

# What Art Can Do

Youth Arts Education at Bergen Kunsthall

by Karolina Rugle

In response to an outdated approach to arts education, especially in schools but also in museums, artists and educators have developed modern arts education projects that are much closer to the methodologies and concepts of contemporary art. Their efforts have resulted in a series of good practices, but these also expose the challenges of updating a largely outmoded system. Artistic organisations setting out to offer such alternatives to current models of children's arts education aim to engage their future audiences from an early age, often emphasising the embodied social and political aspects of artistic activities. Such programmes explore, investigate, and connect to the art of today – to the ways artists research, think, and work – and they provide compelling insight into the path they take to try to make sense of the world. Karoline Rugle interviewed Hilde Marie Pedersen, head of education at Bergen Kunsthall, about their approach to youth arts education.

Cover photo

A collaborative artwork produced by children and artist Solveig Sumire Sandvik, showcased as part of *Mylder* exhibition with contributions from sound engineer Jonas Skarmark. Photo by Hilde Marie Pedersen



Ung Kunstkjennere (Young Art Connoisseurs) participating in the project *Who's doing the washing up?* Photo by Selim Mutic

## Arts in education

Within *Re-Imagine Europe*, which showcases varying approaches to engaging audiences for art, the arts education projects for youth at Bergen Kunsthall, a Norwegian contemporary art centre that produces more than 200 events and 12 exhibitions a year, emphasises the social aspect of audience engagement. Focusing exclusively on contemporary art, Bergen Kunsthall physically and symbolically is the central place in Bergen for young people who wish to familiarise themselves with what's happening in the art world of today.

While the cultural and creative industries form an important and expanding part of the Norwegian economy, the significance of arts education is not reflected in Norway's education curriculum, nor is there a general interest in arts education within society. In the current curricula, basic data-processing skills are taken to be more important than arts education. Such skills encourage compliance with certain rules, rather than creativity. Designing an arts education programme risks falling into the trap of drawing on the same evaluation methodology used in other fields. For example, the benefits of teaching science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects are far easier to measure, and teaching STEM is consequently easier to justify than arts education, which is not easily quantified. Ironically, the current pursuit of innovation has turned the attention of the overall education curriculum away from the arts. Yet, it is precisely through creativity coupled with knowledge that innovation is made possible.

However, in the past ten years there has been a consistent effort on behalf of artists and educators who form collaborations with school groups to develop an approach to the arts within the educational framework, striving to ultimately demonstrate how the arts reflect the human condition. Such practice has proved that creating programmes that stand for something does make a difference. Apart from providing a window into artistic expression, engagement with the arts challenges students to relate to, empathise with, and react to the realities of others, themselves, and other relevant social issues.

## Developing critical thinking

Aimed at creating and developing critical thinking and reflection with the students, the Bergen Kunsthall programmes introduce various forms of art experiences for different ages: visits by kindergarten children, tours and workshops for school children, as well as collaborative work and learning projects with high school groups. Choosing the appropriate media and connecting the students with guest artists enable them to engage in a concrete artistic practice, to express their ideas through different media (from photography, film, sculpture, painting, installation and ready-mades, to a number of multimedia and interdisciplinary approaches), and also to emulate the artistic practices of distinguished contemporary artists.

Hilde Marie Pedersen is the head of education at Bergen Kunsthall. The workshops that take place at Bergen Kunsthall, she says, ‘delve deeper into one or more ways of thinking about problems and processes raised in the exhibition. They give answers to basic questions of how things are done, what artworks are chosen, and also start a discussion on the issues that the exhibitions open up.’ Among the methodologies applied in the workshops is a version of ‘peer to peer’ learning used in group work within the project *Unge kunstkjennere* (Young Art Connoisseurs). This project for young people between the ages of 13 and 23 started in 2017 within *Re-Imagine Europe*. ‘The methodology is guided by the notion,’ says Pedersen ‘that the starting point is art itself, in this case the exhibitions in Bergen Kunsthall. Children coming to the exhibitions will experience everything from performances, installations, films and videos, photography. The methodology isn’t focused on particular techniques or types of work, but on the way they discuss and approach art and go deeper into the issues related to the exhibition, be it women’s rights, ecology, or any other aspect relevant to daily life and social changes.’ The young art connoisseurs meet twice a month to discuss art, visit exhibitions together, interview artists, and work with social media. Through this project the young people have an opportunity to become actively involved in the institution’s creative programme by working with artists and employees. Those who wish to extend their engagement can also gain professional experience, along with meeting friends and developing creative skills in ways different from those they are used to.



