



FOR READING AT LEISURE Working in a Field of Tensions 5: Between Mediation, Art, Deconstruction and Transformation

"It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalise, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to. Because the institution of art is internalised, embodied, and performed by individuals, these are the questions that institutional critique demands we ask, above all, of ourselves." (Fraser 2005)

Cultural mediation as → deconstruction (Sturm 2001) combined with participative and artistic approaches, along with the aspiration to use mediation to analyze the power structures in cultural institutions, and in some cases cause them to change, though comparatively rare, is not a new phenomenon. Among its proponents at the end of the 1990s was the group → Kunstcoop@ at the Germany's Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst Berlin (NGBK 2001) and the group "Stördienst" at Vienna's Museum of Modern Art. The collective → microsillons is a contemporary example in Switzerland, as are → trafo.K, in Austria the duo → Transductores in Spain. One characteristic these organizations share is the context-specific development of arts mediation in the intersection of pedagogical, political and artistic practices, in exchange and in friction with institutions and a wide variety of interest groups. Art movements which see their work as set in the same field of tensions are an important reference for their practices. For instance, the English → Artist Placement Group of the 1960s, which in its turn drew from the Russian avant-garde of the early 20th century, in which artists forged partnerships with factory and agricultural workers (Rollig 2002). By the 1990s at the latest, the participative paradigm of new genre public art had taken shape (Jacob 1995; Lacy 1994, Babias 1995 is an example of how the subject was discussed in the German-speaking region). In this international field of practice it is quite difficult to separate out art, pedagogic and social-political activities, as the boundaries among them are systematically traversed. The movement in art mediation described briefly here grew up in the 1990s, to no small extent in opposition to a museum and art pedagogy whose advocates based their arguments chiefly on developmental psychology and creativity theories. One aspect of that pedagogy which attracted heavy criticism was the idea that attempts only to create enthusiasm and touch emotions failed both the art and the participants because it levelled the potential for learning in their productive resistances. Another point of criticism aimed at the → mechanisms of exclusion associated with access aiming only at individual development.

→ deconstruction see Glossary and Text 5.3

→ Kunstcoop@ <http://www.kunstcoop.de> [18.9.2012]

→ microsillons <http://www.microsillons.org> [18.9.2012]

→ trafo.K <http://www.trafo-k.at> [18.9.2012]

→ Transductores <http://transductores.net> [26.9.2012]

→ Artist Placement Group <http://www2.tate.org.uk/artistplacementgroup/> [26.9.2012]

→ mechanisms of exclusion see Text 4.RL



Since the 1990s, the art world and German-language scholarship on art pedagogy itself have been sources of stimuli emphasizing the autonomy and art-specific characteristics of mediation and highlighting the potential of contemporary art production for institutional education. The approach of “aesthetic education of difference”, for example, associates cultural mediation with the artistic tradition of non-instrumental thinking and views art pedagogy as one possible form of creative practice. Here, arts mediation becomes a point of resistance to the tendency to see it as a service that can be capitalized – to the seamless transmission of specialized knowledge and the optimization of social behaviours of the people involved.

