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Tactile Picture Books in Art Education in Croatia

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Abstract

This article investigates a teacher education project that involved designing and producing a series of tactile picture books as part of the arts curriculum at the Department of Teacher Education Studies in Gospić, University of Zadar. Founded upon the ideals of inclusion and efforts to offer a holistic education for all children, the project aimed to heighten awareness amongst basic education university students to the particular requirements and needs of pupils with visual impairments and also to emphasize the important role of art as an intermedia experience of creation in the educational process. The project focused on participatory art making, involving a dynamic collaboration with special education teachers and librarians from the First Library for Children with Visual Impairments at Pećine Elementary School in Rijeka. Expanding perspectives and rethinking art practice students devised substantial collection picture books, addressing important social and educational issues through creative production. Realizing their tactile picture book projects as independent endeavors or initiating various kinds of collaborations, they were discovering art education as multilayered creative learning processes.

Introduction

Working at the Department of Teacher Education Studies in Gospić, dislocated from the main University Campus in Zadar, has both its advantages and disadvantages. It is a small department with around 170 students and 16 full time academic staff who are dispersed throughout various artistic or more often scientific disciplines. Perhaps by necessity, this means that teachers are often inclined to find associates for different projects outside of their own departments or even outside of the University. Provoked by what I saw as a serious lack of specialized tactile books and picture books for blind and visually impaired children, as well as their unavailability outside the main urban centers in Croatia, I decided to address the specific issue of discrimination through art education project. The arts education curriculum at teacher training studies in Croatia is generally quite traditional, lacking an interdisciplinary approach and a stronger interaction with the wider social context. By envisioning an art project that could introduce students to various art practices and at the same time, stimulate their understanding of the importance of art education in primary schooling, I initiated the design and production of a series of tactile picture books for children with visual impairments.

As a print-based artist and educator, with a long-term experience making artists' books, I was curious to explore the role and requirements of tactile picture books designated for children with specific disabilities. Having previously found that my own artistic and educational projects had benefitted significantly from collaboration with professionals from divergent fields of studies, I decided to initiate collaboration with librarian Tanja Šupe and special education Javorka Milković at the First Library for Children with Visual Impairments at Pećine Elementary School in Rijeka. This collaboration led to devoting an existing art course to creative practice research into the means and possibilities of handmade book production, over the course of two summer semesters in 2016 and 2017 at the Department for Teacher Studies in Gospić, University of Zadar. The project was conceived as a research laboratory of experimental artistic practices that intertwined text, image and objects, while exploring the means of mutual influences and moderations. The overarching aim of the project was to combat the considerable neglect of children with visual disabilities, through placing them, and their needs, at the center of practice-based research. The course participants were pre-service teachers of the Department, who decided to register to attend the course; out of 35 students enrolled per year, approximately 20 (in 2016) to 25 (in 2017) entered the course intrigued to participate in the project.

In the process of conceptualizing a participatory educational project, I could not avoid referencing Tania Brughera's *Cátedra Arte de Conducta /Behavior Art School* (conducted between 2002 and 2009), at the same time being very well aware of how her pioneering project to create a space for alternative art education differs from my experiment on many levels, both in the conception and the content of the project. First, my project does not assume

a complete art education; it refers to a single elective art course inside an already existing educational program. It does not try to revolutionize the program completely, but to improve it by trying to implement innovative practices. Second, we are not talking about educating artists, but training primary education teachers, striving to emphasize the importance of art in pedagogical practice. Interestingly, the project engages a population of pre-service teachers who were previously not particularly involved in the arts nor possessing particular artistic skills or knowledge, engaging them over a period of several months to reflect arts and special education issues aiming to study the results of the interactions. Nevertheless, while working inside the existing educational system, I made efforts to point out to the problems of educational institutions acting as “isolated laboratories where the safety of their structure can provide disengagement with the real challenges the professional world brings” (Brughera, 2006, para. 8) and made efforts to address those challenges with an interdisciplinary approach.

