Young people and contemporary art – four preconditions for learning in art galleries

- Author: Illeris, Helene (illeris@dpu.dk), The Danish University of Education, Educational Anthropology
- Presenter: Helene Illeris, The Danish University of Education

Abstract:

In this paper I use empirical examples to try to connect theories about young people, contemporary art forms and learning. In the first part of the paper, I will introduce the new forms of consciousness which, according to the youth researchers Birgitte Simonsen and Thomas Ziehe, characterizes young people of today. In the second section, I will connect the qualities of contemporary art forms experienced by young people to the theories of the French art critic Nicholas Borriaud regarding “relational aesthetics”. Finally, in the third part of the paper, I will introduce four preconditions for learning, which were experienced as positive by the young people included in my material: “The hook”, “the experience of otherness”, “social interaction” and “metareflection”.

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YOUNG PEOPLE AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Helene Illeris, Associate Professor, Ph.D., The Danish University of Education

Introduction: “The Perfect Audience”

Even though trying to get something productive out of the artworks seemed overwhelming at first, it actually became really interesting when you forgot to use your common sense for a while and just let your thoughts take over. You just can’t compare contemporary art to the art we are used to. You don’t know whether the work is meant to be interpreted or whether you just have to let it be what it is. I mean, it’s entirely up to the individual what they can or will get out of it. It depends completely on the individual human being’s attitudes and morals and there is no simple answer.

Dina, 3.g.

This quote is taken from an essay written by an upper secondary school student in 1996 when she and her classmates participated in a project called “Out of Form” at the Arken Museum of Modern Art located south of Copenhagen. In this project three upper secondary school classes, comprising 75 students aged 16-19, were invited by three museum educators to participate in a four-week long “dialogue” with an exhibition of 13 works by young contemporary artists. Through intensive work including group discussions, essay writing, dialogues with three of the artists behind the works and discussions of selected texts written by young critics and artists, the students were able to engage in a number of ways with Danish contemporary art. Furthermore, the students visited the museum on several occasions, including the opening of the exhibition, and thereby learned about the functioning of the museum and the social construction of the “art world”.

Although they were the instigators of the project, the three museum educators had some reservations about the idea of working with teenagers, because they were afraid that the young people might be too “unfocused, self-centered and indifferent” to appreciate “the intricate world of art” (Fandrup 1997:2). When the four weeks were over, all of the educators’ initial reservations had vanished. They were enthusiastic about the way the students had approached the artworks, the artists and the project as a whole. With reference to the attitudes of the students towards the works in the exhibition, one of the educators states:

Above all they are simply better at looking – at opening up their eyes and staring. They are good at grasping it all. No details escape their glance; nothing is spared in their comments. A skill, which probably has always been at its best in the teenage years: observing slight differences, perceiving the smallest new things. Teenagers wear zoom glasses all the time and this gives them perfect opportunities to see art [...] They dare to do something that is a challenge to other museum visitors: they dare to express their opinions.

And she concludes:
Contemporary art is an obvious theme for debate and discussion of our culture and world, our expectations for life and our possibilities – how we should act in the complex contemporary world. Go and see it with young people. They are as close as you can get to the perfect audience (Fandrup 1997:2-3. My emphasis)

Even though in my experience involving groups of teenagers in projects about contemporary art is not always as unproblematic as seems be the case from the statements above, the educator’s words suggest some very interesting possibilities and perspectives for the relationship between contemporary art and young people. In this article I will attempt to delve deeper into these perspectives by using examples from my own research on 14-15-year-old students’ encounters with works of contemporary art (Illeris 1999a, 1999b). In addition, I will quote data and discussions from the first report published in connection with another Danish project, “Contemporary Art and Young People”, which was initiated by the Egmont Foundation in 2002 (Hjort and Larsen 2003).

The question guiding my discussions and examples will be this: Is there a particular affinity between the “new forms of consciousness” that characterize young people of today and the way contemporary art interacts with the audience? And what kinds of preconditions do young people need to enhance positive learning experiences in these interactions?

As a starting point for taking a closer look at these questions, it may be useful to turn once again to the initial quote from Dina’s essay. Dina makes the following observations about her experience with the museum project:

1. The encounter with contemporary works of art becomes interesting when you forget to make sense out of it.
2. Contemporary art is different from the art we are used to. The artwork gives you no information about how to approach it.
3. Your sense of personal attitudes and morals determines what you can or will get out of interactions with such artworks.