→ [ethnicization codes](#) see Glossary

A third field which is a source of stimuli for art mediation with a deconstructive function is critical museology and the New Art History. These approaches have been questioning the power structures at play in the canon of knowledge as represented by museums and the way that canon is disseminated and taught. These approaches see texts to be read and deconstructed in the order in which objects are presented, the layout of spaces and rules governing behaviour in museums, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of the production of social exclusion, Michel Foucault's works on power, knowledge and discipline (Bennett 1995; Duncan 1996) and semiotics (Barthes 2003).¹ It attempts to analyze their economies, their gender codes, → [ethnicization codes](#) and the historical and social conditions in which they were formed, while bearing in mind that one can never have a fixed set of critical instruments, that every reading produces new texts. There was a conference held at the Tate Britain in 1992 titled “Gallery Education and The New Art History” (Vincentelli, Grigg 1992) which posed the question “How can gallery educators involve themselves in analysing or deconstructing their own gallery's practice?” In her talk, art historian Frances Borzello indicated that one special challenge and capacity associated with arts education lay in its inability to avoid the materiality of the works and the spaces of museum representation, which the New Art History has subjected to critical analysis while taking refuge in academic language. She said that in its interactions with audiences and subject material, arts education is forced to develop languages which democratize the discourse of New Art History, which also generates exclusion (Borzello 1992, p. 10). Thus Borzello stood up in front of an audience of museum education specialists and deconstructed their own scientific contexts, arguing implicitly against the traditionally devalued status (still detectable today) of cultural mediation work. She spoke of the increased complexity associated with the requirement to change linguistic registers, thus attacking the cliché that arts education inevitably leads to a simplification of content. This way of reading already taps into the aspiration set out in the New Art History (Borzello, Rees 1986) and New Museology (Vergo 1989; Hauenschild 1988) in the 1980s, that of producing counter-narratives through the active



inclusion of groups of largely excluded from museums so far (Giroux et al. 1994) and turning the museum into a place for interaction and debate.

In the 21st century, the intersection of the fields of cultural mediation, art, art studies and museology both in practice and in the discourse led to an → educational turn (→ Rogoff 2008; O'Neill, Wilson 2010) in the exhibition world – i.e. increasing interest in pedagogical formats and issues on the part of those producing exhibitions and artists. That interest was also encouraged by criticism of the market-oriented restructuring of European school systems, in particular in connection with the EU's adoption in 2000 of the → Lisbon Strategy. For that reason, projects and texts associated with the educational turn are often connected to a critique of the application of economic categories to knowledge and in particular to artistic education and training. They are also frequently associated with a search for alternative spaces and practices of education. Accordingly, greater attention was directed to approaches based on critical pedagogy, although people drew on a very broad spectrum of positions in this context, ranging from that of Paulo Freire (Freire 1973) to that of bell hooks (hooks 2003) to Jacques Rancière (Rancière 2007). At the practical level, the educational turn is articulated in, for instance, pedagogic formats for exhibition programmes which define the public as a collaborating element (see e. g. the project → Wide Open School of London's Hayward Gallery in the summer of 2012²), in the re-invention of historical forms such as Brecht and Weill's Singspiel (cf. e.g. the productions of the St. Petersburg collective → Chto delat? [What is to be done?]), in the linkages in the production of artistic and didactic materials (c.f. the download of available videos and comics from the collective → Pinky Show, some of whose users are teachers), in self-organized spaces for artist education (e.g. the → parallel school of art; the → Free/slow University of Warsaw) or in artistic projects exploring the conditions of learning (e. g. the work of → Hidden Curriculum of the artist Annette Krauss, in collaboration with students from schools in the Netherlands (Krauss, undated)).

There are many intersections between the contents, intentions and practices of → deconstructive or → transformative arts mediation, on the one side, and the artistic and curatorial inquiries associated with the educational turn on the other. However so far the work done in cultural mediation and the knowledge of its practitioners have seldom been acknowledged by artists or exhibition organizers (→ Sternfeld 2010; Mörsch 2011; schnittpunkt 2012). This ignorance reflects a traditional hierarchy between the fields of art and education. One must hope that collaboration will one day become possible in more places because there are fields of tension which need to be addressed collectively, and with them potentially productive opportunities to interlink the curatorial, artistic and educational production of knowledge. One such opportunity has to do with the → tension which exists between the production of exclusion and the paternalism

→ educational turn see Glossary

→ Rogoff 2008 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/18> [21.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0501.pdf

→ EU Lisbon Strategy http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm [14.10.2012]; see Resource Pool MFV0503.pdf

→ Wide Open School <http://wideopenschool.com/> [14.5.2012]

→ Chto delat? <http://www.chtodelat.org> [14.5.2012]

