

Entering a heterotopia

The potential of free participatory art projects within the educational field

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Abstract

"Inside Me" is the title of a short film that 59 students between 14 and 16 years produced in 2016 for the project "Yes, it's magic". There was no script or given topic. Within a collective process, the film was developed from the contributions of all participants. What arose is an eerie story about the archaic fear of losing oneself.

(You can watch "Inside Me" (8 mins) here: www.yesitsmagic.rocks)

Still frame from "Inside Me"
produced by 59 students between 14 and 16 in 2016.

Within this project, the students gained experience they would usually not have in everyday school life: They faced the challenge of deciding for themselves their individual form of contribution while also experiencing new modes of communication. The students were part of a collective process that formed a unique artistic expression, creating a synergetic effect that was unique to the particular constellation of people, space and time.

This example presents the potential of participatory projects within the educational field, in particular of collaborations between schools and artists: The creation of an “Other Space” (Foucault 1984) beyond the familiar structure of school environment, where different thoughts and creative expressions can be set free.

The following text analyzes the requirements to achieve this aim and emphasizes the need for close cooperation between the artist and the art teacher in every respect – as artistic quality, social aspects and educational impact are inseparably connected and can only be of benefit if different approaches can work together productively.

STARTING POINT AND CONCEPT

The initiative for the project “Yes, it’s magic” was taken by the form teachers (Klassenvorstände) of two ninth grade classes and the art teacher Michaela Götsch. Their goal was to strengthen the pupils’ community through a filmic work that could only be realized through the collaboration of multiple contributors. Therefore, they were seeking the external support of the artist and art educator Verena Faißt.

So the big challenge was: How could a participatory creative process with 59 students be instigated? The team of teachers, art educators and artists came together with their different ideas and approaches and developed an extensive concept in collaboration with Filmarchiv Austria, enabling the students to research the many varied dimensions of film making.

The students were encouraged to engage with film and

its history as a medium of sensory expression that creates realities of transformation, surprise, illusion and deception. This examination of the complexity of filmic reality opened up a large playground for individual expression. Through this process the students prepared for the collective artistic work they would produce together with Verena Faißt, the musician Oliver Stotz, the cameraman Klemens Koscher and a team of teachers from different subjects.

At the cinema and exhibition space METRO Kinokulturhaus, run by Filmarchiv Austria, the students’ work was presented to the public.

TIMELINE

•Teaching Focus + Excursions:

The concept and development happened in the autumn of 2015. In December, M. Götsch and the music-teacher Alexander Kropp started to broach the different dimensions of film mediums within the context of art and music lessons. They dealt with stop-motion, sound design, foley and pre-cinema-objects. The students went on excursions to the exhibition “Kinomagie” at METRO Kinokulturhaus, where pre-cinema objects from the collection of Werner Nekes have been shown, and attended the lecture “In Space: Das Kino und der Raum” on the construction and perception of film space at the Austrian Film Museum.

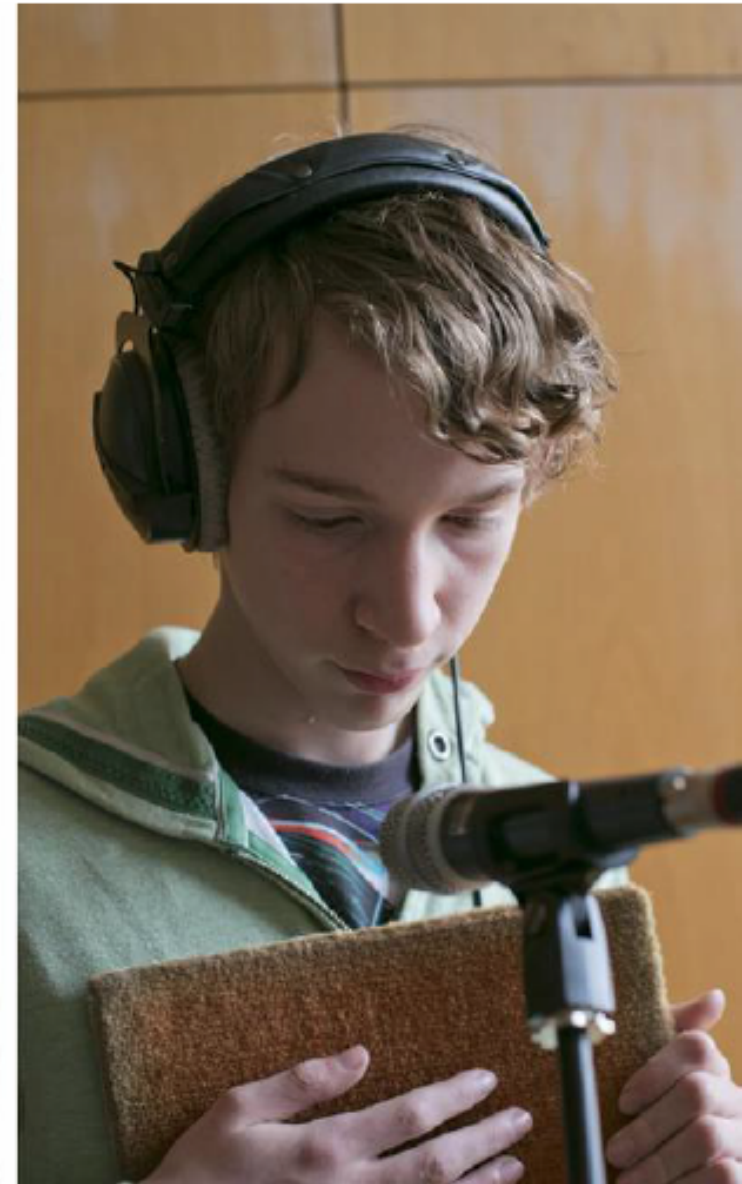
•Teach the teacher workshops:

