(Contemporary) Art, (New) Media and the Teenagers of Today Or how to deal with the gap between oil on canvas and Facebook

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When I was invited to write this article about media and education, first thing that came to my mind was a "new media paradox". So often, in my work as an educator, as well as in my personal education, I have been facing the fact that film and photography were mainly treated as "new media". It was always for me a kind of mystery how 19th century inventions could stay new for more than a century?

Actually, this example opens up some more general questions. How to deal with art education at a time when the development of media is extremely fast? How to deal with art education at a time when the use of various media is so frequent to our everyday life?

Before I start with more practical examples of using media in my educational work, I have to define my position. I am a visual artist and freelance educator from Belgrade, Serbia. The focus of my educational work is on contemporary visual art, and I mostly work with teenagers. In

the past 3 and a half years I have organized and conducted various educational programs, in collaboration with different galleries and cultural institutions. I have collaborated with various schools and teachers, as well as with a number of local sponsoring bodies in order to organize my programs. I usually organize and conduct 5 to 10 day workshops during the holidays, two annual programs with shorter workshops every week during the school year ("Express yourself by drawing" in the Students Cultural Centre and "KCB workshop" in The Cultural Centre of Belgrade) as well as a lot of additional activities. Some of my programs are focused more on contemporary art in general, and on the development of creativity, while the others are more focused on the current show in the specific gallery and the potentials of its practical and creative reinterpretation. In the framework of my programs I often invite different guest lecturers: artists, curators and professors from the local art academies. All of my programs consist of a short lecture, a discussion, and a lot of practical work in very different media (form drawing and painting, to photography, animation, digital art, art in public space, street art etc). My workshops are free of charge for the participants. They are open for all teenagers interested in art and creative work, with no entry selection, based on judging their giftedness or previous involvements with art and art related activities. I also have to mention that I don't consider my workshops as my artwork. As an artist, I mostly work in the field of drawing, installation and animation. I am usually trying to make my artwork communicative with wider range of audience not through workshops, but through using widely understandable cartoon related visual language.

I am also very interested in cultural education in a more general way, not only through practical work. In the last few years I have been collaborating with KulturKontakt Austria on several projects related to cultural education. Actually, the workshop organized by KulturKontakt , I have conducted in 2007 in one of elementary schools in Vienna, was crucial for me to start being interested in education, and it provided me with a positive model how an artist could work as a cultural educator. We continued the collaboration in 2010 and 2011 when I have conducted a

research on arts and cultural education in the countries from the territory of former Yugoslavia. And, finally, this October, I will be organizing an international conference on cultural education in the field of visual arts, in Belgrade, in collaboration with KulturKontakt Austria and The Cultural Centre of Belgrade.

So, how is it working with teenagers in Serbia on different programs related to contemporary visual arts? One question could be a good starting example for the discussion about education and media: why is it that there are generations of teenagers (or youth in general) trying to keep up with all trends in fashion and music, but whose interests in visual arts are so old fashioned?

Art education in schools in Serbia is based on examples from the time period up to 1950s, or even earlier, up to the beginning of the 20th century. On paper, education is slightly better than in practice, in which the recent art is usually completely skipped.[1] So, for most of teenagers art is paradigmatically oil on canvas and marble statue, and just few of them are familiar with any visual artist from last few decades.

The teenagers I am working with have, for example, very interesting collections of photos, drawings and videos found on Facebook, but when they participate in a formal workshop in a gallery, their first impulse is to do something more traditional. Of course, it doesn't take so much time to explain that they could feel free in a gallery, but often some of the first questions are like: I usually draw comics, but what should I exhibit in a gallery? I make photos and videos, but that is only something private? My impression is that this could be treated as a specific media paradox: that today teenager's understanding of visual arts is somewhere in the gap between classical oil paintings and Facebook, and that they are generally confused about the position of contemporary art in contemporary society.

