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Expose yourself or go unnoticed!

An essay on understanding the significance of an institution

Artworks in the park, in the loo, in the school corridor or on the lake? Yes, contemporary art is following a strategy to present itself in surroundings where spectators are least tuned to artistic experience. The experience thus emerging will be tainted by the odd context, surprise, an imperative to look and the overall strangeness of the situation. The occasional spectator is not allowed to prepare himself to receive art but is taken by surprise and with his pants down, sometimes even literally so:

"I was looking at graffiti on the wall while peeing and then I found that one drawing was signed... It was art and some artist had hung it amongst the daubs in a restaurant loo! It has a name, "Identity", as was said in a note glued on the mirror."

In an institution that trains future artists, the question of putting one's artworks on exhibition is a complex one: when, how and to whom, as well as why, wherefrom and how earnestly? Is the context of exhibiting a case of showing off? Is it aimed at critical reception of professional critics? Is it a pedagogical situation, and if so, what does that include? The history and practice of the art exhibition is quite nonlinear: exhibitions belong to an era that is best described as "modern" and "individualistic", both epithets heavily dated. And besides, art exhibitions can be exclusively artistic or exclusively commercial, to the extent that other functions are not to be recognized.

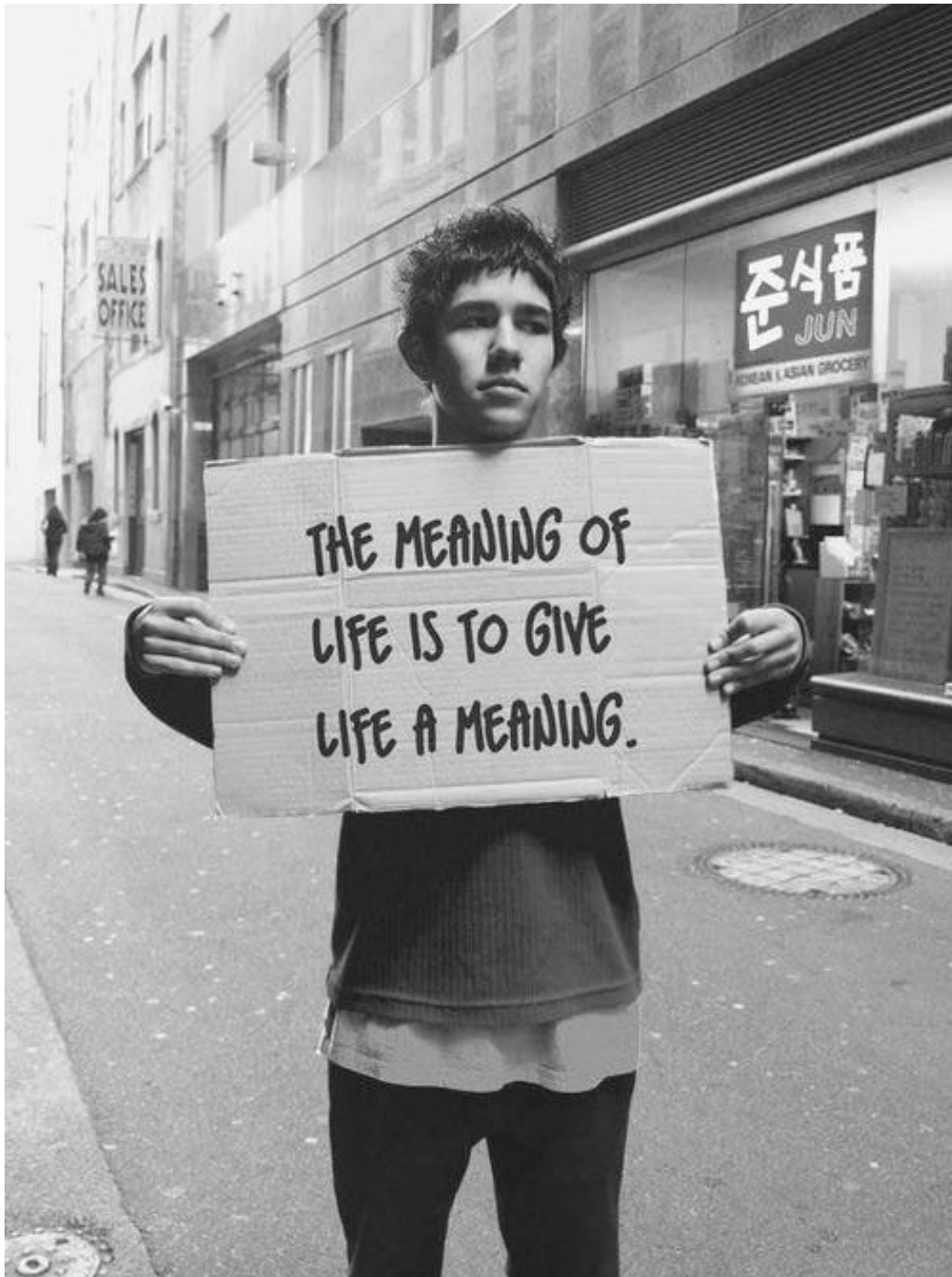
Pedagogical objectives of art exhibitions emerge from their nonlinear history, but one feature, evidently, always comes up: exposing one's works is inherent to the profession of an artist. An artist being on display without publicity is no