I will use these three observations as points of departure for this article by connecting them to recent theories about young people, contemporary art forms and learning. In the first part of the article, I will connect Dina’s third point about personal attitudes and morals to the new forms of consciousness which, according to the youth researchers Birgitte Simonsen and Thomas Ziehe, characterizes young people of today. In the second section, I will connect Dina’s point about the qualities of contemporary art forms to the theories of the French art critic Nicholas Borriaud regarding “relational aesthetics”. Finally, in the third section, I will connect Dina’s first point about when the artworks become interesting to four preconditions for learning, which were experienced as positive by the young people included in the material: “The hook”, “the experience of otherness”, “social interaction” and “metareflection”.

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New Young People – New Forms of Consciousness

I mean, it’s entirely up to the individual what they can or will get out of it. It depends completely on the individual human being’s attitudes and morals and there is no simple answer.

A common understanding is that the term “young people” denotes a certain period of human life, which starts around the age of puberty at 11-13 years and finishes more or less when one has established an independent adult life, with a personal economy, work, a home and maybe a family (Illeris et. al. 2002:11). However, in modern Western society, being defined as a young person has paradoxical socially and culturally constructed implications which go far beyond traditional biological and sociological definitions of youth. For example, in discourses produced by the mass media, “youth” is very often construed as an overwhelmingly attractive state of being, where you are “in the prime of your life”, easy going, open minded and free from the mental and societal restrictions which characterize older persons. In contrast, in discourses produced by more traditional authorities such as teachers, parents, and politicians, young people are more likely to be positioned in a negative and childish role as being irresponsible, irresolute, unfocused, naïve, problematic and not yet capable of handling their own lives (op.cit.:17-18).

The young people themselves tend to handle such contradictory understandings through the construction of complex and reflective discourses about their personal situation, needs and inner life. Young people of today are aware that they are in a transitional phase, but in contrast with earlier times they are not sure that the transition will ever come to an end. Many of them know from experience that almost everything in your life, including partners, jobs and homes can quite easily be changed throughout your life. In consequence, today’s young people seem to be used to the idea that different lifestyles, tastes, jobs and sexuality and identity constructions exist side by side and that it is up to them to choose among a huge variety of role models (Simonsen 2000, Illeris et. al. 2002).

The German psychologist Thomas Ziehe summarizes some of these tendencies by defining today’s young people as “culturally liberated”. In his work in the 1980s (Ziehe 1989, Ziehe and Stubenrauch 1981) Ziehe tried to understand how this “liberation” helped form a “new form of consciousness” among young people. In his books Ziehe discusses the broader implications of the fact that whereas former generations were aware of the cultural and societal constraints e.g. of gender and social classes, the “new young people” born in the seventies and later believe that differences between people are mainly an individual question of personality. As confirmed by Danish research, young people in today’s complex world express a new and persistent awareness about “being true to themselves” and they are very afraid of losing their individuality e.g. by following majority decisions or by adopting the views of others (Simonsen 2000). The ability to perform choices which “feel right” at this moment according to my perception of “me” is experimented with all the time and is perceived by young people as being extremely important, because “the responsibility for how your life turns out has to a far greater
extent become a personal matter. You have only yourself to blame when something goes wrong” (Illeris et al. 2002:23).

When Dina states that dealing with a work of contemporary art “depends completely on the individual human being’s attitudes and morals”, she therefore can be said to employ a central discourse from “the new form of consciousness”. If the work of art has no fixed solution and it is up to you whether you can or will get something out of it, you have to rely on your strongest competency: your personal attitudes and morals. Whereas older theories of aesthetic experience dealt with how the viewer could perceive and understand the intention of the artist, the charisma of the artwork, the meaning of art or other more generalized factors, today’s youngsters talk about their individual experiences: about when it feels right and about their personal sense of choice – “will I and can I engage in this experience?”