→ Pinky Show <http://www.pinkyshow.org> [25.9.2012]

→ parallel school of art <http://www.parallel-school.com> [19.10.2012]

→ free/slow University of Warsaw <http://www.wuw-warsaw.pl> [7.12.2014]

→ Hidden Curriculum <http://www.post-editions.com/?page=hiddencurriculum> [25.9.2012]

→ deconstructive arts mediation see Text 5.3

→ transformative arts mediation see Text 5.5

→ Sternfeld 2010 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/unglamorous-tasks-what-can-education-learn-from-its-political-traditions> [14.10.2012]; see Resource Pool MFV0502.pdf

→ Tension see Text 2. RL



of targeted invitation and inclusion policies. The formation of an alliance to analyze the subject collectively and develop options for moving forward which draw on the full range of perspectives might be very productive in that regard. The same applies to another field of tension, that related to the wish for equality within partnerships. For instance, when a cultural institution enters into collaboration with a small educational centre, it does so from a position of power. The power imbalance not be due to superiority of material resources, on the contrary, it is primarily a matter of → cultural and social capital. This means that the creation of an equal footing between partners requires active effort on the part of the institution in cooperation with its partners. Practitioners from all of the relevant professional fields, curating, programme design, the production of participation-oriented art participation and education and arts mediation can recall experiences in which the status of persons actively contributing to project design was downgraded to that of “project materials”. Or in which a situation in which a balance has been struck between everyone’s interests deteriorates into one in which the exploitation of workers was justified by pointing to symbolic compensation. Examining issues from multiple perspectives and developing options collectively could contribute to encouraging self-reflective practices and taking more intentional and deliberate decisions.

→ cultural and social capital
see Glossary entry on capital,
types of

A third field of tension is associated with thinking about acting within power structures. This relates to the question about the aesthetic of projects at the intersection of art and education. While cultural institutions cultivate a highly receptive sensorium with respect to what is “good form” or, for some institutions, “cool”, such standards may not always be in harmony with the ways participants and cooperation partners wish to represent themselves. There are a variety of requirements, quality standards and interests in respect of modes of presentation at work here. On the part of the institution, the response to this tension has often been one of either assimilation or exclusion: a project must adapt itself to the design parameters of the recognized authorities in the relevant artistic field, if not, it will not gain visibility or might not even take place. In contrast, self-reflective cultural mediation attempts to take the aesthetic articulations of all participants seriously. However, this should not take place at the expense of the creation, in an informed and elaborated form, of a visibility, which could, in many cases, be beneficial for the project and those involved in it. Again, this balancing act and the negotiation processes associated with it would involve an exchange among cultural mediation, curatorial and artistic practices which might lead to interesting results. Below, we describe an example of cultural mediation in the framework of a partnership between a grassroots group and a large exhibiting institution in order to suggest some approaches for dealing with the fields of tensions at issue.

The research and development project “Kunstvermittlung in Transformation” was carried out in Switzerland in 2009 and 2010 (Settele et al.



2012). Four art universities and six museums took part in the project, the aim of which was to research ways in which museum mediation can be improved. The Institute for Art Education (IAE) of Zurich University of the Arts worked with Museum für Gestaltung Zürich [Zurich Museum of Design] in the project to develop multiple pilot projects. One of these was a co-operative partnership between Nora Landkammer, researcher at the IAE, and the association “Bildung für Alle” [Education for All] and its project, the → [Autonome Schule](#).³ The Autonome Schule [Autonomous School] provides German language instruction and other activities for Zurich residents who are barred from formal education systems. Nora Landkammer contacted the organization with the plan of developing a cultural mediation project for the → [Global Design](#) exhibition at the Museum für Gestaltung, which explored the impacts of globalization on design.

