TEENAGER ART: CREATING THE SELF

Andrea KÁRPÁTI and   Zita KOVÁCS
Eötvös Loránd University, Department of Education
Paper presented at the INSEA European Conference, Glasgow, July 1997

Abstract

In Hungary, where fine arts and high culture in general were in the focus of educational efforts of art teachers for more than 150 years, educational reforms begun as a result of political changes in 1989 represent an overwhelming challenge. Art teachers of teenagers ready to modify their curricula need insights into the emerging teenage subcultures their students are part of in order to understand their visual world and incorporate in art education. The authors of this paper have collected case studies of symbolization processes of young people between 14-18 years of age and undertook two large questionnaire surveys on the visual environment of adolescents. This paper contrast international youth styles as recorded by T. Polemus in Great Britain and P.-A. Maset et al. in Germany with Eastern European trends , summarise results of the Hungarian surveys and outlines teaching efforts that acommodate the visual language of youth subcultures in order to help adoloescents further on the road of the creation of self.

Introduction

> "Youth culture in "in". Reaction of the young on social changes and their own patterns of life are being scrutinised by society and the scientific community with equal vehemence. (...) No other symbol system seems to be equally open, integrative and tolerant. In the youth subcultures today, we find everything: all imaginable shapes and forms, colours and tones - and those unimaginable today will find their way here and become a cultural manifesto and aesthetic reality tomorrow or the day after tomorrow at the latest, when the aesthetics of today will belong to yesterday. (...) Youth subcultures embody a set of action repertoires and patterns of orientation with symbolic connotations and interpretations with and through which young people formulate their world view and experiment with strategies for the analysis and acquisition of adult values." ([i])

Youth subcultures have many faces. It is theoretically wrong to presume, as a starting point for youth research, that *one* homogenous youth culture exists. Still, a style occurs in a certain neighbourhood by no means by chance.Deeply rooted in the social or ethnic reality, different environments represent a closed set of subcultures. What we found homogenous in Hungary was the *youth concept of adults*, members of the rebellious generation of 1968, who, in their jeans-and checkered-flanel- shirt attire, stick to behavioural patterns and dress codes that they assumed in youth to show their ideology has not changed. Youth was undoubtedly the symbol and major value of "Modern Age". In our Post-Modern era, however, in the years of disillusionment after the political changes in Eastern Europe of the 1990s, new youth styles are looked upon with a mixture of admiration and threat. Adults who consider themselves as "*forever young*" consider the generation of their children "old at heart". Contemporary youth aesthetics as manifest in the pragmatic, technology-oriented, future-interested, open to the world and international styles and behavioural patterns are not understood, not even recognised as such by educators while they are readily exploited in advertisements. *The visual world of youth subcultures seems to be*

international - when we contrasted our findings with German and British surveys to be summarised in this paper the similarities were striking. Still, *the ideological contents may differ widely*. To be a *Raver* in London is not the same choice as in Budapest. As we will show later, the meaning of a style may be different while "gadgets" are the same.

Ted Polemus, a British ethnographer and photographer produced a magnificent survey of international youth styles of the 1990s. ([ii]) The interviews and explanations of subcultures can be readily contrasted with the visual world of German adolescents in an experience-oriented society (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*) as described in the recent thematic issue of *Kunst und Unterricht* (Art and Education) edited by *Pier-Angelo Maset.* ([iii]) The reason for the formation of styles manifest in dressing, make-up, hairdo, speech and body language is, as explained by *Polemus*:

> "Because we don't want to be categorised - just a stereotype. Because the world we live in is itself full of confusion and contradiction. Because - (as in our politics and everything else) simple either/or categories no longer suffice. Because now that the god of modernism is dead, everything is possible. Because the past and the future have dissolved in "the Now". Because what's clear clearly isn't. Because we've increasingly found that the only personal appearance capable of expressing where we as individuals are at in a kaleidoscopic and enigmatic world." ([iv])

These are answers of British teenagers when asked why they dress in extremely idiosyncratic fashion, why they decorate their bedrooms in a fashion adults find both irritating and threatening, why they create a visual world that cannot be disregarded by art education. Hungarian youth feels the same way. "*Our future by design*" , as our teenagers express it, is a wild mixture of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, of typical Hungarian gloom and imitated American cheerfulness. It is full of enigmas that are meant to be understood but mostly is not. Art teachers feel this challenge more and more intensively and no longer want to stay in their ivory tower of high art . They would be willing to incorporate this special "youth art" into their curricula but most of it remains hidden in the school environment. Thus, educational researchers are compelled to assume the role of cultural anthropologists to reveal styles, signs, symbols and techniques of teenager art manifest in various youth subcultures in Hungary.

