

STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. PhD Marina Teofilova Teofilova
Department of „Art Studies and Art Education“
VTU „St.Cyril and St. Methodius“

for awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD on
professional direction: 1.3. Pedagogy of education in...
(Methodology of Fine Art Education)

Dissertation topic:

PLAYING FORMS IN THE STUDIES OF VISUAL ARTS IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Author:

Marina Lachezarova Aleksandrova
PhD student at the Department of Art Education
FACULTY OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES AND THE ARTS
SOFIA UNIVERSITY ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI

Research supervisor:

Professor Stefan Altakov PhD

1. Data on the doctoral student:

For the beginning I would like to share that I have known the candidate since 2021, when she presented an article on the topic: “Water as a Conceptual and Water Figurative Material in Contemporary Visual Arts” at the traditional for the Faculty of Fine Arts at VTU “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” International Scientific Conference “Visual Studies”. Marina Aleksandrova presented her report in a section where I was the moderator and I remember well that the topic sparked an interesting discussion and although it was presented from a distance in an online environment, it was in a dialogic mode with the topics of other participants in the conference. Even then, I appreciated the dissertation candidate's ability to analyse contemporary processes in the visual arts with deep resonance in an educational aspect.

I will dwell only on individual moments of the biography of the doctoral student, which can outline her development as a young author:

In 2014, she graduated from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” with a bachelor's degree in “Fine Art” and in 2015 with a master's degree in “Advertising Design”.

Since 2019 she has a numerous participations in exhibitions and contemporary art forums. Since 2022, she is a part-time lecturer at the Visual Arts Department, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

2. Data for the dissertation:

Marina Aleksandrova's dissertation “Playing Forms in the Studies of Visual Arts in Non-Formal Education” has a volume of 187 pages, of which 153 pages are the main text and 33 pages of appendices, which implicitly supplement the content of the research.

The content of the dissertation includes three thematically separated chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. 55 sources are cited, of which 19 are in Cyrillic, 22 are in Latin and 14 are from the Internet. The appendix includes 12 figures, 8 tables, 4 field protocols presented in the form of tables, 21 photographs illustrating the educational process carried out with the working groups and 12 photographs taken during the in-depth interview.

The dissertation has a logical structure and a concise presentation. The text is written with a precise use of the terminology, there is a precise citation of the indicated bibliographic and other sources. Talking about the introduction of didactically regulated play situations in the education of fine arts in a formal and even more so in a non-formal environment is, of course, not new, and as the doctoral student himself states in the introduction, the play has already become an educational tool of contemporary time. Therefore, the problematic of the dissertation work is extremely relevant in the context of the modern visually dominated environment, in which the image has become a leading means of communication and information transfer as a cultural code of modernity.

In the introduction, the doctoral student convincingly argues the necessity of the present work and substantiates the scientific problem, relevance, object and subject of the research. Stated in the form of a hypothesis a suggestion that if “...*in the conditions of non-formal education in visual arts, a specific system of classes based on play approaches and methods is applied, then this would lead to the achievement of quality results, expressed in the improvement of artistic skills, experience and interest in the field of modern forms of the visual arts.*” (p. 4) is a good starting point for conducting experimental pedagogical research in a non-formal setting.

Choosing an age group to carry out the research is an extremely difficult task, considering that the age 6-10 years could be defined not so much as a specific age, but rather as an educational period (last stage of preschool and primary school degree), key to forming basic knowledge and attitude towards the visual arts. This is what makes this period so essential from a pedagogical point of view. The changes that occur in the nature of cognitive processes, perceptions, attention and above all in the unfolding of thought and imagination are of primary

importance for the full communication with the works of visual arts. I want to emphasize that, despite the difficulties predetermined by the age group, the doctoral student has found the right language and measure in presenting ideas essential for art, related to the play (as a cultural, social and historical phenomenon), with the interaction of the arts, with the audience, (perception, interaction, idea, content, form, etc.). The theoretical and experimental research carried out by the doctoral student is logically systematized in three interconnected chapters that correspond to the main stages of its implementation: theoretical research of literary and other sources, implementation of preliminary research, preparation of diagnostic tools, design of an experimental methodological model based on play, carrying out experimental research and collecting, processing and analysing the data obtained.