Example: “Cyclops Cameo”
On important result of my research on 14-15-year-old students in their encounters with works of contemporary art was that the young people employed a broad repertoire of well-known “codes” from the cultural discourses of Western modernity when telling about how they experienced “Cyclops Cameo” by the British artist Helen Chadwick (Fig. 1). I have conceptualized these codes as “the psychological code”, “the ethical code”, “the code of form”, and “the code of fine arts” (Illeris 1999a, 1999b). Surprisingly, these codes existed side by side in a very unproblematic way, mutually understood and respected among the students. The fact that one student related his experience of the artwork to his personal feelings using a psychological code did not at all disturb his classmate, who related to the same artwork through a discussion of the moral problems of putting a picture of a deformed fetus on display, while another student emphasized a formalistic question of colors and shapes and yet another posed the sticky question “is this art?”. Furthermore, several students underlined the fact that they preferred to hear about each others’ experiences than what the educator had to say. They thereby expressed a preference for multiple approaches to art, which allowed each one of them to be true to his or her own personal experience and position while respecting and exploring those of their peers.

New Art - New Aesthetic Approaches

You just can’t compare contemporary art to the art we are used to. You don’t know whether the work is meant to be interpreted or whether you just have to let it be what it is.

During the last decades there has been a significant shift in the art world from a prevalence of artworks inscribed in modernist aesthetics to an increasingly intense focus on art as social settings inscribed in a different form of aesthetics, which the French critic Nicholas Borriaud has conceptualized as “relational” (Borriaud 1997).
While the modernist artwork can be described as a self-enclosed object imbued with a very special aura or charisma which the viewer is expected to absorb through a receptive and contemplative attitude, the kinds of work Borriaud describes do not consist of circumscribed objects intended to be looked at, but of experiences to engage in. The “viewer” of the modernist work is replaced by a “participant” in a relationship that is somehow initiated by the artwork, but which can ideally develop in any direction the participant may wish. The artwork thereby ceases to operate as a “monument” of grandeur and uniqueness and instead becomes what Borriaud tentatively defines as an “in-between” – an invitation to take a break from “normal” instrumentalized experiences and to experiment with different social forms of communication (ibid.:29). Furthermore, while the modernist artwork is made to be experienced in museums and galleries of modern art built as silent, white temples, relational aesthetics is for the most part intended to be experienced outside traditional institutional frames or through a complete transformation of these, for example, by changing a museum hall into a bar or an office.

In recent decades more and more young artists have been working with strategies that adhere to the idea of relational aesthetics. Following in the footsteps of avant-garde art, from Dadaism in the thirties to Situationism in the seventies, events like the “platforms”7 by the Argentinean artist Rikrit Tiravanija or the social interventions in a living quarter by the Danish group CUDI8 have challenged the modernist understanding of the work of art. The difference between relational aesthetics and classical avant-garde lies mainly in the fact that while the classical avant-gardists believed that their performances and happenings were at the forefront in the constitution of new utopian realities, the intentions of the contemporary art forms, according to Borriaud, are more humbly “to develop forms of existence or models of action within the existing reality, on whatever scale that might be” (Borriaud 1997:28).

My data includes several examples of how young people prefer to engage in encounters with art as active participants rather than passive viewers. Performances, installation art, video- and computer art are preferred to traditional art forms by a significant number of the 14-15-year-old students in my questionnaires and interviews9. The report from the Egmont project confirms the same tendency among upper secondary school students:

*Already in connection with their first visit to an exhibition the young peoples’ approach to the artworks – seen from an “adult perspective” – was surprisingly open, engaged and positive, and their relationship to the mixed media employed by art (picture, sound, video etc) apparently was absolutely natural. Contemporary art seems to be the students’ ‘natural element’ (Hjort and Larsen 2003:10).*

**Example: “Witness”**

In 2003 I visited an exhibition of contemporary artworks in Roskilde near Copenhagen with a class of 12-13-year-old students, many of them with foreign backgrounds such as Turkish and Moroccan10. The students were especially engaged in their experiences with one of the artworks, an installation piece called “Witness” by the American artist Susan Hiller. Witness was placed in an old abolished church, which became part of the installation. It consisted in a large number of tiny loudspeakers hung down in wires from
the ceiling in an almost dark room (Fig. 2). When visitors picked up one of the loudspeakers and held it to their ear, they heard a voice speaking to them about a personal experience of a supernatural phenomenon. The voices spoke in many different languages – possibly a language the visitor understood, but most often a foreign, unintelligible language.

