

THE CURATOR'S HANDBOOK – HOW TO WORK BETTER?

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ABSTRACT

How to Work Better is a well-known text-based work by artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who appropriated the text from a factory bulletin. This artwork can be seen as a working manual intended for artists and curators working in the contemporary art scene, pointing to the redefinition of the ways the artistic or curatorial work is done. In other words, what matters is not just what you do, but how you behave while doing it. In this paper, I am trying to apply the abovementioned considerations onto the pedagogical work with students at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, as part of the recently launched course called “Museum and Gallery Practice”, offered by the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. I consider what kind of methodology could be used to bring students something “out of the ordinary”, i.e., to offer them something other than traditional, frontal teaching, which takes place without active engagement of students and is mainly focused on well-known works and canonical repertoire.

KEYWORDS:

useful knowledge, (non)hierarchical teaching, students' motivation, curatorial practice, times of hyper-production

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In spite of the fact that the Rijeka Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMSU) employs only one art educator and struggles with a shortage of staff, it devotes considerable effort to working with students. The young generation is one of the Museum's target audience groups, and students of arts and

humanities are the most frequent visitors of exhibitions. This text deals with the questions of how to activate a so-called invisible museum through students' workshops and classes, how to show often vague exhibition policies and how to get students interested in curatorial work. Given the scarcity of textbooks in the Croatian language on the topic of participatory forms of education in museums, the important question is: How to work better and how to introduce changes in teaching programs? In other terms, museums can also be sites of students' active engagement with curatorial and artistic practices providing learning from different cultural workers, designers, artists, and museum staff on site, as well as real interaction with artworks. Yet, changing the conventional ways we do things is a gradual process. In this context, it is useful to highlight the opinion of Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas: "Let's not forget: institutions are formed of living bodies – people – whose daily decisions determine outcomes. Those who have the most power within an institution are also often the most obligated to serve its interests, and thus have the least freedom. If any change is going to happen it will stem from collective effort, probably led by those with the most tenuous bonds."¹

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND THE INVISIBLE MUSEUM

Before I started working on the *Museum and Gallery Practice* course in 2022, offered by the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, I had taken part in establishing the collaboration between the aforementioned department, the Department of Cultural Studies at the same faculty, and the Academy of Applied Arts

1) Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas, "Forward," in *Forms of Education: Couldn't get a sense of it*, eds. Aeron Bergman, Alejandra Salinas and Irena Borić (Zagreb: Institute of New Connotative Action Press, 2016), 12.

in Rijeka.² Conceived as a long-term initiative, the abovesaid collaboration took different formats, addressing the needs of students and focusing on the specific content of the courses. At the local level, I would like to mention our links with the courses *Contemporary Art* and *Mediation and Critique* offered by the Department of Art History, because they aim to “activate” the museum collection, i.e., popularize both modern and contemporary artworks. This particular collaboration produced direct results in the form of student texts published on the Museum’s website. By combining our instructions and those of their professors, the students write reviews of the works of art for the online collection, or explore specific chapters of the local exhibition history. Before doing this exercise in formal analysis of artworks, students first learn more about what happens “behind the scene”, i.e., they are introduced to the museum archive, such as exhibition design materials and correspondence between artists and museum staff. Some of the students continue to be part of the museum audience even after completing their studies, becoming more directly involved in the museum’s work.