artist; it seems that here the claims for publicity in art and science are alike. Only the public evaluates the works, with time, perhaps variably but as the sole agent of significance. This is quite difficult to teach as a theoretical subject but terrifyingly easy to demonstrate when one's works are on display.

Perhaps it is suffice to say that art theory, aesthetics and the practice of doing are only foreplay to the moment of truth: being exposed. Pedagogical criticism in art classes can be quite stressful to students, and not only a few remember them and shudder. Insider criticism is however only play, a pedagogical tool, and it is directed at a certain work; its context comes from the task given beforehand. How different is the situation when one work or more are exposed to public criticism in a context that has no pre-given task? The whole Art World is hovering there behind, as if the works were to knock at the door of Profession.

What are the expectations given by art praxis? Is there any "objective" way to consider one's artworks when they are exposed for anyone to look at? How is the public thought to come closer to the artist and understand the ideas that are given only as a work and its name, if any? The context of an art exhibition is nowadays quite extraordinary, more varied than in the days of the Impressionists (to put the finger somewhere), and the context demands real knowledge in order to become a manageable whole. All this cannot be taught, but the complexity of the stake thus given can be described to those who will be burned.

For an ordinary human, the reception of contemporary art is considered so complex a procedure, so "challenging" as everything is nowadays, that artists not only do art but also attempt to control the reception, often as a part of the respective artwork. In order to exhibit their works they search for places that would tune the mind or senses of the public to make the public more alert or vulnerable. The idea seems to be to compel a person to see and hear even though she may not be interested or is even hostile towards art. The ideas of the Enlightenment still influence us here and make it necessary for us to emancipate our fellowmen and -women, even against their will: to the audience, the shock effect should change their way of thinking and prepare them for a clearer view of the world and thus a better future. No cultural sarcasm seems to diminish the attempts of an artist if she knows what is best for all.



Not even helplessness or incapacity is respected if it includes avoidance of art: in hospitals art is served as a consolation, in schools as an incentive to "creativity", in old people's homes as stimulus to the half-dead, and in prisons as a reminder of the "real" world. In asylums and institutions people cannot avoid a daily rendezvous with art objects if they are located in cafeterias, classrooms, and lounges. One is supposed to consider such force-feeding as a gift, particularly to those who cannot choose and/or are incapable of deciding whether they want to be in touch with art or not. The problem is, naturally, that in so doing the force-feeders give art a context that most often entirely deteriorates the special

context art itself may create: the institution will become a context which – e.g. in the case of classrooms – indicates that art belongs to the compulsory stuff of learning and thus loses its force to give appearance to something other.

Even the great outdoors is not spared. In nature, amongst the trees and mosquitos, artworks "come into a dialogue" with, eh, something, as an artist may write. Such an enterprise reveals, however, how hypocritical and inadequate a dialogue is if constrained by one person. An artist may, no doubt, choose the venue she presents her artworks in. But at the same time, art made contextual may become contextualized against its own resources: the openness and otherness of a work may become excluded in a violent manner.