In the first chapter, Marina Aleksandrova outlines the theoretical parameters of the study by examining the essence of the play in a cultural, sociological and historical aspect. In her reflections on play and culture, she steps on the philosophical positions of Kant and Schiller, and as a starting point for some of her constructions she uses the work of Johan Huizinga “Homo Ludens”, play as a metaphor (Eco) and “play behaviour” (Swift), which is entirely necessary given the nature of her research.

Play is differentiated as physical and intellectual according to the two main forms of activity. For the purposes of the study, some popular examples from the historical development of games are briefly considered. Quite rightly, she does not do a full historical overview of the games here, although she mentions their archetype. Logically at the next stage, entering the unfolding of the theoretical staging, Marina Aleksandrova draws a parallel between the essence of the work of art and the game, rather interpreting the work of Joseph Beuys, which requires active participation on the part of the viewer; she considers the game as the structure of the work of art. In the sub-item “Gamification”, she turns to a relatively new and not so much imposed field in theory and practice, which she places as the meaningful core of her experimental research. Here she makes the necessary clarification that “gamification” is a new concept that seeks to encompass “...*the use of game elements and game design techniques in non-game situations*” (p.22). In the unfolding of the theoretical setting of the study, Marina Aleksandrova analyses the emergence of the so-called artistic game as a phenomenon of new digital technologies that offer the audience an inexhaustible range of images and dimensions of virtual worlds. It examines the main connections, similarities and relationships between game and art based on its deep conviction that game and art already coexist in multiple hybrid versions: „*Art games carry the charge of play and the concept of modern artwork. They are a collective, complex, amorphously structured and changeable image, adapting to current issues and aesthetics or anti-aesthetics.*“ (p. 27)

Essential for the further development of the experimental methodological model, applicable in a non-formal environment, is the analysis that the doctoral student makes of the gamification of the visual image, the so-called 'turn of visual' (Mirzoeff), which refers to the shift of focus from the word to image and requires a revision and rewriting of historical analyses and justifications of modernism and modernity in order to account for the transition from primarily verbal to visual communication. At the end of the first chapter, Marina Aleksandrova constructs the theoretical backbone of the developed educational module by clarifying the concepts of "interactivity", "gamification", "non-formal education", "workshop", etc. with the emphasis being placed on the main material with which the experiment will be carried out - water as a means of expression, considered in all its states and modalities.

The second chapter presents an experimental educational module and design of a model for pedagogical interaction in a non-formal environment in the form of a "Water" workshop. For this purpose, the didactic performances of game forms and their application in non-formal education were studied. In this context, the workshop is considered as the main organizational form in non-formal education.

As a significant contribution point in the chapter, I would single out the preliminary study carried out by the doctoral student in the form of the narrative interview with elderly people (about 70 years old), which allows to trace how games and toys have influenced their skills and abilities in the perspective of educational interaction and the past life path.

The pedagogical experiment was conducted in the field with different groups of children between the ages of 6 and 10, through the implementation of game forms with the use of materials at hand, the adaptation and synchronization of which allows the hypothetical reconstruction in an educational mode of existing works of contemporary visual art.

The conducted experimental research fully meets the requirements for conducting a natural pedagogical experiment. The methodology and tools are adequate to the hypothesis, goals and tasks of the research. The experiment was conducted in a non-formal environment, in four consecutive meetings with children from different places aged 6-10 years. The workshop has a dynamic character as the planned activities and activities of the participants vary in a wide range of game and discussion forms related to water, its states and their projections in contemporary art. On the basis of the obtained results, in the third chapter, an analysis of the development of the attitude and knowledge about the visual arts within the framework of the formative experiment was made.

The Chapter three reflects the specific organization and conduct of the experimental research. A game modular model, its implementation in the form of the "Water" Workshop and an analysis of the results achieved from their

approbation in a non-formal environment are presented. All stages of the didactic experiment are chronologically presented - the field studies, the preliminary and actual experiment, the activities “The Liquid Game”, and “The Ice Game”, “Cloud Game”, and etc., didactic and artistic materials. The results of the input and output diagnostics are detailed and systematized in tables.