Among the activities, I would like to mention the workshop *How to write about contemporary art?* that presents the MMSU as a place that promotes informal teaching methods and builds more lasting relationships with students. The workshop was created in 2022 in collaboration with the Croatian Section of AICA, with the help of our colleague and freelance curator Ivana Meštrov, who has been engaged in curatorial and pedagogical work since 2010. It is intended for students of art history and

2) Julia Lozzi Barković, Lidija Butković Mićin, Nadežda Elezović, Nataša Lah, Danko Dujmović (coordinator of the Museum and Gallery Practice course), Vjeran Pavlaković, Elvis Krstulović and Ana Labudović, teachers at the abovementioned departments, are the ones who have facilitated the collaboration between the University and the Museum.

related disciplines, and aims to foster exchange of different viewpoints on the role and activities of contemporary women artists. Focusing on writing short reviews of exhibitions held at the museum (Sanja Iveković, 2022; Raffaella Crispino, 2023; *The Visible Ones*, 2024),³ the workshop is delivered in an intensive two-day format on the MMSU premises (**Fig. 1, Fig. 2**). In the online part of the workshop, the participants receive personalized comments on their reviews. They can share the reviews with their colleagues by publishing them on the museum website after they are finished and proofread. Since there is no textbook on informal ways of working with students, in 2024/2025 we plan to combine our efforts with Atelieri Žitnjak. It is an art organization which, among other things, organizes writing workshop. The aim is to exchange the methodology of work that too often remains “hidden” in non-institutional spaces and the curricula of higher education institutions.



Fig 1. Students' workshop during the exhibition by Sanja Iveković at MMSU, 2022.

3) For more about the exhibitions, see: *Sanja Iveković: MAKE UP – MAKE DOWN*, <https://mmsu.hr/dogadaji/sanja-ivekovic-make-up-make-down-videoretrospektiva/>; *Raffaella Crispino: We Want Mirrors – A Journey Into the Matrix of Coloniality*, <https://mmsu.hr/en/event/raffaella-crispino-we-want-mirrors-a-journey-to-the-matrix-of-colonialism/>; *The Visible Ones*, <https://mmsu.hr/en/event/vidljive/>, accessed July 10, 2024.

So, how should we write about contemporary art? The workshop begins with an informal presentation, during which mentors and participants speak about themselves in an anecdotal way. This is followed by a guided tour with the curators and a conversation with the students, during which they share their impressions of the exhibition. In addition to reading different types of texts – curatorial texts, interviews with the artist, and critical reviews – we talk with the participants about

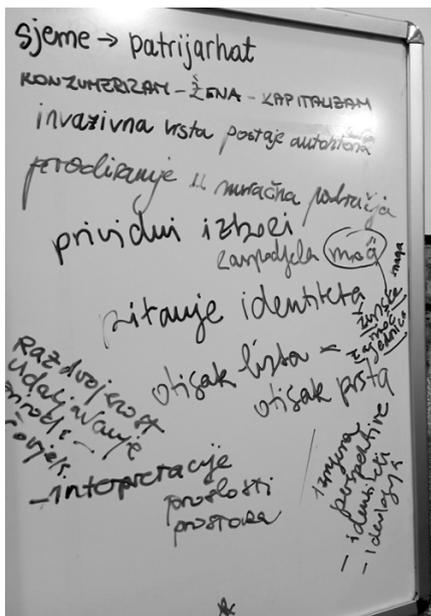


Fig 2. Student's sketch with the key terms about the exhibition by Raffella Crispino at MMSU, 2023.

the structure of their own texts and the aspects they need to address in their writing. We look into the ways of structuring an introductory part providing an overview of the exhibition set-up and its atmosphere; we try to identify the motives for the creation of the exhibition, as well as its importance to the wider public, and conduct a deeper analysis including comments on the selection of artworks and their interrelations. We also discuss the (un)fulfilled expectations, as well as advantages and disadvantages of the exhibition program. It is important for us to encourage the students to present their own insights, instead of gathering mere facts and retelling already published texts, which is a common phenomenon both in the reviews published in the media and those written by students. Moreover, we want to encourage the participants to ask questions and express themselves freely, avoiding the incomprehensible jargon of art