The idea was to also involve teachers from different subjects. No specific artistic skills or prior knowledge of any technical equipment were needed. Instead, the teachers were encouraged to contribute to the collaboration according to their personal perspectives, interests and qualifications. Within one afternoon, they were briefed by V. Faißt about the project’s special structure and mode of collaboration. This included the proposal of a basic guideline to initiate, moderate and accompany a creative process within the framework of the project. Prepared this way, they were able to support the production of the students’ film over a period of three days.

•The Soundworkshops:

The practical workshops took place in February and the first step was the sound. During six art and music lessons the students produced the soundtrack for the film together with the musician O. Stotz and V. Faißt. A professional pop-up studio was set up in the art education’s storage chamber

and different everyday materials, including the body and a cello, served as instruments. There were 12 short workshops of only 20 minutes with 5 students in each. Every group listened to what the group before had recorded and piece by piece an abstract audio drama was produced.



Students during the sound workshops producing the soundtrack for "Inside Me".

- The Film Production:

One week later, this pre-recorded soundtrack was the starting point for the film production itself, which took place over three days. There were five working stations that provided different artistic tools and media which allowed the students to work at individual stations at the same time.

The stations were called "Light & Space" (experimenting with slide- and overhead-projectors), "Mask & Sculpture" (building masks and sculptures out of paper, wire and textiles), "Text & Speech" and "Movement & Performance". The four stations were overseen by the team of teachers who had been briefed about the project beforehand. The fifth station was the video shoot station, which was supported by V. Faißt and cameraman Klemens Koscher. Here, the students combined the different elements into sequences for the film.

The students could also choose to act as observers and document the process with their iPads. Supported by a marketing expert from Filmarchiv Austria, they also produced footage for the public presentation.

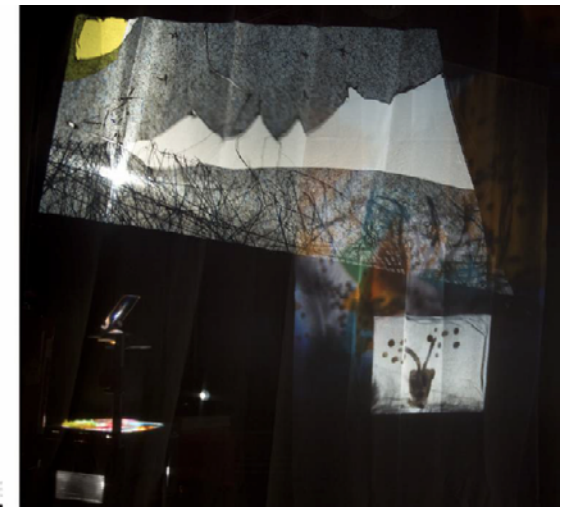
The participation happened on a voluntary basis: The students were free to engage in and move between the workshops as they saw fit, taking breaks as they wished. The only common rules were, that no one disrupted anybody else's work flow and that everyone needed to refer to the shared soundtrack when creating content.



Students working on "Inside Me", respond to a shared soundtrack using light, masks, text and body

- Screening and Exhibition:

The outcome of this collaborative process was the production of the film "Inside Me". On April 19, 2016 the screening of the film and an exhibition of the props used in its creation took place at METRO Kinokulturhaus.



