

# Visual Diary – A Project to Test the Symbolisation Abilities of Adolescents

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## Research background

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. 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 between 1997-2000. More than 100 fully documented case studies and 4 television films of 35 minutes each were produced. Questions 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, an analysis of teenage subcultures was described and published. Data served as a basis for the modernisation of *Visual Communication* and *Environmental Design curricula*. (Both disciplines are taught as legally accredited alternatives for the previously high art focused “Fine Arts” curriculum in Hungary since 1998).

In 2006, we decided to continue studies on youth subcultures with a special focus on the *symbolisation abilities of individuals* manifested in their written and oral representations. The pilot study reported here was executed in preparation for a nationally representative survey on teenager subcultures and their visual signs and symbols.

**Sample:** 15 secondary grammar schools from Budapest and other large Hungarian cities were selected where youth subcultures are formed or adapted from international models. One boy and one girl aged 15-16 was randomly chosen from each grammar school. Half of the sample of 30 students showed special visual talent (students of schools with an art and design focus) and the other half was tested through as average by standardised drawing tasks.

**Task:** each of the students was invited to keep a “*Visual Diary*” for 14 days. This task was developed by Prof. Irmgard Zepf at Cologne University in the 1980ies and standardised as a symbolisation measurement device by the author of the present paper in 1998. Subjects are asked to choose an exercise book, a book to be discarded or just a collection of A/4 format papers to be used for keeping a visual diary for two weeks. Every evening they are supposed to prepare an imprint of their moods of the day each evening through any chosen two-dimensional technique: drawing, painting, collage, frottage, mixed media etc. They are

allowed to “destroy” a page if they so wish through burning, dripping molten wax on top or simply covering it with dark paint. Each daily entry should be given a title. Text may be added as necessary for the expression of the dominant mood of the day of the author.

**Background information on subjects** are also collected in order to better understand the symbolic messages and evaluate the level of visual expression manifest in the diaries.

- *Clark Drawing Abilities Test* – a standardised test of four independent representational tasks for the assessment of general level of drawing skills and abilities. Four visual aspects judged by two trained jurors for each work. International standards available for ages 6-18.
- *Test for Creative Thinking – Drawing Development* – a standardised image completion test of two independent though interrelated task sheets for the assessment of creativity through drawing. International standards available for ages 6-18.
- *Semi-structured interview* on events of the 14 days of diary keeping – with a focus on happenings and related feelings.
- *Portfolio of work* produced by students during the previous school term (2005/2006) to judge average visual abilities through a variety of school tasks.

**Evaluation:** the diaries are scored for general aesthetic quality, level of symbolisation skills and expressivity. Individual, group and cultural signs and symbols as well as gender differences are identified and their relevance for teaching visual expression and communication discussed.