historians. In the workshop *How to write about contemporary art?*, we rely on Kaya Yilmaz's concept of the constructivist learning as a process of designing a world where experience and prior understanding, as well as social interaction, play an important role, stimulated by posing challenging questions, analyzing the problems, but also by playing different roles.⁴ My work in the *Museum and Gallery Practice* is motivated by the question of how to prepare the students, our future colleagues, for the demands of organizing exhibitions, as well as for the competitive and precarious working conditions. How can we support the students in a rapidly changing art system, how can we encourage them to do research-focused work that they would enjoy, instead of approaching a subject as a tedious task that has to be done with as soon as possible? As of recently, museums tend to be seen as public forums promoting discussions and opening to a varied audience, moving beyond the traditional role of shrines for expensive objects aimed at a homogenous audience. Yet, the discussions about contemporary art and inclusion of participatory practices in teaching are still not part of syllabi at national art history departments, especially in terms of teaching the methodology of curatorial work in relation to the current practice. Moreover, we do not know what will happen to teaching in the circumstances dictated by the “networked” society, with digital platforms and tools such as ChatGPT directly affecting the traditional role of art historians and curators.

My work with students attempts to address all of the aforementioned issues, and draws inspiration from the readymade artwork *How to work better?* created by artists

4) Lana Skender, *Vizualna kultura kao nova paradigma poučavanja likovne umjetnosti* [Visual Culture as a New Paradigm of Teaching Visual Art] (PhD diss., Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 2021), 151, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://dr.nsk.hr/islandora/object/dsos%3A69/datastream/PDF/view>.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss (Fig. 3). The artwork focuses on an inclusive work ethic as a prerequisite for every work and teaching process: “... Know the Problem, Learn to Listen, Learn to Ask Questions, Distinguish Sense from Nonsense, Accept Change as Inevitable, Admit Mistakes, Say it Simple, Be Calm, Smile.”⁵ The simply worded manifesto indicates the need for contextual learning, as opposed to uniform and reproductive knowledge. It emphasizes the embodied knowledge promoted by the increasingly popular educational projects in the arts.

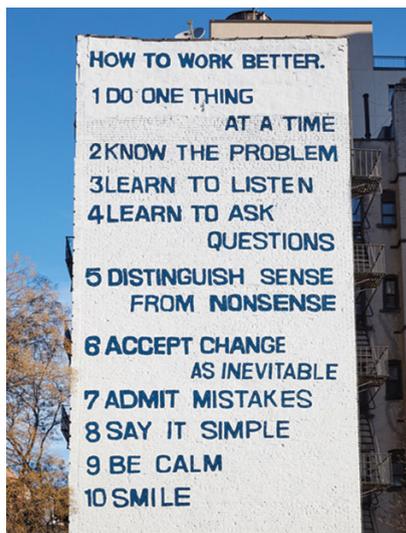


Fig 3. Peter Fischli, David Weiss, *How to Work Better*, intervention in the public space, 2016 (1991), Photo: Jason Wyche, <https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/peter-fischli-david-weiss-how-to-work-better/>.

An international example is the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge* (October 29, 2014 – February 9, 2015) by the curatorial collective WHW, which transformed the Queen Sofía National Museum Art Centre in Madrid into a learning space inhabited by collaborative and participatory artistic practices.⁶ The “really useful knowledge” is presented as research based on exploration and situational experience, which is organized in a dynamic way (group work instead of a linear curriculum and strictly defined outcomes). In other words, instead of searching for universal truth and formulaic solutions, the goal is to enable people to cope more successfully with

5) Peter Fischli and David Weiss: *How to Work Better*, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/peter-fischli-david-weiss-how-to-work-better/>.