Identification of Styles

In the course of an ongoing study on symbolisation processes in adolescence, we have been interviewing and photographing young people and their homes between 14-18 years of age for 6 years. (As of May 1997, 67 fully documented case studies and 4 television films of 35 minutes each produced). Interviews are taken by our research assistants in their twenties - talking partners whom our target group found much more acceptable than adults. Questions are focused on the following areas:
1) *Communicative value of dress, make-up and hair style* (appearance at home, at school, at leisure - basic differences, assessment of actual looks, description of desired looks, ideals/models to follow, best places to shop for clothes, assessment of wardrobe items)
2) *Favourite objects* ("totems", hobby accessories, status symbols, gang relics etc., objects to be proud of, collectibles)
3) *Desired objects*
4) *Symbolisation of self* : "Design a Coat of Arms", self-portrait, "My Family as Animals"

As a result of the   analysis, we detected   several *"styletribes"*:

> "By nature a tribal species, we increasingly find ourselves either individualised, or homogenised, undifferentiated and without a clear sense of community. As Margaret Thatcher famously suggested, "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women and there are families." Unlike her, however, most of us find such a situation at least a little unnerving, threatening or vacuous. To fill the vacuum we have increasingly used style differences as a marker of "people like us". (...) While the members of a gang (like the members of a Third World tribe) all know each-other and have a fixed geographic territory (a "*turf*"), the members of a *styletribe* may well live in different cities, even different countries and are typically strangers to one another - recognisable only by a common style "uniform" which symbolises a shared system of values and beliefs (that is, culture). Though Pre-Modern in their pursuit of a tribal identity, ironically styletribes could only exist in the modern-day "global village" where disparate neighbourhoods, cliques, clubs and "scenes" are effectively linked together by a national and international media eager to report on the latest "*youthcults*" and "fashions". ([v])

The first "styletribers" were the *Beats, Rockers, Punks, Skinheads, Rappers*. As young people typically have more control over appearance than over their the home environment, it is their visual image that communicates their style. Most styles include musical preferences but visual signs and symbols are equally important for the essence of assuming a style - the representation of world view.

Table 1:   Styles of youth subcultures in England, Germany and Hungary

x = present   0 = absent

NAME OF STYLE	Visual characteristics	ENG-L AND	GER-M ANY	HUN-G ARY
Techno / House/ Garage	wild colours, plastic and nylon	x	x	x
Rave		x	x	x
BMX -biker and rollerskater - streetwear	loose slacks, baseball cap, helmet	x	x	x
Modern Primitives	black leather, piercing, afro hair, tattoo, iron jewellery	x	x	0
New Age Glam	transparent or shiny textiles, tight, "fancy" clothes, tons of fake or bijou jewellery	x	-	-
Body Conscious	skin-tight black or white minis, deep cuts, zippers	x	x	x
Ethnic / Folk	Indian, African, Mexican, national folk art etc. clothes mixed, long hair, no make-up	x	0	x
Retro-Hippie	bright colours, platform shoes, ethnic fabrics, flowers	x	x	x
Gothic	long, black dress, "antique" jewellery,	x	x	0

NAME OF STYLE	Visual characteristics	ENG-L AND	GER-M ANY	HUN-G ARY
	pale and black make-up			
Family of Grunge	Doc Marten's boots, sprayed T-shirts	x	x	x
Yuppie	"professional look" from Boss to Armani	x	x	x
Techie / Computer Freak	no dress code - lots of gadgets	x	x	x
Body-builder / Aerobic Girl	fashionable sportswear	x	x	x
"Eastern Entrepreneur" ("entrepreneur in jogging suit")	sportswear as workwear, neon colours, mobile phone, massive golden jewellery for men as well	0	0	x
"Skinhead Politician"	bald head, leather boots and jacket, green shirt, national socialist insignia	0	0	x
Cybermod	wearable art (designer styles for the 3d millennium)	x	x	0