Approaching the phenomenon of visual arts as a complex, multisensory collaborative experience enabled me to introduce students to contemporary art practices, where the emphasis has shifted from the purely aesthetic features of a work to the concept and means of social communication. By placing the tactile picture book at the center of a small research laboratory of interdisciplinary practices, the art project inevitably “leaked out” of the formal/aesthetic/material field and, instead, vibrantly addressed educational and community issues and ethical responsibilities, thus introducing the social issues orientation of art and art education that is notably absent from art curricula of teacher training studies in Croatia. Instead of organizing a course as a research inside a single media framework - whether drawing, painting or sculpture - studying different techniques and means of expression, as customary within art courses of related studies in the country, the project’s intention was to indicate the need for a more extensive comprehension of art in educational processes. I was using tactile picture books as a platform for practice-based research and inquiries into the various functions of art in primary education. Founded upon the ideals of inclusion and efforts to offer a holistic education for all children, the project aimed to heighten awareness amongst students to the particular requirements and needs of pupils with visual impairments and also serve as a means to establish communication through specific non-visual narratives. It aspired to create the foundation of “a thinking structure and the modeling of sensibility that will prevail on someone’s life for a long time” (Brughera, 2006, para. 2). Our hypothesis was that it would affect students’ attitudes towards art pedagogy and encourage their own artistic and/or educational explorations in their future professional careers.

The first picture books for children with visual impairments in Croatia came out in the 1980s and the Croatian Blind Union continues to upgrade its collection of books for young children. However, regardless of the argument of complexity and high cost of such publications, the number of specialized picture books is exceptionally low (Šupe, 2011). The main authors of

tactile picture books are still special education teachers and parents of visually impaired children, as is also the case for the rest of Europe (Claudet, 2009; Ripley, 2009). Regardless of their great efforts, “they are not necessarily good writers, good graphic designers or good handymen” (Claudet, 2009, p. 69). Considering the prominent role that picture books play in preschool and early school education for all children, with regard to its influence on the cognitive, affective and relational development of the child, tactile picture books for children with disabilities may be even more crucial.

Focusing our practice-based research project in the direction of exploring the tactile experience of the book and its relations to the everyday experience of the blind and visually impaired children mediated by special education teachers, was of the highest importance in the initial stage of the project, in order to familiarize the students with the tactile perception and to trigger their creative production. The pre-service teachers were addressing the challenging task of envisioning a narrative – the book in the widest possible sense - for the targeted group of children (regarding age and type of visual disability), instead of simply translating already existing stories to the requirements of tactile picture books. Concentrating on the needs of blind and visually impaired children, we challenged the students to explore art as a channel of social communication. Stimulating future educators to communicate such matters through art seemed an intriguing venture, particularly in relation to the large number of pupils with special needs of various kinds in their future classrooms.

The collaboration with the First Library for Children with Visual Impairments at Pećine Elementary School in Rijeka was of vital importance, because of the library’s long-term experience in working with children with visual disabilities, both as educators and creators of picture books. As guest lecturer, special education teacher Javorka Milković helped the university students to explore and better understand the basics of nonvisual perception. Emphasizing the importance of tactile books for children deprived of visual information about the world, she explained how a book enriches the child’s verbal, imaginative and affective development in every way. It “helps a child comprehend his personal everyday experiences, it allows him to relive them, extend them, modify them and, in the process, to create his own personal story” (Block & Lanners, 2009, p. 33).



Figure 1. Educational workshop by Javorka Milković at the Department for Teacher Studies in Gospić (photographed by the author)

Relying on her practical experience in working with visually impaired children and producing picture books, Javorka Milković gave the university students guidelines on how to facilitate “the experience of an image as a medium” (Šupe, 2011, p. 26) to a blind child; but probably even more important was the students’ participation in the educational workshops. It allowed them to explore the differences between visual and nonvisual images and differences in perception. First with a blindfold and afterwards without it, the students were reading and analyzing various picture books for blind children, which enabled them to understand how a tactile image is not simply visual image in relief, but an image “translated” into another language (Claudet, 2009, p. 75). Comparing a number of authors’ approaches and the qualitative differences in various picture books, students were learning to appreciate the role of tactile images in nonvisual perception in order to give them a clearer idea of what it actually means to read with one’s fingers. To be able to participate in the project, it was highly important to experience directly the process of nonvisual image understanding and the time and patience required to inspect and process tactile information. The process was slow and very challenging, requiring all participants to get involved in a new language of interaction by suppressing visual communication channels in favor of tactile ones (Ripley, 2009, p. 55). Claudet (2009) explains:

The visual perception of a visual picture image uses a sensory channel capturing remote reality, in an instantaneous and synthetic way. However, the tactile

perception of a tactile picture uses a sensory channel which will only capture reality if there is contact between the body and this reality (if it exists, if it is tangible), in a sequential way (that takes time) and analytical (detail by detail). (p. 76)

In other words, to be able to recognize objects, it is crucial to find one or more tactile analogies between the tactile image and the experienced object. These correlations are reproduced through a corresponding form and texture, but since a picture book can hardly represent the original size and character of a large number of objects, the adult interpreter often mediates the reading process (Claudet, 2009, p. 78). While tactile images enable a visually impaired child to “take possession of a communication system used by everyone around him” (Block & Lanners, 2009, p. 33), they also serve as mediators of abstract phenomena from the environment that are difficult to touch or personally experience in the real world, those that the child knows only from verbal experience (Šupe, 2011, p. 26).

During the first phases of the project, we extensively explored the *First Library* collection where we found various published books of different origin purchased in different parts of the world, and handmade books by parents, volunteers, librarians, teachers as well as professional designers. The variety of books and subjects addressed encouraged us to continue developing our ideas, relying on the guidelines for making tactile books¹. Reflecting on the processes of tactile image making and object understanding, in order to be able to bring closer the visually inaccessible experiences and incite the imagination of blind readers, the students were bound to a carefully premeditated conception of the artistic act, exploring the meaning and the definition of the artist’s book, through the slow process of materialization of originally composed narratives. The main idea was not the production of pretty artefacts, although the aesthetic of children’s books certainly wasn’t to be neglected and much attention was paid to selecting materials and the craftsmanship of the book, but to experience the process of creation. The task was to expand the perception of our university students, learning to appreciate that “art is in the transformation process for the participants; it is in the visualization of a discussion for the audience; it is in the proposal of a new model of collectivity.” (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 198) to influence their understanding of the importance of art as relational practices in both educational processes and community issues.

¹ The Typhlo & Tactus Guide to Children’s Books with Tactile Illustrations, <http://www.tactus.org/>



Figure 2. Student work: Domestic animals (photographed by the author).

Conventional art courses conducted as part of similar study programs are usually oriented towards students mastering specific artistic techniques, often limited to single medium practices; I decided to reverse the concept. Emphasizing the importance of participating in a project and taking into consideration students' individual knowledge and preferences, I renounced prescribing suitable choice of techniques, which motivated various conceptions of what constitutes a book in general. As an artistic object, a book involves a wide and varied set of artistic practices and it would be quite impossible to define it unambiguously. An artist's book is a multidisciplinary and interactive art form. Artists continue to challenge its formal conventions – redefining the book's physical structure, introducing unconventional materials, defying the principle of multiplication etc. – artist's books sometimes continue recognizable codex form while at other times are transformed into sculpture or installation, they could also be produced as a unique work of art in large editions, depending on the intentions of the artist. Also, the book as a medium is employed to explore new methods of communicating the narrative to the reader; sometimes exploring the idea of a book as an art form and at other times using it as a documentary trace of another artistic activity (Wye & Weitman, 2006, p. 224). The conceptual approach to artists' books definitely proved to be encouraging to the students when reflecting and evaluating existing picture books; while analyzing the books' form and structure, as well as the means of articulating the content (Yannicopoulou, 2014, p. 9). We encouraged them to study the conceptual and material shape of a book by approaching it as a fully conceived authorial concept, in other words, by “incorporating the materiality of the book into the narrative, in turn transforming the book with a metatextual sleight of hand” (Do Rozario, 2012, p. 151).

The project required students to engage with processes of interrelating text and images and experimenting with artistic practices. This allowed for the classroom to be reenvisioned as a production center (Cruz Gonzalez & Díaz Alemán, 2013), where students working in pairs or smaller groups focused on a collaborative project together with their mentor and other colleagues from different areas of expertise, within or outside the University. Associate professor Sanja Vrcić Mataija, PhD, teaching Children's Literature at the Department supported students to articulate the text, Javorka Milković gave advices on formulation or layout of both tactile and textual content. Depending on their projects, the students also took initiative to acquire additional assistance from various kinds of artisans or technicians.