The exhibition was intended as an opportunity for taking a close look at globalization and visibility, which everyone involved – including the museum – would learn from. Alone the fact that a research institution attached to a large university of the arts made contact with a small grassroots organization of immigrants and non-immigrants placed this project in the paradoxical situation mentioned above, of wanting to create an equal playing field while starting from a position of power. In this particular case, it was possible to influence (though not eliminate) the paradox, thanks to the fact that both the group and the arts mediator were highly conscious of the fact that they were acting in a situation where power was distributed unequally. Right from the start, the group actively sought to clarify how the various roles were to be distributed within the project and who would benefit from the partnership in what way. The group was unwilling to allow itself to be instrumentalized for research purposes or as a means for producing → [symbolic added-value](#) for the museum. In all phases of the partnership, the people involved took great care to ensure that everyone’s motivations were openly articulated, regularly scrutinized and respected, to ensure the preservation of a “minimal equilibrium”, without pretending that the inequality in resource distribution did not exist. Thus, for instance, the partners decided collectively that the arts mediator and one member of the group would lead the project as a team. In this context it was important that the mediator did not define in advance specific processes or subject-matters for the project. Instead, these were actually developed collectively within the group. Accordingly, the project was given the very open name “Atelier” [studio] – the term for a workshop in which the unexpected and unplanned could occur in many different forms of activities. The group was made up of 15 interested persons who were attending German classes at the Autonome Schule. Their first step was to visit the exhibition together, multiple times. After this they met with the chief curator. The first objection was voiced during the group’s visits to the exhibition: the “we” form used in the

→ [Autonome Schule](#) <http://www.schuel.ch> [25.9.2012] see Text 4.4

→ [Global Design](#) <http://www.museum-gestaltung.ch/de/ausstellungen/rueckblick/2010/global-design> [26.9.2012]

→ [symbolic added-value](#) see Glossary



exhibition texts and the catalogue – which stressed that the use of credit cards as a form of payment is normal today – was aimed only at relatively affluent members of society and above all, those with legal residency status. Similarly, the objects shown in the exhibition struck the group right away as being beyond their reach, either financially or because of their immigration status. The invitation to a group to attend an exhibition and work with subject-matter neither of which were created for them or with them in mind, generated the → field of tension between paternalism and the institution's desire to be more open. In response to this tension, the group decided to refrain from defining possible interests in advance, as a target group approach might have dictated. Instead, a space for discussion was opened up to allow the group to ascertain what their positions and interests vis-à-vis the museum and the exhibition might be.

As a result, the project should be seen less as a form of → participation than as → collaboration with the institution – one appropriately open-ended with respect to results. Following the exhibition visits, the group worked with visual media in various workshops and developed ways to approach urban space through the camera from the angle of globalization and taking up the themes along which the exhibition was organized: mobility, communication, economy and control. In the course of these exploratory efforts, the group decided to work on the themes from the perspective of people who are living in Zurich illegally and hope to remain there. During the activities in urban spaces it was occasionally necessary for the institution to actively work on the creation of an equal playing field, or to redistribute resources. The cameras for the participants were lent to Atelier by the IAE. A letter accompanied the devices, so that none of the participants who did not have residency permits would be suspected of stealing the cameras if stopped by the police. After a few meetings, the team leading the project suggested that the group collectively produce a publication that would help people in similar situations to get by: a “Bleibeführer” [Guide to Staying], the title an ironic twist on the ubiquitous “Reiseführer” [travel guides] for tourists. The collective creation of that publication filled the next few months. In this phase, the group had the opportunity to work in the third field of tension: the one resulting from differences in aesthetics. The question of the Bleibeführer's aesthetic, its form and its appearance, was not an easy one to resolve. The members of the group came from different socio-economic backgrounds and different geo-political regions and had varying ways of approaching design. The arts mediator intervened to a greater degree at this point than she had in the rest of the process because she felt responsible in more than one way for the project's product: to the museum, to the research institute and, to no small extent, to her own design standards and the cultural mediation project itself. She applied her own design expertise to the process. Though all of the decisions concerning the selection of texts and images were

→ field of tension see Text 2.RL

→ participation see Text 4.3

→ collaboration see Text 4.4



discussed and made by the group as a whole, in the end the → *Bleibeführer* reflected homogenous, modern standards – and conventions – in its graphic design. This rendered it acceptable to the museum as a product and won it a place next to the other items for sale in the museum shop. At the same time, it was under great demand in Zurich by organizations working on immigration issues. Thus the “professional look” of the publication had multiple tactical benefits and resulted in the release of a second print run for it (Landkammer, Polania 2012).