These subcultures cannot be explained as trends of fashion or peculiar dress codes attached to music groups. The basic *difference between fashion and style* is their existence in time: fashion is temporary while style has an aspiration for eternity. From the sixties till the early eighties, "new" was a synonym for "improved" - it no longer is. "Trendy" assumed a negative meaning, it became a descriptor for a pitiful "*fashion victim*" . "Originals" and "classics" are cherished and the attachment to a certain style is more an ideological decision than a fashion move. It is meant to last much longer than a season. The *semiotics of appearance* (dress and accessories, hair style and make-up, body language, speech: tone, pitch, phraseology) may be international but they certainly convey different meaning in different societies. In Hungary, the *hippie* movement was largely banned in the sixties and seventies. Its rediscovery in the early eighties was in fact the first acquaintance with an anti-capitalist ideology - just in time in the early 1990s when the harsh reality of early capitalism hit hardest on the middle class. *Rave* and *Techno* in Hungarian villages is largely associated with big time city life and drug culture. While the number of drug addicts in the 1980s was among the lowest in Europe, by the end of the 1990s every tenth Hungarian teenager has been exposed to "disco drugs". In a country with the highest suicide rate in the world, the drug and music experience seems to be the mood they have always yearned for: flirting with death, flying high, escaping a world where the ideals of the parents are ridiculed but not replaced by any plausible world view. *Ethnic* subcultures always used to have special Eastern European overtones, folk art being the major vehicle of protest against Soviet rule, a set of wearable symbols of revolt teenagers of today inherited from the previous generation. ([vi]) The "*Eastern Entrepreneur*" or "entrepreneur in jogging suit" embodies the local alternative to the *yuppie* - unschooled, ill-mannered but very efficient in business. An embodiment of Susan Sontag`s *camp,* this subculture takes pride in rejecting the dress and speech code of the establishment and openly expresses delight in Kitsch, distorted "folkish" music and trash literature. A failure at school, rejected and ridiculed, the "Eastern Entrepreneur" refuses now to finance high culture.

Hopefully this brief summary of beliefs and values attached to youth subcultures explains why we think art educators, decoders of visual language, should make effort to understand and cultivate idioms their students use outside - or even inside - the classroom. The major *function of style* is the presentation of self or the creation of missing parts of self: "show off" power, wealth, erudition or sex appeal . The clear and articulate expression of subculture may attract possible partners and distract the undesirable. Visual language can express basic ideas about self and others more immediately and powerfully than verbal idioms. Data are cross-indexed against an enormous bank of previous experiences to arrive at a tentative conclusion about others and facilitate the selection of a suitable behavioural strategy.

> "As the hipper people in marketing have come to realise, "people like us" are now identifiable only by extremely subtle differences in personal philosophy as expressed in lifestyles and taste. Accordingly, it is the subtle manipulation of our own appearance to send precisely the right signals, coupled with a sensitive, sharp "reading" of others, appearance that is most likely to make the identification of "our kinds of people" possible." ([vii])

Teenager   Environments   -   Style in the Home

We conducted two large surveys on visual environment of 14, 16 and 18-year-olds. In this paper we will report on a part of the material 514 questionnaires by 278 girls and 236 boys with an almost equal distribution of sex and settlement type (city, town and village population) within the three age groups. As the topic of this paper is the description of youth subcultures we will treat all three age groups as one, representing Hungarian secondary-school students aged 14-18. The questionnaire included 77 questions (among them, 54 open-ended questions) and three drawing tasks on the following topics:
1) Type and location of home
2) Living with your family - "rules of the game" at home
3) Desired home
4) Private space - present and desired furniture and decoration
5) Meaning of decoration and objects in the private space
6) Mass communication usage
7) Attitudes towards visual arts and art education

Here are some of the findings or this survey:

The majority of young people agree that *their room reflects their personality* as well as their garments or hair style does or even more. Those who think it is not a mirror of themselves (18,2 %) live in environments provided by parents that they are not allowed to alter or redecorate. These young people emphasise how deprived they feel of this major source of expression. Those who are allowed to arrange their room as they wish declare that they completely redecorate whenever they enter a new phase of personal development. Furniture cannot normally be removed at will but wall and drapery colours, decoration and lights are changed several times a year. *Not one of the almost 600 young people asked has ever received any advice at school on designer rules of furnishing*, neither were they instructed in the possible symbolic meanings and visual effects of colours, textures and shapes in the home. All of them wish they would.