6) *Really Useful Knowledge*, MNCARS, Barcelona, 2014, accessed July 10, 2023, https://monoskop.org/images/9/94/Really_Useful_Knowledge_2014.pdf.

the environment, solve specific problems more efficiently, and gain a better insight into their own assumptions. Encouraged by artistic practices in the 1960s and 1970s, active knowledge creation and critical questioning originate from the constructivist approaches to teaching and progressive pedagogy, which are still not a vital part of the formal education. The main idea is not to furnish the mind with ready knowledge but to provide practically applicable operational skills that make people more effective. In response to the rise of globalization, neoliberalism and digitization, the second wave of participatory and DIY principles began to spread in exhibitions and art academies in the 1990s, focusing on playing with language conventions and challenging the definitions of artists, critics and curators. This second wave, known as the “educational turn”, is more present in theory and as part of curatorial and artistic experiments than as a systematically accepted and elaborated approach in education. As the curator and educator Janna Graham notes, this educational twist is full of various currents and versions, and therefore remains open to elaboration:

In the context of ‘the turn’, this tension has been evident in a number of ways: between temporary, generally short-lived artistic or curatorial experiments and the long-term care work of educators engaged in the ‘un glamorous task’ of critical arts education (Sternfeld); between named artists and ‘unnamed participants’ (Sanchez); between artists’ and theorists’ conceptions of experimental education, and the reaction of social movement activists, who understand the impetus for the turn as a call to social and institutional action around the reshaping of education, suggested by the tendencies such as the Bologna Process of European Education Reform.⁷

7) Janna Graham, “Technologies for Living Otherwise: Arts Pedagogy as Social Reproduction and Movement Building,” in *Creativity Exercises: Emancipatory*

DIRTY FINGERS VS. EX CATHEDRA

I am interested in classes delivered in places that are different from traditional lecture halls with their frontal teaching arrangements, as well as in classes with a smaller number of students – groups of up to ten people. Whenever possible, I use a circular chair arrangement in classes, and combine walking and standing. My aim is to create dynamics and “awaken” the body, which would otherwise remain inert, while also softening the hierarchical relationship between the lecturer and the student. The classes take place in museum spaces and galleries in Rijeka, such as the exhibition space of the Filodrammatica building, Drugo more (The Other Sea) and Studentski kulturni centar (Student Cultural Centre), where students learn how to create exhibition programs and organize exhibitions. Moreover, the students can get involved in the gallery work as part of their professional practice, and they can also propose future activities. In thirty teaching hours, we also visit the studios of artists and designers, e.g., the spaces of Delta 5 in Rijeka, where several artists have their studios, and with whom the students can discuss working conditions, as well as the conceptual and technical processes in creating a work of art. The gap between the production and the reception of art is bridged by visiting different classes at the Rijeka Academy of Applied Arts, along with discussions among students and teachers, who are each other’s “first neighbors” on the campus, but have very little contact and no collaboration programs.

Our classes are mostly held at the Museum, in the exhibition area when it is closed to visitors, during different phases of exhibition preparation. In this way, students gain a firsthand

Pedagogies in Art and Beyond, eds. Dora Hegyi, Zsuzsa Laszlo and Franciska Zolyom (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), 303–304.

insight into the exhibition demands and possibilities, including spatial conditions. Theoretically speaking, they are offered an insight into the planning and potential changes of the “exhibition architecture”, which is covered in the lecture *White Cube as an Exhibition Standard*. Through practice, students gain a sense of spatial arrangement and the size of exhibits, which in classical teaching they mostly see in a two-dimensional format, either in a textbook or in a PowerPoint presentation. The students are also walked through different exhibitions, where they can see certain lapses that, due to the need for compromises, often accompany group exhibitions and heterogeneous media expressions, but are rarely discussed. Along with an analysis of current museum displays and preparatory models, the students receive an assignment to rearrange the artworks in a specific exhibition. This includes the introduction of additional artworks and elaboration of thematic and spatial relations within the newly created exhibition context, which is presented orally and discussed among the students. My intention is to incorporate lectures or workshops delivered by various experts into the classes, so that students can learn more about different possibilities of working in the culture sector. For example, the semester in 2021 brought together professionals such as Ivana Lučić (museum education and work with children), Ana Tomić and Marino Krstačić-Furić (design of the museum catalogues and exhibitions), and Jelena Androić (public relations; **Fig. 4**). In 2022, our guests were artists who are also engaged in curatorial work. Branka Cvjetičanin spoke about communication with the public that does not belong to professional circles and does not usually attend art events, and Elena Apostolovski held an online workshop on the role of a curator. She presented projects related to virtual space and digital curating, and talked about the International Student Film Festival, in the organization of which students from Rijeka can also participate.