In this project, the → *cultural mediation's functions* with respect to the museum were complex. They included a reproductive dimension, since new museum-goers were created, at least temporarily. This aspect received less emphasis than did the project's deconstructive function. The latter function was associated with the critical scrutiny of the implicit audience targeting which the museum, and the exhibition visited, “Global Design”, effected – scrutiny which took place not only at the level of discourse but also through the presence of persons who are barred access to most societal resources due to → *routine and structural racism*. Another factor highlighting the deconstructive function is the fact that the creation of *Bleibeführer* constituted the creation of a new contribution which took its place in an array of other pre-existing contributions put forth as interpretations of the theme “Global Design”, and in doing so shifted the meaning of that term. The project also encompassed a transformative dimension: in its formation of a group whose activities extended beyond the formats used in museum mediation in the past, in the opening of cultural mediation as a space for social-political action and through the demand for the “*Bleibeführer*” from another field of social activity. The museum transformed itself within this framework into an “institution critique”, of the kind called for in the quotation which introduces this text from Andrea Fraser, who believes that thirty years of institutional critique should have some effect. In the medium term, the project “Kunstvermittlung in Transformation”, within which the “Atelier” project was set, contributed to a visible change at the museum: with the 2012 creation of the post of “curator of mediation”. That is – and this is part of our thesis – also a symptom of the educational turn described above: the elevation of the status of mediation in many cultural institutions. This elevated status is key to further advances in this field of work. If the standards articulated in the discourse surrounding the educational turn are to be met, it is important that pedagogical expertise consistently be brought into play in cultural mediation projects, to encourage pedagogical reflexive practice. This is not an expertise which the artists involved in cultural mediation or programme designers necessarily have. It remains to be seen whether the educational turn will turn out to be a powerful one, in the sense of a paradigm shift, and result in cultural institutions in which artistic, curatorial and pedagogic knowledge operate in combination and on a basis of equality.

→ *Bleibeführer* <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8GZVOIC-v9OPsk5sSkJ1MVZ1R2c/edit?pli=1> [22.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0504.pdf

→ *Functions of cultural mediation* see texts für Eilige in 5. What does cultural mediation do?

→ *routine and structural racism* see Glossary



- 1 “[...] [Culler citing Derrida’s Positions] ‘In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other ... occupies the commanding position...’. [...] The practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but in order to breach it” (Culler 1982, p.95).
- 2 The text announcing the project on Southbank Centre’s website reads “This summer, [...], the Hayward Gallery transforms into Wide Open School. An experiment in public learning, Wide Open School offers a programme devised and fuelled by the imaginations of more than 80 artists from over 40 different countries. Intended as a meeting place for people who love learning but don’t necessarily like being taught, Wide Open School presents the opportunity for people of all ages and walks of life to explore different ways of learning about a wide variety of subjects, alongside leading artists”.
- 3 I wish to thank my colleague Nora Landkammer here for making her written notes available to me; they provided the basis for my brief description, which permitted only a encapsulated version of the project’s complexity.

Literature and Links

This text is based in parts on the following previously published papers:

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Links:

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- Autonome Schule: <http://www.schuel.ch> [25.9.2012]
- Büro trafo.K: <http://www.trafo-k.at> [18.9.2012]
- Duo Transductores: <http://transductores.net> [26.9.2012]
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- Gruppe Kunstcoop©: <http://www.kunstcoop.de> [18.9.2012]



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