All teenager live with their parents - a situation unlikely to change until their marriage. Only 54 % of them has a brother or a sister and no more than 6,5 % has more than one - a sign of the sharp decline in population in Hungary in the 1980s. 55 % has a room of his/her own, - to put it the other way, 45 % has to share rooms with a sibling (33,1 %) 5,8 % with two siblings and 4,1 % with a grandparent. Most of those who filled out the questionnaire were ready to produce a drawing of their room (93 %). For the first question about the level of satisfaction with their room, the majority of teenagers selected positive replies (38,2 % very pleased, 47, 6 % quite pleased with furniture and decoration) and only 4,5 % was completely dissatisfied. Nevertheless, *73,9 % would like to exchange pieces of furniture if finances be provided*. Apparently, the image of the room has to be as open and flexible as its owner, ready for new challenges and styles to assume. As for the *mood of the room,* those who like it (75,5 %) emphasise that it is cosy, happy and warm and cheerfulness. (Boys and girls use almost the same list of adjectives and share a common aspiration: the room should radiate love.) A relatively high 21 % comes home to a totally different environment: a room that they experience as "small, stuffy, disorderly, childish and old-fashioned".

The most preferred piece of furniture is their bed (48,8 %) second to it the desk (16,6 %). The computer is present in about one third of the teenager rooms only and is the favourite object of only 6 % of them. Furniture to go is termed "childish" and "uncomfortable" but not "unfashionable". As we assumed before, fashion is "out". Wall decoration is composed of posters (72,5 %) but there are some (with no aspirations for an career in art) who still pin up their own work (5,6%), a general practice until early adolescence. Most of the images depict famous people (42,8 %) but definitely not just musicians. Writers, poets, middle-aged strangers with interesting faces and, of course, nice boys and girls are among the icons that represent the beauty ideal of adolescent Hungarians. Landscapes and buildings are the second most popular motive (21 %) and reproductions of works of art are also there in about every tenth room. (11,5%) *Favourite objects* included stuffed animals, not only childhood relics but also recent gifts (24,5 %) instruments to make music with (radio, CD player, musical instrument, 18,2 %) the computer (8,2 %) and found objects cherished for their beauty (stones, shells, twigs etc.)

When asked about future plans, only 6 % would like to have an apartment similar to that of the parents. *Young people experience the changing Hungarian society as a chance to break away from the social milieu of the family* but neither the home nor school seem to offer suitable alternatives for suitable environment. "*Design Your Own Home!*" - a national competition for young people aged 6-16, organised in 1995 by the Institute for Teacher Training of the Hungarian Academy of Crafts and Design in co-operation with the Ministry of Education and the Rubic Foundation yielded about 800 entries, 254 accompanied by a model of the ideal house. Design-oriented Hungarian teenagers turned out to be extremely conservative in their plans. Three-bedroom, two-storey high villas of very similar cubic shapes were designed almost without exception. When compared to ideal home plans of young architecture students from the 1980s collected by our biggest University of Technology in Budapest, *the homes of end-of-millennium adolescents have no ideology whatsoever* . No sign of ecological consciousness (usage of nature-friendly building materials, solar energy for heating, garbage recycling etc.), no commitment to community or extended family living characteristic for the youth of the 1970s and early 1980s. They do not show signs of adherence to a youth subculture or ethnic group, either - they are neutral enough to please every adult taste. These neat designs are apparently the

products of art education - a cool exercise in craftsmanship. Until this attitude remains unchanged, we cannot expect youth culture and school culture to meet.

> "Our Post-Modern world is a very different place. We are now more inclined to question the value of change for its own sake and to have doubts about the inevitability of "progress". At the same time, instead of focusing around a single "direction", our world has splintered and fragmented into a plethora of lifestyle options which coexist, rubbing shoulders with each-other like commuters on a London subway. Things aren't as cut and dried as they were. Where once there was a clean, obvious direction, now there is a maze (a Rave) within which we all seem to be moving in different, often contradictory lines - cutting across time and space as well as each other's tastes in the process. It's all very confusing - and yet undoubtedly all very exciting at the same time." ([viii])