Unge Kunstkjennere participating in the project Taking over with artist Jordi Ferreiro. Photo by Eva Rowson

## Art as the starting point for everything

Pedersen shares a glimpse into the processes and work of the Kunsthall team which has – for the past ten years – been working in different ways to provide arts learning opportunities in an effort to bridge the gap between Bergen’s largest contemporary arts institution and the next generation. During a normal week, Pedersen curates programmes connected to education at the museum, along with several mentors. Most of the programmes are associated with the actual arts programme or the exhibition taking place. Young people of all ages are welcome to participate in the workshops after a tour of the exhibition. A direct approach is taken in order to get closer to the nature of art-making and the processes at the heart of artistic work. While walking through the exhibition, the mentors share details and interesting things that occur within, but also behind an exhibition, going deeper into the processes beyond those that one can usually see. It takes time, but the more they get into it, the more the young people engage, and they welcome the responsive element of such an educational project. With time, what they think extends their boundaries, demonstrating the very tangible benefits of introducing children to art at an early age. As Pedersen says: ‘Dealing with contemporary art means dealing with what is going on in the contemporary society – structural, political, environmental and social questions, but also everything else happening in the world today. What can art do? It can comment on what is really going on in the society, from a different angle.’

Apart from being an art historian, Pedersen is also a teacher. She believes that working in a contemporary art institution and teaching art to young people are two very different things. She finds it particularly significant to acknowledge the processes behind making art. 'Once a year I find an artist to work with. The artist prepares an exhibition and a workshop for children. We started that in 2010 because we wanted to have children feel what the artist feels and creates.'

About the differences between how a museum deals with art and how teaching young people deals with art, Pedersen says: 'Museums are mostly looking and copying things, in terms of production and projects, but that doesn't represent a good way to teach about art. They keep the attention on the surface level of things, isolating, occasionally touching on or completely ignoring contemporary art. If you only talk and present, you don't get to really know the thoughts and realities of the young people you are communicating things to. Discussions, criticism, and viewing are ways to engage with art in general. By doing this, you are creating awareness of the multifaceted and transcendent function of education, and that of the arts.'



Unge Kunstjennere taking part in *Who's doing the washing up?* Photo by Eva Rowson

# Preparing the stage: initial encounters

Bergen Kunsthall usually presents more than ten different exhibitions each year. Some artists prepare workshops for the children throughout the year. All of this generates the key material used as a starting point for the youth programmes. Getting the young people to talk, to understand, to listen, or simply to be in the space is already an accomplishment. The first step is letting everyone adjust to being in a new space and in different surroundings in their own way, with the curator inviting them to sit down and just be in the room for a while. The simplicity of this initial step usually provokes interest, questions, reactions and ultimately prepares them for deeper discussions. This is followed by asking questions that open them up to engaging, without creating preconceived notions among the group. Another way is simply welcoming everyone and inviting them to observe. Many artists create things intended for the audience, but some opt to emphasise 'being-present'. This is also an approach to expanding the awareness of the children within the group, who are well acquainted with goal-oriented learning, with tasks full of missions and assignments. Here, the mission is: relaxing, clearing the mind, calming the pulse and the excitement that is focused on arousal, be it auditory or visual.

## Taking it further

The nature of a performance is essential to opening up a wider discussion – for instance, on social discrepancies, through examining simple gestures and noticing a big change in the receptiveness of a person sitting on the floor as opposed to someone who is standing, and so on. These aspects can influence perception and potential action regarding individual, local, or universal questions and urgencies: 'You start local and expand to a bigger topic, issue or problem. Some local topics are also general. The performance is intended for the local people and audiences, so it's related mostly to people who can travel to them, be there for a while, and go back again. Sometimes a longer relationship is established with a particular class (for example in a video project), which enables them to approach it in a more individual, deeper and personal way. The results displayed in the exhibitions are very personal and open.'

Site-specific art projects can be especially suitable for education projects, as children often can relate to them. In the experience of the Bergen Kunsthall team, such works have proven very useful, as they produce different results, additionally enabling them to start viewing things (and thinking) from a local perspective and expand this into a more general topic.

# Language is key

The hands-on approach is based on several key points, but fails to eliminate some of the obstacles that would require a rethinking of the educational system. The most important element is communication: ‘the feeling that they are seen, spoken to, taken into consideration, is an important element for having young people come back. Relevance is important when it comes to earning trust and respect from children and young people. There must be some sort of recognition for them; if everything is presented and perceived as foreign, they are unlikely to return.’ In the case of Kunsthall, if a new educator is hired, an effort is always made to ensure that they understand the importance of speaking to people in a language they understand. Developing imagination is a desired result, but also one of the ways of bringing art closer to young people. An example of a very creative way of formulating some of the elements in art for children was the fanzine *Kunsten å Koken* (*A Cookbook for Art*) that Unge kunstkjennere created themselves.