Exhibition view / Poster "Inside Me" at METRO Kinokulturhaus

METHODICAL APPROACH

This project had a process-based approach. Because of this the project's framework was continually fluctuating and shifting to accommodate creative changes that were initiated by the students and their collaboration with each other. To create a framework to support this process the project was given a specific structure, a set of available tools and collaborative working expectations to help create a dynamic artistic and social environment for the students.

This artistic and social space was characterized by:

- A Transparent Setting:

The aim was to set up a clear structure that enabled the participants to orientate themselves within the project. It was important that the project's settings were not limiting to the students, but instead offered a solid and inspiring basis for their collective work to blossom. So for example it was decided on in advance, that the starting place and only point of reference for the film's production would be a shared and collaboratively produced soundtrack.

- Trusting Atmosphere:

From the project's inception V. Faißt and M. Götsch tried to establish a trusting and encouraging atmosphere with the whole team – for both students and teachers. It takes courage to commit and invest in an unknown creative process. You cannot demand creative commitment from a student as an artist or teacher, while withdrawing yourself. Joint commitment and respect for the shared work also means respect for each other. So the mission was not: "Get the others involved!" but "Get yourself involved!"

- Inspiration and Sharing:

Still, the spark needs to ignite. If everything just falls into place – great. But if not, you need to inspire. The idea was to do this through engaging the students in a sensory space of expression, while also clarifying to them that sensory perception and creating artistic expression is inseparably linked. Listening to the shared soundtrack, exchanging ideas of what it evoked,

asking: "What can you hear? What kind of scene or site could this be? Is there something moving? Is it up-close or far away? Hot or cold? Strange or familiar?". Helping the students form these questions further supported them to find the right visual and verbal cues to realize the content via images and sounds.

SO SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED ...

A strong artistic outcome: a unique creative expression and collaborative circumstance of people, space and time was achieved. The creative process temporarily inverted the rules of the ordinary school environment.

Apart from a shift in time and space (using normal school classes as creative workshops, working on a voluntary and individually timed basis) there was a role transformation: Teachers, students and artists perceived themselves and each other in new ways, discovering new skills and passions, developing ideas and together finding new modes of communication and expression. The teachers were asked not to lecture and the students were asked not to expect instructions. They were challenged to find their own way of contributing, to make up their own minds, evaluate themselves and collaborate with each other. Everyone involved did this successfully and the group was able to experience the power of collective effort.

It was quite a challenge for teachers and students to withstand this shift of the familiar structure of school and for the artists to work within the expected norms of the scholastic framework. Sometimes it caused confusion, uncertainty and struggle amongst teachers and students. But working with artists who are positioned outside the school system helped to facilitate these shifts and enter a kind of counter space - or "Heterotopia" - as Michel Foucault has named it (Foucault 1984).

When normal school life recommenced, it was discovered that the project had instigated reflection on how school, teaching, learning and creativity in a collective can be engaged and could work else.



Still frame from "Inside Me",
that turned out to be an essay on the archaic fear of losing oneself

DAS BLAUFLAMMIGE ONIGIRI

But maybe the best way to talk about the project's benefits is to tell the story of "Das blaublammige Onigiri". This is the pseudonym of one of the participants.

In the beginning of the project, she was a very shy and fearful girl. She never spoke and her face was hidden behind her long fringe that ended at her nose. During the project she chose the smallest tool she could find (which was a slide frame) and proceeded to make a miniature landscape. When she had completed its construction and we projected it into the space, the effect literally blew her mind. Her little, almost invisible work suddenly took over the whole space and plunged all of us into her moody and dark mountain landscape. The group cheered. This was an important turning point for her, with the landscape becoming a key contribution to the collective work. By the end of the project's duration she had decorated the whole festival room with her projections and she was applauded by her classmates. On the day of the presentation at METRO Kinokulturhaus, she had her fringe cut, was self-assured, chatted with teachers and classmates and confidently gave everyone eye-contact.

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Still frame from "Inside Me"

CAPTIONS

All images © Verena Faißt

Image 1: Still frame from "Inside Me" produced by 59 students between 14 and 16 in 2016.

Image 2: Students during the sound workshops producing the soundtrack for "Inside Me".

Image 3: Students working on "Inside Me", respond to a shared soundtrack using light, masks, text and body.

Image 4: Exhibition view / Poster "Inside Me" at METRO Kinokulturhaus

Image 5: Still frame from "Inside Me", that turned out to be an essay on the archaic fear of losing oneself.

Image 6: Still frame from "Inside Me"