Almost everybody in the class was enthusiastic about the artwork. During the visit the students, with all of their different cultural backgrounds and spoken languages, were very engaged in relating to the speaking voices: While listening to the loudspeakers they called each other to listen to the stories which were told in their mother tongue, and they spent a long time following the narratives. After the visit they reported that participating in the experience of Witness had given them a much more positive attitude towards art. The students emphasized their strong reactions to the artwork, talking both about their individual feelings and about the social qualities of the experience. They all agreed that this kind of exhibition was much more exiting to visit than looking at “normal pictures” in museums.

New Encounters – New preconditions for learning

According to Simonsen a consequence of young peoples’ new forms of consciousness is a break with the problems of education and learning which have prevailed in recent decades. Whereas teachers used to fight against a passive attitude among students, today’s young people are prepared to be active and to take control of their own learning processes:

Earlier, teachers tried to get the younger generation to take on responsibility for their own learning. The difficulty was in breaking down a passive and expectant attitude to the teaching situation which was an obstacle to border-crossing teaching. Today pupils are actually taking responsibility for their own learning. They regard it as their own fault if they do not succeed in something and think that they should manage it all themselves. When this observation is combined with the lack of compromise in choice of interest, a picture is drawn of a generation that is in the process of taking on responsibility for a completely new structure of independence and responsibility […] (Simonsen 2000:149).

From the point of view of the constructivist approaches to learning that have dominated theories of museum education for the last 10-20 years (e.g. Hein 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 1999, Falk and Dierking 2000) the awareness of young people towards their own learning processes should be understood in positive terms: Through highly reflective processes of choosing according to intrinsic motivation and personal interests the young people ensure
that they do not “waste time” on things that do not make them feel involved or that do not feel 100% relevant to their personal learning process.

The other side of the coin can be found in an extremely critical attitude towards more traditional and authoritative ways of teaching. This attitude is exemplified by some of the quotations in the report prepared for the Egmont Foundation, in which the upper secondary school students’ “[…] strongly expressed aversion towards what might be called the “schoolification” of art and “art as assessment” (Hjort and Larsen 2003:6).

Comments from the report included the following:

*Then we went around to take a look at the artworks you know, and then she presented us with an… an analysis and an interpretation just like that, bang, bang, bang…this what it is about. This is what the artist thought. And it was, you know, it was almost like…sitting in…in class…It was just plain teaching, there was no, “What do you think?”* (Sofie, 2.g, in: Hjort and Larsen 2003:6)

*An exciting and inspiring exhibition always ends in a heavy discussion, and my fascination collapses under the weight of super-intelligent and generalizing interpretations of well-known forms […]* (Anonymous, 2.g, in: Hjort and Larsen 2003:9)

When the students talk positively about their experiences at the exhibitions, most of them emphasize the possibility of experiencing the artworks in a personal rather than an intellectualized manner – in Dina’s words: “[letting] your thoughts take over”. Based on the material from the different projects, I have distinguished four preconditions that seem to have contributed in a positive way to the experience of the young people and thereby to their learning processes. I term these aspects “the hook”, “the experience of otherness”, “social interaction”, and “metareflection”. All of these can be understood within a constructivist framework, as preconditions for the construction of one’s own learning.

**The hook**

In their article about intrinsic motivation and flow experience Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Kim Hermanson (1999) talk about the first capturing of a museum visitor’s curiosity as “the hook”. They describe the hook as a combination of “contextual stimuli that attract attention” and “stimuli that appeal to prior personal interest”, which indicates a combination of emotional and cognitive attractions.

Many of the young people included in the material are very sensitive towards the possibility of getting hooked by the immediate experience of the artworks. They look for artworks that will catch them right away, mainly through emotional attractions:

*Um… I don’t know, well, I want it to grab me right away, and then that it should… I want it to connect with me. Because if it doesn’t, I don’t like it.* (Hanne, 15 years old)

*When I entered the dark room I could feel it right away. My imagination ran wild, it was doing 110 and my soul, which had been poor, felt rich. It was almost nothing less than a miracle.* (Anonymous, 2.g., in: Hjort and Larsen 2003:12).
According to Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (op.cit.:147), getting hooked is a precondition for intrinsically motivated learning where students do not engage in the process in order to obtain some external reward, but rather for the pleasure of the process itself.