Why do I think that contemporary art is so important in education? The answer seems to me quite simple. We need contemporary art to understand contemporary society. We need contemporary art education,

and education based also on contemporary examples, in order to prepare future generation to became contemporary artist, cultural workers, active art audience, and more generally, creative persons in any field. When discussing about contemporary art and education in Serbia, I also have to mention another problem, which I am quite often in touch with in my educational work. There is a significant amount of teenagers from Serbian high schools who are extremely conservative, whose sets of values make them behave in a manner that is generally coded as nationalists and sexists. My opinion is that cultural education programs, especially programs related to contemporary art, could provide a good tool for a positive change related to this issue. Of course, the situation is not so simple and straightforward. It's not enough to say that teenagers are not familiar with contemporary art only because of their education. This situation is also a product of the missing link between the sectors of art, culture and education.

In my practical work I am often trying to find different methods to overcome this "Oil paintings / Facebook gap". One of the key aspects of contemporary visual art is pluralism of media: all media from oil paintings to the latest digital technologies are usually integral parts of the most relevant exhibitions. It is only important to put the media in a right context, and to use it in a best way to discuss the topic of an art work. On the other hand, I am always trying not only to conduct the workshop, but also to learn from participants about their interests: books and comics they read, music they like, kind of art they are interested in, and more general, what do they think the art for their generation should be.

So, I would like to present four different practical examples of understanding and using media in my educational practice:

1. Updating of the Voyager Message from 1977 by Facebook Group and Joint Video Work

In 2010 I was invited by The Cultural Centre of Belgrade to organize and to conduct a 5 day workshop and an exhibition in the framework of 51st

October salon in Belgrade[2], as one of the parallel events of the show (October salon is one of the most relevant international manifestations of contemporary art in Serbia). The exhibition was dealing with the question of how our memories, in the range from personal to historical, are constructed, and how they could be presented through different art approaches, mostly video works.
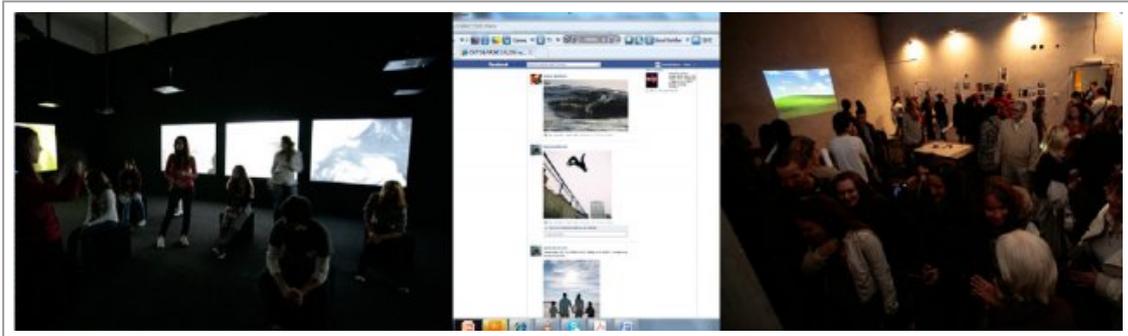
My workshop for high school participants, titled "Creative Laboratory for Alteration of Memory", consisted of lectures, guided tours and a lot of practical work related to the topic of the show. The basis of the practical was the use of photos (mostly private and family photos, as well as materials collected from the internet), which participants brought to the workshop. Participants had the task to explore the photos through manipulation and reinterpretation in various media, from drawing and tracing on transpierces, to Photoshop interventions, in order to discuss different mechanisms of how our memories are visually constructed.

One of the most important parts of the workshop was the production of the joint video work. The starting point was one of the works presented in the exhibition: Steve McQueen's "Once upon the Time"(2002). This video work was based on the famous collection of photos selected by NASA, which were part of "time capsule" in the Voyager mission from 1977, in order to represent the Earth and the entire human civilization.

The starting questions were: If this generation of participants could have an opportunity to create such a collection of photos in order to represent current condition of Mankind, what would it consist of? What would be the difference between 1977 representation and today's selection of

images? How to present it in a form of a video work in the framework of an exhibition?