A diagnostic toolkit of criteria (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and relevant indicators was developed in order to determine how effective the applied experimental game model is.

Individual achievements are processed quantitatively and presented in a summarized form by means of tables. The processing of the results provides a serious basis for verifying the hypothesis formulated by the doctoral student, as well as for the nature and quality of the results achieved. Based on the convincingly presented arguments, the hypothesis is proven. In a separate point, conclusions reflecting what was achieved in the conducted research are drawn.

In the conclusion, the obtained results are summarized, conclusions and recommendations for future research are formulated, and the contributions of the dissertation research are objectively stated. The potential of the module for future transformations, application and development is discussed.

4. Contributions:

Marina Aleksandrova's dissertation is an original work that represents a contribution to the research and theorization of the current issue of the possibilities and place of play as a specific artistic expression of children of preschool and primary school age.

She explores an interesting aspect of play as the essence of creative activity and applies it in pedagogical situations in a non-formal environment, which we are traditionally used to thinking only as a matter outside the focus of pedagogical theory, rather concerning the individual preferences and inclinations of children with a pronounced interest in art, which are encouraged by their parents, and not so much as a problem with a basic educational aspect in the field of arts, hence the relevance of the researched thesis.

That is why I fully support the main contributions of the dissertation work indicated by the doctoral student, which really reflect the theoretical, scientific and practical results achieved by her:

- The topic of the dissertation research represents the author's view and overview of the doctoral student;
- The research covers theoretical material that is currently not published in Bulgarian scientific works and which was selected, analysed, systematized and translated by the doctoral student;

- An experimental educational model was developed, based on game forms as a learning tool, which was tested in a non-formal educational environment;

- Generated an innovative design for a workshop as a pedagogical model with an interdisciplinary approach in the field of arts. In this approach, different

theoretical positions are drawn from the humanities, which are studied as different disciplines, and are convincingly related to contemporary forms of the visual arts;

- The experimental educational module allows to be transformed and composed into segments, enabling flexible application of the workshop educational tool during the experimental work with children not only in the studied age group;

- One of the great merits of the developed pedagogical model is the conscious and in-depth study of the creation of a natural connection between the environment, natural materials, handling and modelling them, and at the same time the organic use in this process of modern digital means;

- The doctoral student convincingly develops a pedagogical model based on the game with one of the most natural materials - water, which through the experimental research and the obtained data proves the validity of the working hypothesis that if *"...in the conditions of non-formal education in visual arts, a specific system of classes based on play approaches and methods is applied, then this would lead to the achievement of quality results, expressed in the improvement of artistic skills, experience and interest in the field of modern forms of the visual arts."* (p. 4)

4. Publications:

The publications presented by the dissertation were published in specialized editions with scientific review and are directly related to the topic of the dissertation. The articles meet all requirements for originality.

5. Questions and recommendations:

- In abstract, are mentioned the ideas that arose for the potential development of the game model you developed and how to make it publicly available: specifically referring to the educational project by Liliana Dvoryanova, the publication of an entertaining booklet with instructions for use by visitors in the Museum of Water, Blagoevgrad, the continuation of the workshop "Water" are two interconnected modules with a game presentation of the themes "Earth" and "Air". I'm curious if in the meantime you've been able to implement some of these intentions and if they've given rise to the generation of new ideas?
- How does the doctoral student see the adaptation of the experimental game model to the artistic training of children in a school educational environment?
- Last but not least, I recommend Marina Alexandrova to develop, design and publish (produce) an interactive educational game that is not only entertaining and useful for preschool and primary school children, but also for everyone related to the visual arts and modern pedagogical processes.

6. Conclusion:

Given the merits, contributions and practical applicability of the discussed dissertation: “PLAYING FORMS IN THE STUDIES OF VISUAL ARTS IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION”, I recommend the respected members of the scientific jury to award Marina **Lachezarova Aleksandrova** the educational and scientific degree PhD in professional: 1.3. Pedagogy of education in... (Methodology of Fine Art Education).

M. Teofilova
October 3, 2023
V.Tarnovo