Each group of students independently devised the thematic field and the form of their project, exploring the possibilities of the artist book and defining its structure along the way. While experimenting with the medium, and at the same time attempting to respect the The Typhlo & Tactus guidelines for tactile books, the students were slowly building up the outlines of the visual form through an intense process of accumulating ideas, developing primary sketches and deciding on appropriate technical solutions. The project approached the idea of education as a place for dialogue and exploration, which included engaging participants with different perspectives to work together on an artistic challenge, respecting diverse standpoints, attitudes and methods, while being dedicated to a common objective (Lewis, 2013). By giving the students the full control of the process, I strived to organize the course as a space where the book was being formed as the visible expression of an experience.



Figure 3. Student work: *The Great Barrier Reef* (photographed by the author).

Treating the course as a productive lab influenced the students in such a way that a group of 20 to 25 students (depending on the year of participation) functioned as a heterogeneous open space for discussion and exchange of ideas, with respect for each other's affiliations and abilities. Teaching/learning through the production process, directed by the participants' individual ideas, operated on the assumption that different groups of students would take their project in different directions (Montalvo, 2013). This resulted in a wide variety of picture book projects. In this way, the process of learning was formulated not as a transfer of general knowledge or a set of acquired skills in order to make a book, but as a result of reflexive experience, the process of creation of objects generated through discussion, research, experiment, and even argument (Finkelpearl, 2013).

Since the target age-group for the books were the youngest elementary-school pupils, a large number of tactile books were designed according to skills and the level of knowledge of preschool and early-education children and therefore didn't rely on complex stories, they all required an adult mediator to lead the child through the book, give additional explanations if needed, and encourage the child to explore the pages. It took a lot of our time to decide upon the most appropriate subject, form, structure, adequate materials to create a book that a child could relate to; a book that could enable a child to consolidate, broaden, and integrate his or her experiences, and to be able to arrange, classify and enrich those experiences with verbal, imaginative and affective content (Block & Lanners, 2009 p. 27). Upon deciding the thematic frame of the book, the students were questioning the impact of the material features of the book on the reception of its content. They were testing different forms and formats of the book, the suitability of various materials, contents layouts and making necessary changes to the original design throughout the course of the research process. The project yielded artefacts that significantly varied in their formal approach to the book, assuming, at the same time, diverse conceptual attitudes and working processes. As evident in the examples illustrating this text, especially figures number 3 or 6, the picture books were often designed using bright and strongly contrasted colors. The use of strong colors is important for tactile books are read to and by the children who have residual sight, so contrasting colors, intensified by contrasting textures, are vital to image/background identification process (Block & Lanners, 2009, p. 32).

Over the course of the project, the students created around 30 picture books that can be roughly divided into several categories. The first category of picture books are known as *reality books with simple images*, which could be best described as the first narrative reconstructions of a child's personal experiences. These kinds of books put familiar objects into a new context to help the child understand the analogy between the object and its representation (Block & Lanners, 2009, p. 27-28). These books are intended to encourage smaller children to comprehend the concept of the book by allowing the reader to detach the

object from the page and explore it from all angles, thus making continuous comparisons between an illustration and the real object. The students used untreated or adapted everyday objects (slightly modified to better fit the book format) and arranged them in sequential order to convey specific messages or narrate a simple story; for instance, maintaining personal hygiene, setting the table, or similar activities. As the representational objects were not firmly affixed to the pages, the books were sometimes accompanied with additional elements (such as decorative bags) to store the objects, so they could be dismantled and assembled through the play with an adult reader. The second category of books consisted of *proto-stories* that introduced illustrations, which in turn bore symbolic references to real objects, although they were modified in size, structure and material (Block & Lanners, 2009, p. 30). The students used a wide range of techniques to make the books, often collaging all sorts of materials including natural materials (bark, fur, horse hair, small branches, sand, small stones, pinecones, egg shells), fabricated fibres (nylon, cotton, plastic, artificial flowers, burlap, different fabrics, carved pieces of linoleum) or parts of everyday objects (Christmas lights, cans, straws and so on). Since the emphasis was on exploring the book as a multisensory object, in addition to tactile stimulation, students were also inducing auditory stimulation. For instance, by producing small-scale handmade instruments (guitar, drums, fife, various types of percussion instrument) that could be detached from the pages and played.



Figure 4. Student's work: *Musical instruments* (photographed by the author).