So, we found our way to reinterpret Steve McQueen's work. During the workshop we formed the Facebook group where all of participants were adding photos which, from their point of view, could represent the Earth. This kind of visual experiment was really interesting for the participants, and they also started very dynamic discussion about the presented images. Some of the images and comments were really serious, while others were trying to represent "us" in a more funny way. The final video work, in a form of a slideshow with additional sounds, was really an interesting mixture of beautiful landscapes and cities, ecological catastrophes, battlefields and cartoon characters. It was a mixture of global and local, private and general, pessimism and optimism. Participants also had the additional conclusion that our "new massage to aliens", which was an unofficial working title among the group, doesn't need real aliens. We have to start, at first, to communicate among ourselves, in order to share and to discuss our different points of view.

I would like to point out that the idea of this joint video work was not only to help the participants to understand one particular artwork, but more to stimulate them on critical thinking and understanding of an artwork not only as a fact with straightforward interpretation, but more as a stimulus for further creative thinking. It was also important to stimulate teenagers to use the media which they are using on a daily base, as a tool for creative work.

2. Mapping the Municipality: From Walking and Drawing to an Online Interactive Map

In 2011 I have started the project "Creative postcards of the Savski venac Municipality". The project was supported by the Municipality of Savski venac (one of the central Belgrade municipalities) and it took place in The Students Cultural Centre in Belgrade. This long term project was initiated with the goal to discuss different approaches in art in public space, as well

as contemporary approaches to cultural heritage, and to stimulate participants to take an active part in the improvement of visual aspects of their urban environment. It has been realized in collaboration with different elementary and high schools from the territory of the municipality.

I would like to describe in more detail this workshop, because its participants were to use and combine different media. The idea was to produce a new creative map of the municipality within a 7 day workshop. First part of the workshop was focused on the research: creation of "personal map "of the municipality, where all participants were invited to add their comments on the large printed map on the gallery wall, and a discussion on the history of the municipality reflecting on old photos. A one day "tourist tour" through municipality was organized in order to explore different parts of the municipality, from official monuments to "hidden" places. During the tour, participants were making sketches, taking photos, and discussing which locations could be interesting for art interventions. In the second part, the participants were working on their own projects – sketches for different art interventions in a public space. They were free to choose the location and media (murals, graffiti, small architectural projects, eco projects, etc). Finished proposals were, by the use of Photoshop, presented as the simulation of interventions on locations. Proposals were also printed as a series of postcards, presented in an exhibition in the gallery, and on the web as the "Creative interactive map of the Municipality".

This working method covers very different media. It is also important to mention that it combines two different aspects of public space: the real

urban areas, and the public space of the internet. On the next level of the project, some of the proposals will be realized as joint mural/graffiti work. The interactive map will be developed and added with new creative proposals. I consider that such combination of media could be very helpful in reaching a wider population and to foster the interest in creation of the identity of our urban environment.

3. Holograms, Avatars, Online Friends, Live Performances and ... Emotions

In collaboration with The Cultural Centre of Belgrade in 2010 I started the program "KCB workshop"[3]. It is an educational program focused on the exhibition program at the Art Gallery of the Cultural Centre of Belgrade. Usually, there is a 3 hour workshop for each exhibition, which consists of short presentation of the exhibition, discussion with artists and/or curators and a practical part related to the topic and/or media of the exhibition. The gallery is exhibiting contemporary art and the workshops have been realized in very different media from drawing and painting to video.

One of the most interesting examples for this text comes from the exhibition "Displacements"[4], a hologram installation (interactive and interdisciplinary physical interface for live holographic performance video streaming). It was really a good starting point for creative educational work.

In order to produce conditions similar to the ones presented in the exhibition (unfortunately, it was technically impossible to work with

holograms), in the gallery space were installed and linked: computer with access to Facebook , Photoshop and projection on the gallery wall, camera, and a monitor with real time streaming from a camera installed in the space. The participants were separated into two groups – impersonating the audience and performers (and they have switched later). Performers had a task to contact their on line friends from Facebook, explain to them briefly what they are doing at the moment, and to ask what kind of emotion they have to perform. The performance was staged in front of the projection and it was followed by live Photoshop drawings, different Facebook images and additional comments of the on line friends. The audience was able to watch the performances on monitor, as well as to suggest additional activities to the performers by using a mobile phone.

