

# Eavesdropping on children in galleries Keeping the passion at the heart of the encounter...

**By Helen O'Donoghue**

Senior Curator & Head of Engagement & Learning Programmes,  
Irish Museum of Modern Art



*L'Université, Alice Maher, 2012. Image © Colm Hogan.*

*'...It's the souls of all of the people who studied here'*

...was one child's whispered response to Alice Maher's installation *L'Université* in a disused lecture hall in what was once University College on Earlsfort Terrace in Dublin<sup>1</sup>. The work was in a darkened room where hundreds of miniature lights hung over old graffiti marked desks and spotlighted sections of both writing and drawings in a myriad of pools of light. When I hear an insightful response such as this, or see a child gasp in wonder or stare in silent awe at an artwork installed in one of IMMA's galleries I feel a surge of the passion that ignites me professionally and is at the heart of the work for all gallery educators worldwide. Working in a museum that houses such extraordinary objects that have the power to hold us, take our breath away, allow us for a moment or a lifetime, to delve deeply into that unknown space within ourselves and to reveal the secrets that lie within, is a privilege.

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<sup>1</sup> *L'Université* was temporarily installed in an off site gallery that the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) had in 2012.

There is nothing that can replace the real-life experience of an artwork... If we believe in the transformative power of the arts and therefore that engagement with artworks are an essential aspect of human development we need to consider their relevance to the children that we care for. In this digital age when children, at the swipe of a small finger, can access a wonderful and incredible virtual world, we need to re think what the value of the 'encounter' with an authentic artwork is...

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Franz Cisek, the founding father of child art and his follower Georg Kerschensteiner advised that children should not go to the cinema, theatre, or be introduced to great pictures too soon in childhood to avoid its influence on their natural schematic drawings. Following in this vein, when I began working in a gallery/museum context, I would have been a strong advocate of waiting until the child had the real-life encounter before a reproduction of the artwork was shown.

It feels that after some twenty-five years of working in this field of arts and education and with the omnipresent of the visual, be it in print or in the digital world, we need to reconsider once again the importance of the 'authentic encounter with an artwork'. Children live in a crowded visual world and have to sift through a deluge of visual stimuli on a daily basis, so what role has the gallery space got in the life of the contemporary child?

Is it time to reconsider what a gallery space might offer?

Alongside the 'magic' of the experience of children encountering the sometimes unexpected nature of a live artwork, however tiny and quiet (such as a small scale line drawing) to overwhelming and all encompassing (such as a large scale sculptural installation), museum educators worldwide have engaged in action research to test out methodologies and approaches to engaging children in meaningful dialogues about artworks over the past three decades.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) where I work has, since opening in 1991, worked with teachers to develop frameworks within which to enable quality conversations with children in our galleries. Our research has revealed how teachers (and indeed all adults) have discovered new understanding and in some cases a new appreciation for artworks for themselves, as an outcome of listening closely to what children say or ask, when engaging in conversations about art.

In one of IMMA's long term research projects titled *Red Lines Between The Fingers*, (Campbell and Gallagher 2002) the researchers wrote:

'Time and again in the course of this research, teachers have pointed to the impact of the open-ended and explorative nature of the framework that the artists adopted when working with the children in their classrooms and when facilitating engagement with artworks in the museum. The role of the accepting adult in the success of the sessions for both children and teachers alike emerges as very important.'

'What might be termed the 'accepting framework' is a way of working which is fundamental to the ethos of all programming in the Education and Community department of IMMA.' The Museum's Primary School Programme (PSP) provided the basis for the approach adopted during the aforementioned research project and was initially developed through a series of artist/teacher partnerships in the early 1990s and was documented in *A Space to Grow* (Davoran and O'Donoghue, 1999).

'The research confirmed the Museum visit as a central element of the project. It provided opportunities for responses from children to the artwork, which at times surprised the teachers

by their complexity and quality. Teachers were impressed with the level of thinking expected by the artist of the children during the visit and the way the children rose to these challenges. They were surprised that it is often the quieter children who seemed to gain most from the discussion and exploration of the artwork.' (5.10 P88, 5.11 P90)

One teacher said of the structure which the artists and mediators (gallery staff) adopted when facilitating the children who were viewing a piece: 'It was extremely simple and easy to work with and yet amazingly effective. It gave an excellent framework that many adults could do with: What is it made of? What does it look like? Why was it made? The framework allowed for great conversation to occur. There was none of the expected, 'That's crap. That's stupid.' It gave them a way of understanding the work and valuing it. It stimulated the use of a lot of problem solving skills.'

