



3.4 Art as a system as subject-matter

Who defines what is art or who is an artist? How are quality criteria established in the arts? How is a price put on an artwork, and how did it come to pass that art can be traded like a commodity at all? Should an interest in the arts be attributed to innate predisposition or to social influences? Why have the students at Swiss universities of arts and music mainly been young men who are → white and come from families from the upper and university-educated middle class, despite the fact that “talent” is supposed to be the key selection criterion in admissions exams? Questions like these are examples of subject matters of cultural mediation which examine art as a → system and encourage debate. They target the – frequently unwritten – rules of the → field of artistic activity, the market mechanisms or the social conditions in the various artistic domains.

→ white see Glossary

→ system see Glossary

→ field see Glossary

Addressing the topic of the systemic functions of cultural mediation itself constitutes a special case – arising, for instance, when mediators and participants discuss for whom, how and why the arts contribute to personal growth and /or why cultural mediation should take place at all.

In principle, “art as a system” can be introduced as a topic in any cultural mediation format – but in reality, at least in continental Europe, this happens quite rarely and, when it does appear, usually in very small doses. One can point to one reason for this in the latent tension that exists between the critical potential of this kind of thinking and the functions of cultural mediation, which has traditionally served to sustain and affirm the system. Because of that tension, cultural mediation staff do not tend to see questions like these as lending themselves to their purposes. Moreover, cultural mediators may be discouraged or even expressly prohibited from broaching such questions by the directors of cultural institutions.

The adoption of an alternative approach becomes more appealing when one realizes that (self-)criticisms and (self-)analysis can, to a certain degree, have a system-sustaining dimension. That is why, for instance, the Tate Galleries worked with education professionals to publish an “Art Gallery Handbook: A Resource for Teachers” (Tate Galleries 2006). Part of that publication discusses the institution’s selection processes and the offices endowed with the power to interpret, examining and questioning their authority. The fact that the Tate collaborates with schools a great deal suggests that the gallery has an interest in having partners in collaboration (teachers) who are well informed and independent thinkers. Moreover inviting teachers to think for themselves may do more to encourage them to identify with the Tate than would attempts to “convert” them to art. However, unanswered questions remain: how far institutions will allow critique to go and at what point and in what form it begins to be perceived by the institution as a threat or loss of control.