It is not seldom that the purpose has been quite the contrary: an artist aims at something novel, something that may open the resources of a work in a manner unknown even to the artist though somehow instinctively felt by her. Instinct is a strange organ: even the creator of a work knows and does not know what the chances are of a work if placed into a surroundings alien to the one where it was created. In the performative arts this dynamics is well known and well employed: a piece of theatre reveals unexpected effects when performed in a location that's not ordinary to the story. Recontextualizing is a patent procedure, and it works more often than not; even when it does not really work it gives valuable knowledge to the performative artists of how to work between the stories and locations. Perhaps a visual artist is able to develop the performative part of her artistry?

In visual art the historically fixed praxis already offers the locations and places: for two millennia pictures were painted on the spot and never moved to another location. Seldom did any picture have a life elsewhere than in the place where it was created; sometimes old paintings were moved to a new building but most often only to a context already fixed, from church to church, from halls of power to halls of power. Recontextualizing was not the policy until the modern robbery wars emerged and museums became the locations of concealment of stolen goods.

For a work of visual art the location of creation was "natural"; being detached from its cradle was "unnatural". The artists have left letters and notes where they include instructions not to move the picture (most notably Leonardo and Cellini). If a picture could wander around it could be seen in *any* context and thus acquire *any* connotations whatsoever, even blasphemous, defamatory or treasonable meanings. In eras when artists were outlaws and with no protection of rights (well, in the West until the Second World War), such a recontextualizing would end in forfeiting one's head, a price too dear to pay for art's sake.

However, the idea of *any* context whatsoever, by its accidental location, became more and more interesting. During the last hundred years of visual art the renegades have ruled the customs: artists who wriggle themselves out of the

bonds of tradition(s), household economics, and/or "being liked" have shown the way. One strategy has been to free pictures from their frames: the actual frames (that bourgeois habit to cordon off the picture from its location), to separate the image from its picture and deny the connection between them, to propagate the mechanical reproductiveness of the representation and thus contest the liaison of location, place, or material appearance to any meaning.

Meaningful prerequisites to any new understanding of visual art are perhaps provided by perpetual change of context, continuous variation of connotations and total freedom from the conditions given by the odd situations of an artist. This must, naturally, be taken within historical limits: art shows were not known as we know them, any exhibition was a work of highly controlled social order, and the chance to get one's works presented was limited to those who were "academically" qualified. In the history of art, "academically" most often had a pejorative connotation: it reveals the pecking order, a power structure that did not vanish until after the Second World War, and even then only gradually. The art academies were the gatekeepers of art and dictated the good and expelled the bad. In a situation like that some ideas were revolutionary: a free context, unpredictable location and unrestricted licence to exhibit one's works. Many wanted to challenge those in power, with more or less well-argued new doctrines.

In the beginning of the last century the ateliers or studios of artists were important locations to see what was going on. Their development was important: from social meeting places to places to see contemporary art and talk about it. An artist who was not "academically" valued became the talk of the town if she was able to entice people to her studio to look at the works and talk about them as if art were a topic open to anyone. Art history has hundreds of stories like this.

Out of this skirmish emerged modern art, then postmodern; each new epithet gave birth to a typical pattern to exhibit artworks. Old words were used, like "show", "gallery", "exhibition", but they gathered new meanings. They evolved with the development: artworks became more important and the public was granted permission to have its own opinion. As in Tage Danielsson's hilarious movie "Picasso's adventure" (*Picassos äventyr*, 1978), in the gallery show of the "Independents", an advanced tradition of putting contemporary artworks on show, people had the licence to like, laugh at, mock, and condemn what they saw. What was new was the venue: separate artworks that were de- or re-contextualized into an exhibition were as such open to assessment that did not need any previous (academic, context-ridden, knowledge-driven) attunement.

The change that art shows went through during those years after the Great War was enormous: from studio visits to galleries, both independent of the academic art world. Independent agencies, mostly art lovers with some spare money,

created a new praxis that was an important ingredient in the new soup, later called "modern art". Art students were the ones who benefited the most. They both saw more and various contemporary art and art-in-coming and had the opportunity to find themselves famous overnight, if lucky. The new motto of the aestheticians revealed that art becomes real only when in contact with the audience. Not academies but exhibitions became the locations of learning how to work.

