

Gabriele Stöger

EROS - AN UNCONVENTIONAL MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

The idea

"Eros" is a thematic mediation programme for adults at selected Federal museums and galleries in Vienna. It is special for combining the use of the organizational structures of VHS and the applied methods in museums. It is also a remarkable fact that the team consists solely of free contract workers, who are neither employees of a museum nor of any other educational institution. The programme was developed in cooperation with the Bureau of Cultural Mediation following the intention of making the treasures stored in these museums more accessible to new sections of the public. Museums should not be places which can be used only by specialists. We regard them as storehouses of social experience and cultural achievements which should be available to all.

The themes of "Eros", "Power and Weakness" and "Violence" were chosen so that everyone has something to say about them. Instead of passively being taught, visitors unaccustomed to museums are enabled by this approach to make active enquiries.

The participants

The project is primarily addressed to people who seldom if ever go into a museum because they have never felt that they had anything in common with museums, and the museums did nothing to disabuse them. Museums and galleries, like other institutions, play according to certain rules. Anyone wanting to join in has to have an interest in doing so, which must first be aroused. The number of participants is therefore restricted to 9 per group.

People who do not go to museums usually have a reason for not doing so. It is difficult to motivate them to have anything to do with an activity that they usually find they have enjoyed when they have done it, but which is not cheap. In order to reach "non-visitors", some organizational effort is required, part of which can be contributed by a community adult education centre.

The places

The "*EigenArt/museum*" team has worked so far in the permanent collections of the following Federal museums: the Museum of Art History, the Art Gallery of the Academy of Fine Art and the Army Museum.

So that the visits are manageable, certain sections of these comprehensive collections are selected to suit the themes mentioned above. For the "Eros" programme, the Museum of Art History is chosen, because here "man's view of woman" predominates, while "man's view of himself" can be seen at the Army Museum. What is still missing in museums is "woman's view of herself and of men".

The methods

In order to encourage a true dialogue between the participants and the guide, and among the participants, a theme, objects and questions are chosen which set people "looking" for things among the exhibits.

To begin with, every participant is asked to say a few words about himself or herself, and what he or she expects from the evening. This introduction helps to create an atmosphere of greater trust for the next stage; without such an atmosphere, non-verbal interaction and discussion of very personal matters are impossible.

Then their "senses are awakened" by touching objects that are soft, rough or smooth with their eyes covered, by smelling different aromas, by hearing sounds and by tasting fruits: flowers, silk, money, stones, mussels, fur, net gloves, a string of pearls, rattles, bells, and so on. This done, they are asked to find a picture, without thinking too long about it, that most closely fits with the strongest impression they gained from the senses exercise. The group looks at these pictures together and discusses how the connection came about: was it by association, an object, a painting technique, a general effect?

After a short break, participants look at a picture that we have selected to fit the theme: Tintoretto's "Susanna at her bath", Correggio's "Jupiter and Io", Parmigianino's "Amor cutting a bow" or Titian's "Nymph and shepherd".

Men and women are divided into separate groups for one task connected with the way the sexes view each other. Women look for a picture which they think will have an erotic effect on men, and men look for a picture they think will have an erotic effect on women. The pictures are then discussed. It often appears that women have to be naked to get into an art gallery. Erotic men, on the other hand, are hard to find. Devotion and nakedness are found at most in Saint Sebastian or Christ on the cross. It looks as though nakedness first of all means weakness.

This point is taken up again at the second meeting in the Army Museum. The opening question is: What makes a man strong? And what makes him vulnerable? Participants are once more sent looking for things, this time in a museum that illustrates the history of the Austrian monarchy and sets out to demonstrate strength and success.

The effect

Cultural education means finding relationships in this context, relating the subject (the viewer) to the object, and subject to subject. The methods, which are sometimes provocative, help in various ways to establish contacts: with pictures that one might not have noticed on one's own, with ways of looking at them which one would not have arrived at on one's own, with the impressions and associations of the other participants, and not least with oneself. The museum is thus no longer a place where visitors have nothing to say about a picture just because they do not know when the painter was born.

The organization

The project was not developed at the behest of a museum or adult education institution, but was carried out by an independent team and offered to the institutions from outside. Grants were received from the Adult Education Department of the Federal Ministry of Education, but these did not by any means cover the costs of planning and preparation. It is far harder to reach adult groups than schoolchildren or young people, and a considerable amount of administrative work is necessary in order to win over the target audience, besides the planning of a project. The first groups with whom we worked were trade union members. In order to achieve lasting effects there should be a more constant cooperation between adult education and museums, or better, the cultural mediators.

The budget

Lacking the institutional frame the programme is now offered - only from time to time, not regularly - through the community adult education centre, although the hourly rates paid to tutors are well below the full cost. The team of free contract workers are paid for the hours actually spent in a museum with a group, but not for travel, preparation or materials. If such an institution were not involved, on the other hand, participants themselves would have to pay for the programme, which is expensive because of the human involvement. Museums have so far not shared any of the cost, but do grant free admission to the groups with whom we are working.

Team

EigenArt/museum consists of four persons, and works as an independent group not tied to any museum or gallery: Susanna Gruber, Anna Petschinka (both art teachers), Walter Stach (former art teacher, now Bureau of Cultural Mediation) and Gabriele Stöger (freelance art educator). Last year the group was awarded the Ludwig Sackmauer Prize for Adult Education for its work.

About the author: Dr. Gabriele Stöger works by free contract as cultural mediator in several projects, she is regional coordinator for the Socrates project in Vienna, president of the Austria association of Cultural Mediators in Museums and Exhibitions.

Contact address: Team EigenArt/museum, c/o Dr Gabriele Stöger, Schellhamnergasse
10/2/9, A-1180 Vienna