This teacher described how one child responded when encountering the artwork *Neon Rice Field (1993)* by Vong Phaophanit:

*B surprised all the adults today by her response to the rice and lights exhibit. While the work stimulated many amazing responses, hers astounded us all, as it was so imaginative and true. She thought it looked like a hand up to the sun because the sun makes red lines between the fingers. The group was using the framework of the three questions to think about the art instead of just dismissing it. Again the complete confidence of the children when responding was great, the fear of being wrong wasn't there. All responses were accepted, none were dismissed. (2002, p.51)*

*The pieces got the children thinking and they understood that their opinions mattered and it wasn't a case of being right or wrong. They were involved in creative thinking, language, analysis: why did the artists make this? Projecting themselves into the artists' mind, what was the artist feeling? Thinking? I saw the children really thinking in a way that is rarely seen in school. (2002, p.49)*

IMMA's experience is mirrored in international research such as that carried out in other English speaking countries, for example, the TATE in the UK, where constructive and co constructive learning was first identified as a methodology in 2005 by researchers Charman and Ross:

'...dialogue is central, as it provides opportunities for learners to share and question knowledge and then take risks and change. In this model the teacher (artist) functions less as an 'expert' and more as a 'co-learner', instigating dialogues and voicing and re-ordering their own knowledge in collaboration with the learners. Learning develops from the learner's existing experience and knowledge (as per construction model), is driven by the learner's intentions and choices, and is accomplished through a process of building and sharing knowledge and experiences with others. Hence the group or 'learning community' is considered.'

Over thirty years ago in North America, Abigail Housen founded Visual Thinking Strategies based on theories of aesthetic development, which has recently influenced Irish practitioners. (<http://www.vtshome.org/research>)

A resource that Mark Maguire at IMMA has developed more recently with the Primary Professional Development Service titled *Our Collection Looking and Responding, A Guide for Primary Teachers* (2010) encapsulates the body of research at IMMA and international research, and applies it to the context of IMMA's Collection.

While introducing the IMMA Collection it emphasises the diversity and innovation found in contemporary art practice:

'There are artworks that are on walls and there are artworks that you can walk around; there are artworks that are outside the museum and there are artworks that are inside the museum's rooms; there are rooms that are like a cinema and there are rooms where the artwork is all around you.'

IMMA's guided tours for children are intended to create structured opportunities for children to look at, think about, and respond to art. The framework is divided into three exemplars - Sensory Experience, Observation & Exploration; Supplementary Information & Meaningful Guidance and Discussion & Interpretations.

These should enable children

- To use their personal experiences as a starting point in exploring art.
- To use dialogue and debate (particularly with older children) to develop ideas, knowledge and understanding.
- To build up a selection of critical and analytical thinking skills in response to artistic and aesthetic experiences.

And as Maguire says, 'Children can grow up with the IMMA Collection. Children visiting the galleries at age five will hopefully have the opportunity to return to the same galleries as they mature, into their youth, and throughout their adult lives. Hence IMMA, and particularly its Collection, can be a part of a person's lifelong aesthetic experience and can provide a cultural source to which people can repeatedly return throughout the changes and developments of their lives.'

Repeated visits to familiar artworks can both create a sense of belonging for the child and works can accrue meaning over time. As we change our understanding of artworks will reflect this.

'...And because of this, and because we all live in a culture that communicates increasingly through visual imagery, children's experience of contemporary art is not only necessary, but it needs to be relevant and revelatory. Acting as a partner and as a learning resource, IMMA can enable schools to enhance this part of a child's developmental experience.' (Maguire P.13)

Artworks are metaphors, carriers of meaning, and repositories for ideas. They connect the artist to the world around her and connect that world to the artist. And as Alice Maher has said:

*We are not making art to pass time, its not a hobby... we are not making art to bloom unseen in the desert air, it cannot live without its other component and that is audiences, visitors, observers, participants, readers, spectators, listeners. **Half the part of art is its audience** and what that audience brings to the art is incalculable and becomes part of the work. The living imagination of the audience has got to be tapped and allowed to flow into the artwork as well as get something out of it. Art gains from the audience who sees it, for its own reservoir of meaning is being added to continuously, just as it leaks meaning out into the world of that audience. (Maher, 2007)<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> ALICE MAHER artist, extract from her presentation for 'Case for Culture' CNCI Conference April 3, 2007

And we know that the best conversations are two-way, dialogue is central to the communication and if we can continue to bring children to galleries, who knows what insights we might overhear.

**Helen O'Donoghue, IMMA**

**Helen O' Donoghue** is Senior Curator and Head of Engagement & Learning Programmes, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Ireland. Appointed to her current role in 1991, she has developed the programme from the inception of the Museum. Currently working with four curatorial staff, they have devised initiatives for both formal and informal learning engaging with all aspects of the museum.

O'Donoghue has presented papers and published widely for Museum conferences. Exhibitions/publications include: Intersections: Testing a World View 1996, Unspoken Truths (1992-1996), Once is Too Much (1997-2004), A Space to Grow 1999, '...and start to wear purple' 1999, Equivalence 2002, John the Painter 2003, Hearth 2006, E.gress 2015-2016 and texts Borderlines: David Jacques' Garden text on artist's residency in primary school: in 100 Flowers to Bloom: Fire Station Artists' Studios, 2007; Art, Artists and the Public: pedagogical models for engagement with art and artists in a museum context in Art Education and Contemporary Culture, editor Gary Granville, Intellect 2012; two texts Education in the Visual Arts and Participatory Arts, Art and Architecture of Ireland/Volume V, RIA/Yale, 2014



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