Additionally, some university students decided to work with materials that extended the tactile features of the books, introduced sound using different means – featuring particular kinds of paper, various polyethylene surfaces or items that produced sound when in movement. Diverse materials of distinct qualities relied on multidimensional experiences of reality,

exceeding exclusively tactile impressions and were incorporated into narratives thematically related to weather conditions, different stories of animals or ecological picture books – topics that inevitably imply multisensory experience. Other books were organized more as activity books, aimed at enhancing motorial or intellectual skills, by requiring active participation of the reader in terms of completing specific tasks, solving riddles or guiding the main character through the adventures of the book. The students made efforts to create picture books that would expand the children’s perceptive and representational skills, visualizing narratives that tended to rely on their direct personal experience, translating it to images that attempted to stimulate recollection and imagination of visually impaired readers (Block & Lanners, 2009, p. 30).



Figure 5. Student’s work: The purse – closet (photographed by the author).

In the process of producing the books, the students made efforts to envision stimulating themes that could bring closer otherwise hardly accessible or inaccessible situations, in order to provide the young readers with knowledge they could not otherwise gain in their home environment. For instance, several books addressed domestic, wild, or extinct animals, various kinds of birds and insects, or the underwater world (for example, different kinds of fish, corals, jellyfish, sea urchins etc.), which the children may have been familiar with only on a verbal level. Other students devised simple stories concerning weather conditions and seasonal changes by indicating transformations in nature or traditional agricultural labors,

enabling the child to take part in agrarian activities by picking potatoes, apples, pears, grapes or similar fruit/vegetables and folding them into designated bags or baskets. Some examples of the students picture books abandoned the conventional structure of the book in which the content is usually expressed sequentially between book covers. Instead they organized the books as ensembles of separate pages that could be folded into different compartments in an arbitrary order. Here, the successive order of the elements was not important; rather, the component of surprise became the dominant factor - from opening different pockets, extracting the parts and discovering tactile images of different textures, objects usually correlated by a common denominator.

There were also books, designated for slightly older children that attempted to deliver more complex narratives, for instance, a story conveying a recipe for frying eggs or a story of walking with the dinosaurs. Other books carried important ecological lessons and others reflected on different life periods etc. These books usually relied more intensively on two communication levels – the interplay of verbal and visual signs, rather than only paying attention to the illustrative component of the book, encouraging the child to feel, pull, lift, peel, shake, listen, rattle and squeak the represented object. Consequently, successful engagement with these books was reliant on the active involvement of an adult interpreter – a mediator who incites the visually impaired child to discover the pages.

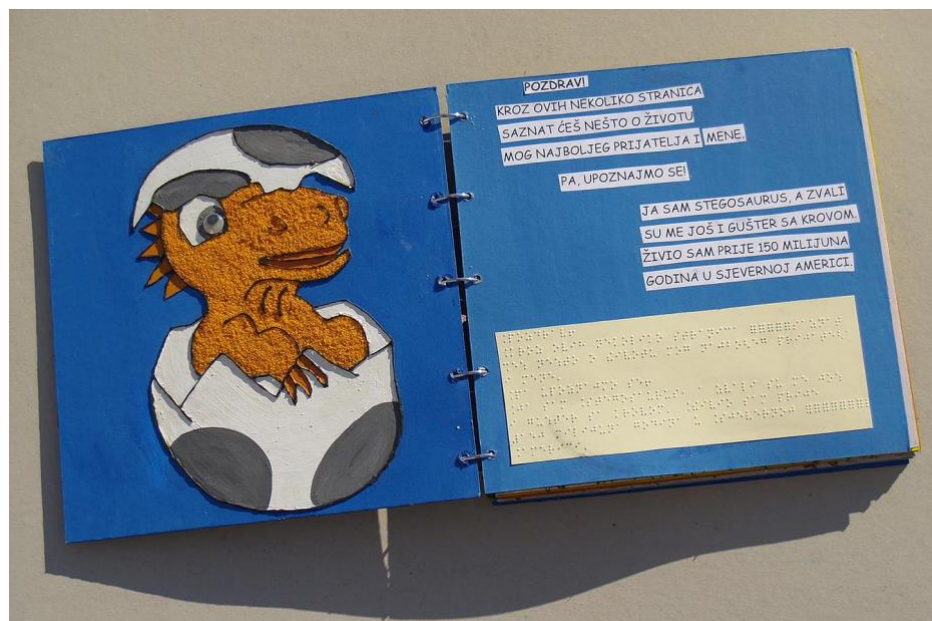


Figure 6. Student's work: *Walking with the Dinosaurs* (photographed by the author).