This, at the first glance a little bit chaotic, "media structure" produced really great practical results. The real performer was in a position between various contemporary media, but still focused on a personal emotional response. On the other hand, that was something very familiar to teenagers: their everyday reality is definitely captured by and constructed through various media, such as internet, digital image, mobile phones, between real identities and avatars, so they started very soon to feel in this artistic environment "at home". It was also important that this workshop was a good example of the tendency of contemporary art to overcome strictly defined gallery walls, as well as to explain that contemporary art exists in a more complex relation between the exhibition space and the audience. On the other hand, this working method doesn't require any special technical conditions, and with one

computer with internet access, camera, monitor, and a few mobile phones, it is easy to produce this media environment which represents so much the conditions of contemporary society.

4. "The War ist over J/?" Or do we believe in media constructed Images and how to play with them

The fourth and the last example I would like to present in this text approaches the question of media from a different point of view. In the previous three examples the question of media in the educational process was more based on different practical ways of using particular media and their combinations in order to discuss and to present various subjects. I think that in an (art) educational process it is also very important to point out the way images are constructed in contemporary society, and how different public media, from newspapers to TV and internet, are presenting various images to the viewers.

In the framework of 52th October salon in Belgrade[5], in 2011, I have conducted a workshop titled "The War is Over J/?" The 5 day workshop dealt with the question of different visual representations of (local) histories in history textbooks, TV, internet, and family photo archives. Some of the key questions were: Do we consider history as a strictly defined narration focused mostly on political history? Could we have a more open view on history facts, and could it depend on different personal points of view? What do today's generation of teenagers think on a local history and its representations? Where does the history end up and how to deal with the recent past and today events? What events and persons will be included in some future history text books?

This time the working materials were history text books (from different periods between 1945 to present day[6]) as well as photos from family albums related to historical events and various contents from the internet about local history. Participants were invited to make creative and critical reinterpretations of these visual contents, mostly by different drawing approaches (redrawing, tracing, erasing and collaging). The workshop was an integral part of the exhibition and the space for the workshop was arranged as a typical classroom in Belgrade.

The central part of the workshop was the creation of a joint drawing on a museum wall. We made an experiment: what should happen if all participants together, free and spontaneously, started to add, draw and reinterpret different images related to our history in order to produce a visual representation of "all of our histories" together. What should happen if we combine different approaches and periods, "personal" and "official" interpretations? On the last day of the workshop, a series of interviews with the participants was filmed in front of the joint drawing.

I found this method very stimulating to foster critical thinking and discussion on very serious issues, in a playful and relaxing atmosphere.

On the other hand, joint drawing on a museum wall, and the series of interviews, were a successful model of how to present opinions of teenagers to the audience of the show.

So, what should be the conclusion?

Pluralism of media is definitely one of the key aspects of contemporary visual arts. Art education, both on a formal and informal level, in my deepest opinion, should try to keep in contact with contemporary approaches and to use various media and their combinations in order to address different aspects of contemporary society. In order to overcome "the gap between oil painting and Facebook", we have to have a good balance between art history and contemporary examples and to keep trying to update our knowledge. And, first of all, we have to foster creativity on all levels and aspects of education in general.

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Further info on her art practice: www.ananedeljkovic.com

[1] For elementary school there are different publishers of art textbooks. Some of them do include contemporary art examples, while others are completely focused on examples which end up with Modern art. In high schools, most of the students learn from the textbook in which art history ends up with just a few examples from 50s, 60s and 70s, plus very few pages with basic information on photography, film and animation.

[2] 51th October Salon , "The Night Pleases Us", curated by Johan Pousette and Celia Prado (2010)

[3] KCB is acronym of Serbian name for The Cultural Centre of Belgrade.

[4] Exhibition "Displacements" was curated by Dorjan Kolundžija, Ana Adamović, and Milica Pekić, 2011

[5] 52th October Salon, title: "It's Time We Got To Know Each Other", 2011, The Museum of Yugoslav History, curated by Galit Eilat and Alenka Gregoric

[6] It is important to mention that local "official histories" in Serbia have changed dramatically from 1945 to the present day several times, and it is very obviously represented through the history textbooks