Hungarian art curricula are traditionally based on knowledge about and techniques of "high art" and on the conviction that it should be in the core of any learning material. As teacher surveys suggest, the self-expressive, symbolic and therapeutic functions of art are considered far less important and, if time is limited, to be omitted from the curriculum. ([ix]) As for the expression of The German authors of the special issue of "*Kunst und Unterricht*" (Art and Education) on "Youth Aesthetics" (Jugendaesthetik) clearly represent a different view. "*Youth aesthetics as a point of crystallisation for life problems*" is the title of a paper from *Joachim Bröcher*, a German art teacher who based an art project on life conflicts of adolescents ([x]) Problems expressed and elaborated in art projects are the detachment from parents, the formulation of ethnic identity and a hetero-, bi- or homosexual existence, facing gloomy professional perspectives, experiencing a general lack of security. As revealed in our comparative German-Hungarian survey done after the political changes of 1989-1990, ([xi]) adolescents in the two countries share the same problems. The basic difference is that art educators in Germany try to incorporate the visual language of youth subcultures in education ([xii]) while most Hungarian educators still insist that the art room should be an island of harmony and beauty where the language of visual communication is that of classical art. In the supplement for the journal, *Pier-Angelo Maset* offers an excellent collection of images of youth, products of adults or of themselves. Images to confront and reflect on, to identify with or reject impulsively. The questions and exercises offered invite the art teacher to enter the world of youth subcultures leaving prejudices behind or else, putting them to the test.

Hungarian educators also make efforts to facilitate the essential function of teenage art: the symbolic creation of self. A new form of art competition was launched in 1996 by the Hungarian Academy of Crafts and Design and the Ministry of Education that requires more than a landscape or a portrait usually asked for. A topic is given and a documented mini-exhibition of sketches, variations and finished work has to be sent in. "*Someone Who is Important For Me*" was the topic for 1996 and "*On the Road*" for 1997. Let me conclude with some of the entries that show the way teenagers create and express themselves at the same time. The images of course also bear witness to the importance of art as a medium flexible enough to accommodate all youth subcultures. The signs and symbols are there for us to understand. My generation for whom the wide world reluctantly opened up in the late seventies, was the first to assume international youth styles. Now it is our challenge to keep on understanding and interpreting them. The art

teacher may be the translator between a generation of youth reluctant to speak and that of adults with no time to listen.

References

[i] Kracht, Günter (1997) Jugendkulturen - Orten des Staunens, *Kunst und Unterricht, No. 211, p. 12-19, quotation from   p. 12*

[ii] Polhemus, Ted (1996)   *Style Surfing -   What to Wear in the 3rd Millennium*, Thames and Hudson

[iii] *Kunst und Unterricht,* No. 211, April 1997: "Jugendaesthetik" (The Aesthetics of the Young)

[iv] Polhemus, Ted (1996) op. cit., p. 17

[v] Polemus, op. cit.,   p. 42-43

[vi] Kárpáti, Andrea (1995): Arts Education In Post-Communist Hungary: Policies, Curricula and Integration *Arts Education Policy Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1,   pp. 11-17

[vii] Polemus, op. cit., p. 11

[viii] Polemus, Ted, op. cit., p. 32

[ix]   Two large teacher attitude surveys were taken in Hungary to identify role models, professional beliefs and teaching aims and objectives of art teachers: in 1984, as part of the National Assessment of Art Criticism and Art History Skills and in 1993, as part of the Dutch-Hungarian project for the Modernization of Final Examinations in Art. The top and the bottom of the list of *most / least preferred learning objectives* remained unchanged in the course of 10 years: 1) teaching basic representational skills and abilities,   2) teaching about the history fine arts, ...9) offering means of self-expression   10)   using art as a problem revealing and -solving tool (art as therapy).
   Cf. also: Kárpáti, Andrea (1995): From Post-Communism to Pre-Capitalism - Hungary's Dilemmas of Changing Paradigms for Art and Education. In: Ed. Monique Briére, *Proceedings of the INSEA World Congress, Montreal, 1993,* Montreal, INSEA

[x] Bröcher, Joachim (1997)   Jugendaesthetik als Kristallisationspunkt von Lebensweltproblemen, *Kunst und Unterricht, No. 211, p. 20-21*

[xi] Kárpáti, Andrea, Farkas, András, Kovács, Zita   *(1994) Hungarian Education and Adolescents of the Nineties :   a Double Portrait in the Frames of Transition.*
In : Rust, Val D., Wichmann, J. and Knoost, P. (Ed.) : Education and Value Crisis in Central and Eastern Europe. "Comparative Education "series, Peter Lang, 219-252. pp.

[xii] Selected German educational literature on youth subcultures can be found in *Kunst und Unterricht,* issue 211, April 1997, 19.