to think of doing something spectacular, distinctive...

There is nothing wrong with wanting to give beauty, understanding, good experiences – that is great and important. But we should first ask the right questions, questions about the real needs of people, and be open to answers that might surprise us.

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