Fig 4. Students visiting Delta studio, designers Ana Tomić and Marino Krstačić Furić, 2022.

Besides guest lectures and discussions, as an additional method of encouraging verbal and visual dialogue among students, I use the Knowledge Fair which was promoted at *Documenta* 2022 in Kassel by the educational platform Gudskul and the art collective Ruangrupa.⁸ In addition to the Knowledge Fair, as an introduction to the class and a warm-up exercise for the question “What is an exhibition?”, I read to students the instructions for organizing exhibitions *Sam svoj majstor* (DIY), written by Želimir Košćević.⁹ I mention the experimentation with exhibition formats during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the simultaneous popularization of the curatorial practice, and announce the reading of different curatorial or critical reviews, in Croatian and English, as an integral part of the classes. These reviews correspond to the topic of each lecture, and they have

8) “Gudskul”, accessed July 15, 2023, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/gudskul/>.

9) Želimir Košćević, “Kako pripremiti izložbu” [How to Prepare an Exhibition], *Sam svoj majstor*, 7 (1985): 694.

an unrestricted, experimental or humorous form, as the aim is to encourage students to write the course assignments in a more relaxed manner. At the Knowledge Fair, which rests on the idea that everyone can be both a teacher and a student, the participants work in pairs and exchange their knowledge and impressions of exhibition typology. While one person expresses their perception of the exhibition format, the other notes it down using verbal concepts, drawings or diagrams. They then reverse the roles, and finally show their sketches and notes to other colleagues (Fig. 5). The simple, individualized implementation of the Fair's guidelines motivates students to use visual and verbal maps in the process of designing the exhibition program, which helps them define their own ideas and communicate them to others in an understandable and playful way, ignoring possible errors or differences in the levels of prior knowledge.

This type of applied teaching with group discussions, case studies and problem-solving in a real context that leans on the methods of participation and play, in addition to working with primary

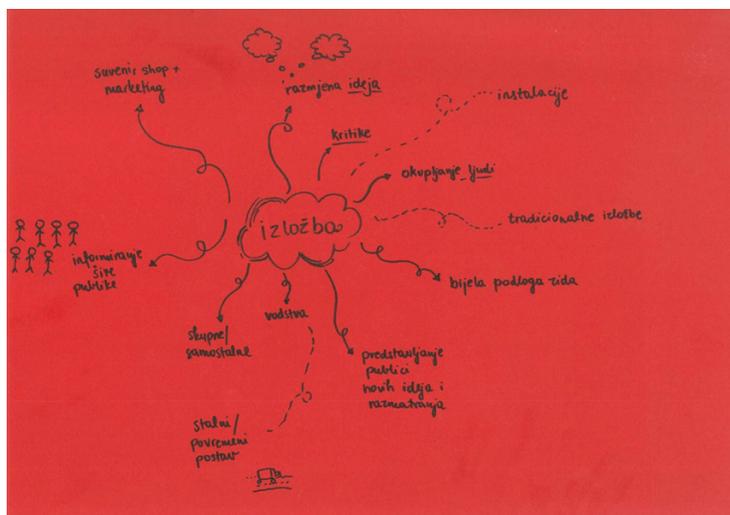


Fig 5. Students' sketch for *Knowledge Fair* around the notion of the exhibition, 2023.