Nevertheless, the textual component was adapted in various ways in all of the books made as part of this project. In some of the examples, text consisted of shorter rhythmical sentences or

verses. In others it provided more comprehensive stories that vividly contextualized or complemented the image. In some cases, it offered activity instructions for the young reader or designated and further explained the relating represented object in the basic tactile books. The textual layout was featured differently according to the complexity of the textual narrative. In the example of basic tactile books, the Latin text was fabricated in high relief. On the other hand, more extensive textual fragments were written in both Latin and Braille. Latin, which was accompanied by a text in Braille, was materialized by using large black bold fonts on a light background, intended for children with residual sight or for their sighted companions (Claudet, 2009, p. 72).



Figure 7. Elaborating the project further - initiating a new collaboration with the Association of Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities, Gospić - addressing wider span of disabilities (photographed by the author)

In conclusion, although this project didn't have a major impact on the position and the treatment of the visually impaired children in the Croatian educational system, it made an impact on the perception of the role of education, especially art education, of several generations of primary education teachers who graduated from the University of Zadar. The book proved to be a perfect tool for opening up a dialogue between different educational fields – arts and special education, on the one hand, and tangible issues of the “invisible” community of blind and visually impaired children on the other. It aspired to approach the concept of education as a space for discourse and research, respecting heterogeneous starting

positions of various participants, their different attitudes and working methods, in an attempt to devise an experimental project that could instigate communication and aesthetic interaction between people traditionally not included in artistic events or activities. It also functioned as an instrument for addressing the discrimination of children with disabilities as a larger issue and as an impulse to boost the creative potential of future primary education teachers. The majority of the books made as part of this project were donated to the First Library for Children with Visual Impairments at Pećine Elementary School in Rijeka, since we noticed that the children accepted them with delight. Other books were donated to the Association of Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities named Bees in Gospić that showed a strong interest in the project and expresses support for future initiatives. The project encouraged students to perceive art as an inclusive experience that builds bridges among different social groups and inspire future projects and artistic collaborations. Encouraged by the extremely high interest of the university students participating in the project and the motivating proposals for cooperation with the Association *Bees*, a series of discussions were initiated regarding the potential of further collaborations. Association *Bees* works with children with a larger span of development disabilities, besides visual impairments, and future projects would probably require stronger interconnections between students/artists, therapists and children with disabilities.

In short, the project focused on artistic research grounded in the principles of inclusive education, focusing specific on serving the needs of children with visual impairments, working with special education teachers, librarians and future elementary school teachers, as well as creating a sense of community and artistic collaboration amongst the student cohort. The students' research was founded in sensitive, emotional, intellectual and practice-based learning with a high degree of learner's active engagement through direct and open learning (Pivac, 2017). Relying strongly on professional advice when designing the picture books, responding to different situations that occurred during interactions and addressing it through creative production, the students were devising their projects through multilayered learning processes, inspiring both their independence and creativity.

Again, calling to mind the work of Tania Brughera, we could say that we have tried to present art as a means of active participation in an effort to generate a need for creative engagement when facing various educational challenges in our students' future careers. We envisioned the project "to create a void, to create desire, so the participants feel the need to create their own utopias, their own projects to fill that void" (Finkelpearl, 2013, p. 190) in their professional educational and artistic activities. The objective was to trigger a sense of responsibility amongst student teachers that doesn't end with this project, but that builds up a determination to engage in independent enquiries and collaborations once they've completed their studies. By presenting the work outside the course and the University, I desire to emphasize the

interconnection between educational programs and the local community, the vibrant responsibility and the importance of participation and the artistic involvement in different community issues and the need for a stronger presence of arts in primary education in Croatia.

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About the Author

Ana Vivoda, PhD is Associate Professor of art education at the Department of Teacher Education Studies in Gospić University of Zadar, Croatia. She is a visual artist and her practice-based research intersects fields of print-based art, installations, photography and artist's books. Her work has been shown in solo exhibitions in Croatia, Spain and Serbia and she participated in over one hundred and fifty international exhibitions in the country and abroad, receiving many awards and acknowledgements.

Her research in art education is largely interdisciplinary establishing collaboration with various institutions or associations in the country through educational projects addressing various cultural heritage or community issues.

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