Children working with artist Solveig Sumire Sandvik on a site-specific project titled *Sound and Movement* for the exhibition *Mylder*. Photo by Hilde Marie Pedersen

# Importance of continuity

Continuity is crucial to establishing, developing and maintaining connections. In the case of Bergen Kunsthall, the same classes can come back every year and participate in the programme. ‘That is also how you can get to know the children very well, and they feel at home and can introduce others to the programme.’ In order to make this happen, it is important to establish a link to the education system, which comes with some obstacles.



Mylder exhibition

Relating art to other subjects taught in school has become standard in our approach to arts education. As schools eliminate arts programming from their curriculum, and even extracurricular programmes, the programmes at Bergen Kunsthall shoulder an even greater responsibility in assuring that these programmes do not become out of reach for children altogether. We should beware to not lead children to conclude, that art is not important, and that investing their time and efforts in art practices will receive little to no acknowledgement, and that they cannot contribute to society in a meaningful way through arts. In order to prevent the problem of the (education) system from becoming a student's problem, as is often the case nowadays, it is important to raise the awareness of the educators, who will have to increase their knowledge and competence when it comes to widening the school's role in the area of arts education, or to highlight informal education projects in arts, thus enabling educational institutions to play a role in promoting not only art education, but also psycho-social well-being.

Bergen Kunsthall sees itself as an additional channel for increasing arts resources for students and educators alike: 'as Bergen Kunsthall is the only contemporary art institution in Bergen, if someone wants to introduce these types of projects to the students, it is quite likely they will have to reach out to us.'

# Approaching people

The goal is to keep abreast of what is going on in the arts and develop these projects. Gathering feedback is essential, even if it is simply to ask people passing by if and what they know about art. Bergen Kunsthall team dispatched a team of young people, asking random passers-by in the street to fill in a questionnaire about their views on the arts, with a 'goal to inform people about the importance of art because it affects how one sees the society and life,' Pedersen explained, adding that 'although a lot has changed in the arts, many people have an outmoded way of looking at the arts, as a foreign sphere.' The study showed that, many people who aren't directly connected to art in any way had very interesting thoughts on art.



Stills from Adelita Husni-Bey's film Agency

## The importance of sustainability

Apart from the social and artistic aspect, the overall complexity of funding makes it difficult to map the needs and create conditions for a more sustainable work in this direction. Projects are funded for two years, but what is lacking is a guarantee of development and continuation. Continuation and consistency are not considered successful outcomes of a project; novelty far outvalues consistency in project proposals. 'It's difficult to make good things grow and be acknowledged. Moreover, it's almost fashionable to change approaches and methodologies, so it ends up making working difficult instead of supporting and sustaining it,' Pedersen says. In fact, it is young people who are looking for long-lasting opportunities and consistency. Everything comes and goes and they need a challenge, a consistent approach take on their own challenges.

## BIOGRAPHIES

Karolina Ruge graduated in musicology at the University of Zagreb. In her work she focuses mostly on contemporary and experimental music, as well as interdisciplinary and performance practices. Apart from producing, organising, and curating music festivals, she has a weekly radio programme, makes music documentaries and writes reviews. She is active in advocating for human rights through the international work of the non-governmental organisation Are You Syrious.

Hilde Marie Pedersen is an art historian from the University of Bergen. She has extensive experience as a mediator, lecturer and writer, and taught art theory & history at the Art School in Bergen and the University of Bergen. Since 2007 she has worked as head of education at Bergen Kunsthall, where she founded Unge kunstjennere (2017) and Art Stories (2014), both to generate greater interest and understanding of contemporary art. She has written several articles and texts on contemporary art for publications and exhibition catalogues.

## CONTEXT

This article is part of the *Re-Imagine Europe* publication. The publication collects articles, essays, interviews and reports about audience engagement for interdisciplinary arts organisations. It aims to share knowledge gained throughout the *Re-Imagine Europe* project with professionals in the cultural sector who would like to gain a deeper insight in audience development and capacity building.

*Re-Imagine Europe* (2017-2021) is a four-year project of ten cultural organizations from across Europe, responding to the current social and political challenges. With a programme of residencies, commissions, symposia and workshops, the project partners stimulate both artistic production and audience development. They experiment with new ways of reaching out to their audiences, motivated by the ambition to develop a broader and more engaging approach to audience development and capacity building.

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