**Experiencing otherness**

As stated by Nicholas Borriaud, an important function of relational aesthetics is to give an unusual break from everyday life that allows for participation in different social forms of communication. It may therefore be possible for contemporary art to constitute an alternative to young people’s self-centered attitudes in a positive way they can accept by challenging their intuitive conceptions of normality (Ziehe 1989:36). By introducing a positive element of “otherness” (Illeris 1999a,b), works of contemporary art may constitute what Ziehe calls a “productive state of emergency” (Ziehe 1997:34). This makes the audience, in Dina’s words, “[forget their] common sense for a while” and adopt a curious and sensitive attitude:

*In the encounter with art I never try hard to make perfect sense of it, I sort of let myself ‘glide’ along with it while an impression is formed and my imagination – not my rationality – runs wild.* (Anonymous, 2.g, in: Hjort and Larsen 2003:7)

To me, some art is not just pictorial; it can start a lot of thoughts in my head. It can bring forth different emotions in me like happiness, hate, love, just start some thoughts, which are not always there. (Anonymous, 1.g, in: Hjort and Larsen 2003:13)

According to Ziehe (1997) the confrontation with experiences that are very different from the daily, self-reflective routine is a necessary preconception for young people if they are to learn how to handle unusual situations without turning away with the usual “it doesn’t mean anything me”

**Social interaction**

Relational aesthetics considers the audience not as viewers, but as active participants in a relationship. One could say that relational aesthetics is “educational” by nature, because it aims at making the audience explore different kinds of experiences and meaning making (Illeris 2004). To young people, experiences with contemporary works of art seem to give further meaning when, after they have got their first individual impression, the experience was discussed and reflected on in a peer group. In fact, many of the students included in the material emphasize that learning with peers formed an important part of their experience. For example, in their essays about their museum visits two girls, one from grade 10 and one from upper secondary school, write:

*The other exhibition we went to see, Sunday Morning Walk, gave a first impression of confusion and boredom. But after we made a description of the art it turned out to be really fascinating. I was in a group with two other girls and we described the first three artworks with the candles, it became more interesting, but the exhibition with the watches was the most interesting because it was described in a good way* (Lotte, 16 years old)
In my group we spent half an hour on brainstorming on our own and after that we told each other about it. It wasn’t long before the arguments were whirling around in our small group. Could it be so hard to analyze a work of art? Yes it could. When six young people analyze in six different ways.

[...] I have gained a lot of new knowledge from spending hours working on one work of art, not just from the artist, but also from the others in my group.

(Caroline, 3. g)

Constructivist theories of learning in museums emphasize the importance of the sociocultural contexts as preconditions for learning (Falk & Dierking 2000). In relation to contemporary art, working in peer groups seems to assume particular importance because, as noticed by Dina, there is no “right” way of approaching the artworks.

Metareflection

I have used the term “metareflection” to define the process of reflecting on one’s own position as a learner, thereby asking the question “could I learn differently, e.g. by approaching the artwork from another audience position?” (Illeris 2002a, 2002b). As an alternative to verbally-based interactions, I have experimented with different preconditions for metareflective learning through alternative forms of group work, both when teaching teenagers and when teaching university students. Inspired by relational aesthetics and theories of performance the groups have worked with forms of interaction such as “appropriation” of artistic strategies or performative “staging” of relationships in front of a camera (Illeris 2003, 2004). By being involved both bodily and visually in questions about their own social position as audience and as learners, the young people were given alternative opportunities to engage in the kind of learning processes they value: processes whereby they can make their own choices, be “true to themselves”, but at the same time experience otherness and social interaction with their peers.

Exit: what about those who do not “crack the code”?

Being hooked, experiencing otherness, participating in social exchanges and engaging in metareflective processes of learning seem to underline all the positive learning experiences that young people have in their encounters with contemporary art, and most of the students statements’ seem to confirm my initial hypothesis about the existence of a particular affinity between the “new forms of consciousness” that characterize young people today and the way contemporary art interacts with the audience. However, as Hjort and Larsen conclude, not all young people can be characterized as “the perfect audience”. In their report they point to the fact that students from privileged social and cultural backgrounds seem to achieve the most advanced learning results. Instead of equalizing the students, the Egmont Foundation project\(^{16}\) seems to have emphasized social differences in its first year:

The students’ different cultural and social backgrounds are, as mentioned, significant factors in all school subjects, but the significance might be even greater when working with the theme of (contemporary) art. Because of the complex and open ended character
of art it can, as described, function as a crystal ball that exposes the diversities of the audience (Hjort and Larsen 2003:21-22).