The modernist idea of a gallery was not ready when it appeared. It took years to carve it from the traditional show venues. From the beginning, however, one characteristic was prominent: it was a location of *neutrality*, neutral in power, neutral in style, neutral in economics. To become a gallery artist did not indicate any bonding with any schools or art sects, not aesthetically, by style, nor ideologically. The gallery owner was quite often an art dealer, but an economic bond was only beneficial, or at least that was how it was regarded.

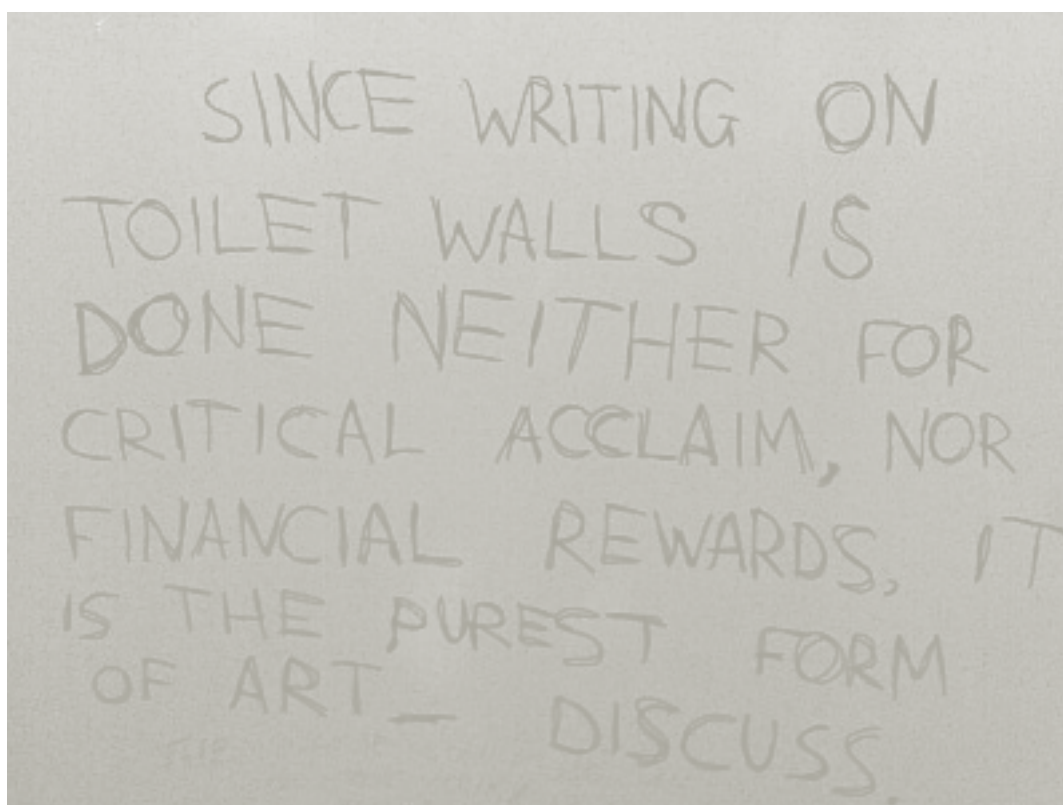


Gertrude Stein (Bernard Cribbins) and Alice B. Toklas (Wilfried Brambell) in the show of the "Independents", taken by surprise in front of a painting that totally exceeded all their expectations, namely one by some unknown Pablo Picasso (Tage Danielsson, Picassos Äventyr, 1978)

Later the neutrality appeared as an architectural constituent of a gallery as well: the modernist ideal of an inner space was apparent in lofts, former industrial locations and lobbies with various functions. Open, spacious, light-colored, and as such non-existent-as-a-space was the recipe. Artists were to meet this neutral context in a particular fashion: their artworks must suffice, the location won't lease out any meanings to the works. In parallel, each artwork was bestowed

with more space so that it seemed to waft about in empty air, in an emptiness and neutrality unharassed by any other artwork. Galleries became more and more *white* until they acquired the name "white cube" and the development was complete. Only after that could anyone dream of leaving the neutral space and conquer, for example, loos and forests with artworks.