sources – museum material and protagonists of the art scene (curators, artists, producers and others) – points to the advantages of conducting the art history course on the Museum's premises. In an actual setting, rather than in imaginary and often idealized contexts, students are presented with real working conditions. They get to see unarranged exhibits and storeroom spaces, and learn more about the technical and production aspects of a particular type of exhibition. The content of the course and the space in which it is delivered thus become inseparable. Such experiential learning offers students the chance to interact with artworks, their materiality, and spatial requirements. In addition to thirty hours of lectures and exercises, the course also includes fifteen hours of professional practice. The practice offers an insight into the invisible and often abstract aspects of the museum work: the students learn about artwork acquisition and documentation, as well as ways in which artworks are stored, exhibited and presented. As a specific activity within the professional practice, I should mention a workshop intended for other graduate students of art history, as well as for students of the Academy of Applied Arts, in which they learn how to hold guided tours for a younger audience. The workshop titled *Students for Students* addresses the following questions: how to speak more clearly about contemporary art, and how to apply the art history terminology in an actual context, so that it resonates with visitors? After the guided tour led by the museum staff, students get the opportunity to have a try at it themselves: they perform this task behind closed doors, in order to adapt the exhibition rhetoric to their own language and reduce the stage fright before speaking in public. To feel more comfortable, students do this in pairs, making the experience more dynamic for the audience as well. Instead of being passive listeners, the audience is encouraged to engage in an open discussion and ask specific questions about the artworks and motives for the exhibition.

THE QUEST FOR AN EXTENDED METHODOLOGY OF WORK

The course *Museum and Gallery Practice* focuses on the contemporary institutional practice and exhibition discourse. The students learn about models of curatorial work within the real context and personal experience. These models are compared with the canonized examples of curatorial practice, as well as with less known, regional programs of experimental nature. The selected examples are not shown in a linear, chronological manner but in a way that follows specific topics and allows comparison. All this helps students understand specific phenomena of the contemporary art scene. The content of the course, which is open for refinement and modification, was created with reference to similar international programs and curatorial courses, in which I have personally participated. The process also included conversations with colleagues and students about the possibilities and limitations of curatorial work, as well as the shortcomings of traditional teaching of art history. The key question posed here is: “What is good to know when you start working as a curator?” This question approaches the curatorial role on a practical level, as opposed to the state exams which mostly cover the legal and documentation aspects of institutional employment. The lectures – which explore the popularization of the curatorial profession, as well as the topics of artist-curator relationships, changes in exhibition standards, typology and methods of working with the collection and the public, and the writing of exhibition texts and displaying of works in public spaces – are arranged in a spiral manner. The spiral curriculum, which, according to Kerry Freedman, is best suited for teaching visual culture, relies on the repetition of related concepts, which enables a better understanding and deepens the complexity of the content.¹⁰

¹⁰) Skender, *Vizualna kultura kao nova paradigma poučavanja likovne umjetnosti*, 165–166.

One of the field exercises that students perform orally is called *Surprise me!* In the exercise, the students select two works of art from the website in order to draw a comparison between them later, when they see the same works in an exhibition. They can make notes which they can use as a guide, with keywords to determine the similarities and differences between the works and to describe what was different about seeing the actual artwork compared to seeing it online. In this assignment, students learn to identify related patterns in artworks, and develop visual and conceptual associations. The assignment is also useful as an aid in the evaluation of the exhibition itself, as the students observe the way the topic is articulated and how the artwork is displayed and arranged. The students have the chance to practice observation and to form connections between the process of looking and the way the artwork is arranged and represented, bearing also in mind the wider cultural and political context in which the exhibition is created.