Observations like these point to an important challenge for educators who want to create the best preconditions for learning in encounters between young people and works of contemporary art. The fact that art appreciation is used as a social mark to distinguish between cultured and uncultured social classes (Bourdieu 1989) is still valid even though works of art have become “relational” and young people consider themselves to be “culturally liberated”. Relating to artworks is demanding, both personally and culturally. Therefore, it is extremely important that educators interact with young people not as a unified and “perfect” audience, but as individuals, all of whom should be given the best opportunities to learn by exploring many different forms of individual experiences and social interaction in their relationships with works of contemporary art.

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Notes:

1 All translations of Danish quotations into English are my own.

2 The Danish upper secondary school (gymnasium) comprises three grades, called 1.g., 2.g., and 3.g. in Danish. Most students enter when they are 16 and finish when they are 19 years old.

3 Examples are also used from unpublished material that I have produced in connection both with this project and with my ongoing research project “Contemporary Art, Learning and Bildung” (2002-2005) at the Danish University of Education. The material consists of essays written by students, observation notes and transcripts from interviews. More precise information can be found in the notes at relevant places in the article.

4 This project runs from 2002-2005 and involves four upper secondary school classes from four different schools in Copenhagen and four museums and galleries. Through frequent visits to exhibitions with works of contemporary art one aim of the project is to “strengthen the sense and understanding of contemporary art among upper secondary school students” (www.samkunst.dk). This report is the first of three planned evaluation reports and is focused on the learning processes of young people (Hjort and Larsen 2003:4). The
The report is based on empirical data from questionnaires, observations, dialogues with the students and the teachers, group interviews and essays written by the students (ibid.:5-6).

5 Helen Chadwick: “Cyclops Cameo”, 1995. The artwork consists of a circular canvas, 150 centimeters in diameter, painted in a grey and yellow striped pattern. At the very center of the canvas is a circular photograph, illuminated from behind, showing a deformed fetus with only one blind eye in the middle of his face. The artwork was chosen as the focus of the analysis because nearly all of the students talked about it in the interviews – most of them as an example of a piece they did not like.

6 Transcripts from qualitative interviews conducted with seven 14-15-year-old students in May and June 1997 on their experiences with two guided visits at exhibitions with contemporary art.

7 Rirkrit Tiravanija was born in 1961 in Buenos Aires. Tiravanija’s name is often connected to the concept of the platform. A platform is an artwork conceived as an open space or a room where the audience is invited to participate, interact or “just be” (Albrechtsen 2004:8). When visiting Tiravanija’s works, the public is often invited to eat, cook and sleep, or just to “chill out” in pleasant surroundings.

8 C.U.D.I. - Center of Urban Culture, Dialogue and Information was established in the immigrant district of Vollmose in 2000. The two artists, Lasse Lau and Lise Schou, rented an apartment in one of the houses and thereby created a platform from which they organized more than 10 artistic events in which residents were invited to participate.

9 In a questionnaire filled by … young people aged … … per cent indicate that the prefer contemporary art forms to traditional art forms [not finished]

10 I participated in this visit as an observer, making notes that form a minor part of the body of empirical material for my project “Contemporary Art, Learning and Bildung” (2002-2005) at the Danish University of Education.

11 See note 6

12 This is one of the most frequent expressions used by young people in my interviews and observation notes.

13 Falk and Dierking discuss the fact that communities such as school groups contribute significantly to learning, and that among children’s “peer teaching” in smaller groups is the preferred form of approaching museum learning (Falk and Dierking 2000:102-103).

14 Essay written by a 16-year-old girl after her visit to the Brandts Klædefabrik gallery of modern art, Odense, 1998.

15 Essay written as part of the project “Out of Form”, Arken Museum of Modern Art, 1997 (see the introductory chapter of this article).

16 See note 4.