This was more a shortcut through a history of exhibition praxis, but it will serve here as a sketch that is able to guide us through the benefits of exhibition praxis to art students. As a common procedure today, an art exhibition in a gallery is inclusive to the main context of those who plan to become professional artists. You either exhibit or die. A studio or atelier is not a venue to show one's works: a studio reveals in a feverish manner the untimely incompleteness of the artistic thinking of the maker, and not everyone, particularly in the beginning of one's career, is willing to bare the accidental character of creation. A studio may be the place to meet colleagues and ponder the chances one might have within the discipline, but only a neutral space with no hints to personal history can act as a podium for showing *off*.



And it is this showing *off* that counts. Not only seldom do teachers and supervisors assure that it is not wise to exhibit too soon, half-maturely, without real stuff to rely on. They seem to believe that scribbling into the air and self-assessing one's outcomes will one day hatch out a mature artist and great artworks. Even though some gallery owners and curators are after juvenile first-

timers, no real boom has ever caused young artists to burst onto the podium in masses. Art critics don't appreciate shows with art students alongside known artists and even less so exhibitions held solely with works by art students or those just graduated. Thus it seems that the "art world" does not need "fresh blood". But no one knows how to mature to markets if no threshold in-between is offered to step on.

What can a gallery give to an art student? Particularly in a modernist tradition an artwork needs space, a slow tempo and an independence of some sort. Neither a classroom nor a studio is able to detach an artwork from its coming-into-the-world, from the cradle that so often throws psychological dust in one's critical eyes and prevents any adequate assessment. Not these but something entirely different: a laboratory (derived from the work "labor") is needed, a place where labor (as in the expression "a woman in labor") is seen as something completed, fulfilled, not tied to any cord that could disclose the author.

Tradition has created a kind of laboratory, a *museum*, a solid institution for the labors of art but in a strict sense post mortem: when in a museum for artworks there is no way out. Contrary to that, a gallery is a hothouse where an artwork is supposed to be enlivened and shown in its glory. After *the gallery treatment* an artwork is even more art since it has gone through an *initiation*: it has proved to be strong enough to live by itself, without any nutrition from the author.

It happens frequently that an art student is not aware of the nature of initiation. An artwork will be put on show and that's that. Alone, without support from the author, the artwork may look insufficient but the reason for that is not identified. The lighting is bad, the hanging is inadequate and the audience is too noisy. But in the real world, the neutral space, without much preparation, discloses within seconds the adequacy of the artwork, often giving the author a surprise: is it like this? does it look like this? is this the work I did? The initiation of the work becomes an initiation of the author as well.

An author may be surprised but even more so are the teachers, supervisors, and critics. A young artist may become identifiable only in a neutral space: the idiosyncrasy of the expression, any mannerism in representation, any bond to a person are not present in a gallery. At this moment something entirely new *may* appear, if there is any.

The criticism of art exhibitions, during the last hundred years, has revealed how important is the space and the place. Avant-garde movements, already in Alfred Jarry's gang, Dada and not the least the Bauhaus, expelled the naiveté of creation from the art shows: it is the showing, re-presenting, putting-into-the-show that counts. As a single gesture, Duchamp opened our eyes under the signature of R. Mutt (1917). The object had its history as an object, but its life as an artwork began in the gallery.



An art student only rarely comes into contact with theoretical ponderings about exposing herself through artworks. The institution already awaits her, its functions fixed, its operations mostly a guess. It is not her task to define the institution anew; on the contrary, the effects of the institution come from the fact *that it is there*, ready, already operational. Its force is unquestioned; its representational impact is never given another thought. Evidently, the institution itself should come under more critical thinking, even by art students: representation itself is no simple matter, nor is meaning-giving that takes place alongside the representational practices. But how to unfold practices that are taken as the ultimate good in art life?

Theories of representation and the development of practices around the institution of gallery both insinuate that *change* is more important than what already has been attained. An art student never enters a situation that is what it was: the gallery institution has been in constant change during the postmodern era only because the art world itself has challenged the institution by bringing into the forefront the idea of ubiquity of art. Galleries continue to exhibit artworks but, at the same time, art is everywhere where human eyes are: the shift from natural objects and landscapes to art objects is flexible enough to create a vast *gallery of the world*. This, more than anything else, emphasizes the worth of actual galleries that become – even in their play of change – spaces of representation of the representation itself.