Although some of the assignments are more popular than others, the students' reactions to classes and exercises are generally good, as demonstrated by their active participation in classes. In the first several hours, to make the students more comfortable and "break the ice", I try to talk about the course structure, presenting my own schooling and experience. After reading some examples, the students write their biographies in a descriptive rather than factual form, expressing their interests and goals. In this task, they can combine actual facts with fictional elements, responding to the question of where they see their career in a couple of years. Thus, to eliminate the students' discomfort about their "blank" CVs, I encourage them to speculate about their future work and instruct them on how to submit proposals for future public calls. From time to time, when I see that their attention falters and they start "scrolling"

on their mobile phones, I introduce certain “micro” activities to “wake them up” and bring their focus back on track. The instructions I give them are aimed at reversing the standard roles and models of reception, for example: present the artwork through pantomime, observe and analyze the behavior of visitors in front of a particular exhibit, present the concept of an artwork to a colleague imagining that he or she is a neighbor who has nothing to do with art. My favorite exercise, which encourages the students to write an exhibition text, focuses not only on the works of fine art, but also on the works from popular culture, created over the past hundred years. Students have to place the written analysis of the work in a sociopolitical, cultural and historical context, but also express a personal attitude by answering the question: Which work do you “feel at home” with?¹¹ This exercise helps the students gain perspective, elaborate on their ideas and maintain thematic precision and consistency, since the text has to be short (approximately 500 words, without quotations). The idea of “feeling at home with” seems suitable because it generates multiple meanings and different interpretations, instead of idealized assumptions.

The “grand finale”, i.e., the final work, is a curatorial proposal, made in writing, which we discuss together – from basic concepts and visual maps to the final text, which often ends up being quite different from the initial idea. The students prepare the final work in accordance with the guidelines of public calls in Croatia, which we also cover in the classes. The proposal includes a description of motivation and topic, an explanation of its importance and specificity, and an exhibition concept, accompanied with related examples and references. Special attention is paid to working with the public, including

11) Similar instructions provided by the book and website “Wicked Art Assignments”, accessed July 15, 2023, <https://www.wickedartsassignments.com/>.

the explication of accompanying activities, exhibition aids and types of exhibition publications. Students are free to choose the format of the program they are presenting (exhibition, film festival, workshops, interventions in public spaces and others), as well as the methodology and material, but it is important that the means and purpose of the program, including its space and audience, are clearly defined. This is the part that we discuss thoroughly in classes, as it is subject to changes. The aim is to expand the typology of curatorial work and possible places of its realization, with interesting outcomes such as a dialogue-based exhibition with students of the Academy and renowned artists of the older generation in the Student Cultural Centre, or a series of art interventions on Rijeka's beaches intended for the younger audience. An integral part of the final work is a self-interview in which students assume the role of their own critic, discussing the challenging points of their proposal, and potential weak spots. In this short text, they reflect on their own role as curators, looking back on their own experience and work process. I find this part of the assignment very important because it offers a valuable insight into the challenges and obstacles the students faced.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

To sum up, in teaching I rely on participatory teaching and experiential learning, encouraging students to navigate real situations and limitations and solve problems, which is the very definition of creativity.¹² Debates, group work and re-examination of traditional binary schemes also play an essential

12) Axel Wieder, "Pedagogies of Open Form: Oskar Hansen and the Politics of Collective Space," in *Creativity Exercises: Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond*, 230.

role. I am preoccupied with the questions of how to present the conditions in which exhibitions and viewing take place as the subject of the course and at the same time avoid predictable, all-too-familiar solutions. More and more I see the need for a flexible yet structured approach, with practical assignments that help students learn how to begin their work and at the same time avoid falling into the trap of conventional thinking and obvious narratives. Perfecting and testing the models of teaching is a never-ending process, and this text is just an opportunity to examine what has been done so far. As the advocates of an open form of teaching say: "If we suppose that people possess unknown, suppressed, unused capabilities, the next step is to try to eliminate, or at least impair, the inhibiting elements. In other words, to say we are developing the imaginative faculty means not to realize that in fact we are developing nothing. When we crack open a walled-up treasure chamber, we are not adding to the treasure supposedly within; when we see something inside shining through the cracks, we feel all the more inclined to bring that wall down."¹³

13) Miklós Erdély, "Creativity and Fantasy Developing Exercises, 1976–78," in *Creativity Exercises: Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond*, 103.

The paper was translated by Lidija Toman in 2023.