For an art student a gallery means a place that is unhistorical, neutral and "pure", pure in the sense of "free from experiential memory". The purity indicates that all the disturbing factors are left outside, and an artwork rests on itself in order to become received. People who come inside will naturally bring with them *their*

experienced life-world, but the gallery itself does not taint the artwork with any meanings other than "artistic". Even the experienced life-world of the artist is left outside save the features revealed in her artworks. This artistry is of course a fake: there is no such purity anywhere. But it seems that for an artist in her novice years *belief* is important: a belief in separate universes, a belief in the divide between what has been and what begins just now. It is wished the artworks are presented as if they were born right now, at the moment, pristine and without the sins of earlier generations.

The tradition of gallery representation has produced a series of practices. The practice of *hanging* is an art as such: anyone present when a hanging is going on will be surprised how much *talk* is included. Talk goes on and on when an artist (or someone for her) tries to define the best order of the works, the lighting dominating a certain part of the room, the level of the upper edge and lower edge of the painting, the position of the statue or the installation towards the entrance of the room. There prevails an attempt to find *a pose* that would entirely deny a choice of a destiny, a destiny entering the room with the public. Presentation of artworks becomes a representation of a certain state of mind, a conception of art, and an attempt to manipulate the reception. The talk strives to manifest this change, from presentation to representation.

From the angle of art pedagogy, such a turn is a mishap. Becoming an artist is a struggle where no easy triumph is ahead. The situation is not helped by the idea that talking about hanging will solve the problem of how to show oneself as an artist. Supervisors and art teachers are well aware of the problem, but how to *explain* the strange step from presenting to a representation that appears in the hanging?

Criticism is another practice that becomes true, quite abruptly, only through gallery experience. Pedagogical reception will be gone forever once a young artist receives her first criticism: she meets the professional art world, often filled with rather unprofessional clerics, sometimes good writers, not often good advice. The critique sessions in art school have nothing in common with the criticism that becomes true through a public exhibition. As an artist, one cannot be prepared for this leap: one is taken seriously, perhaps for the first time, and, at the same time, someone quite unknown, at least personally, sees through one's manners, shortcomings, and budding ideas. It must be giddy: one is flattered by the new status one has, and one is devastated because of the new nakedness protected by no one.



From the viewpoint of art pedagogy, the exhibition is a double-edged tool. First, it prepares an art student for a more community-driven action, to work together, to find a role in a group through one's artworks, and – quite literally – speak out one's intentions while hanging. Second, it imitates life in a poor fashion because all know that such an exhibition is only a toy, a toy to play with, and no one's career steps are dependent on it. Playing with a real thing is pedagogically unwise since it conceals the severity of an artist's life: you either have success with your shows or you are a goner.

From another angle, an artist novice may benefit from a pedagogically motivated exhibition *in the case* she is prepared for the outcomes of it: becoming a member of a group, working together with people with various objectives, standing in comparison with others whose quality one is not able to assess, really seeing oneself and one's work of art in a new context where other factors than internal are most meaningful.

All this, however, requires a serious minded management: student group shows must be organized professionally, if possible by people independent of schools, colleges and universities. If the people in charge belong to the art world, either by profession or by identity, they are able to create a competitive atmosphere that gives way to certain aspects not easily met elsewhere: jurying, hanging, all round presenting of the show, a catalogue and a demanding context to talk about the works of art. It is like elevating the student works to a new level, to a new context where explaining yourself is not enough but where the talk puts a claim on re-contextualizing your work.

The really "heavy stuff" is to present yourself through the works to an audience that is not interested in personal explanations but instead demands interesting viewpoints and persuasive argumentation through the senses. Nothing can equip

one for such encounter in advance, but that's why the exhibition practice is needed: to become an agent in the real art world.

Tage Danielsson's film Picassos Äventyr (1978) provided a still presented here in a very foggy manner.

The rest of the pictures are, more or less, a common property of several thousand blogs in virtual reality.