

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES Marie-Hélène Boulanger: Cultural mediation, or the Story of a Special Encounter

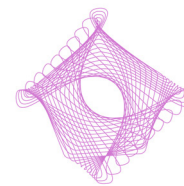
The doors to our institutions seem imposing and massive to those who do not already possess the cultural keys to open them. Yet sometimes it only takes a single encounter, one first experience with an artwork, to make the barriers fall. The way of seeing is transformed, the cultural adventure can begin.

The question is: how can that encounter be provoked. How does someone become a visitor or audience member? On one's own, the first step seems too big... and accompanied? It is by offering this accompaniment that cultural mediation takes on its entire meaning, because it invites people to explore by dismantling preconceptions and reticence. It provides access to the work, not by offering pedagogic analysis but through confidence building, which creates favourable conditions for reception.

Although the term cultural mediation has only recently found its way into the institutional vocabulary, the aspiration to democratize culture is not a new one. The history of Geneva's oldest theatre, the Comédie de Genève itself has been shaped by a philanthropic vision from its earliest days. It was founded in 1913 by four members of the Union pour l'Art Social who wanted to "introduce to art a very large audience which has been kept away from the artistic movement due to economic circumstances". One hundred years later the Comédie continues to pursue this vision by developing cultural mediation projects for multiple audiences.

Since the 2009/2010 season, the Comédie has benefited from the work of "cultural attachés", who help it open its doors to new theatre goers from diverse backgrounds. Appointed for one season, the cultural attachés invite two or three people from their community to accompany them to each performance. In their capacity as mediators, they encourage engagement with the theatre, facilitate access to the site and guide the viewers in their encounters with art (whether or not it is their first). More than 600 people have been invited and thus have experienced one of the performances of the Comédie de Genève since the project started.

Holding a Master degree in Cultural Management, Marie-Hélène Boulanger was responsible for cultural mediation at the Théâtre de Bourg-en-Bresse (France). She has been responsible for audience development at the Comédie de Genève since May of 2012.



CHANGING PERSPECTIVES Denise Felber: Why Have Cultural Mediation in Schools?

Cultural mediation? No cultural mediation?

The question does not arise for the average teacher – cultural mediation takes place in schools, it is a tradition. Certainly one rooted in enthusiasm for culture and the arts, but most of the time without any deliberate rationale. And fairly often, the teachers who, though interested in culture, are overwhelmed by the complexity of the material, choose free cultural mediation projects for their classes which require minimal efforts on their part and which their school, for one reason or another, believes to have proven effective.

There is often no one who can answer the most pertinent questions – what is done in the project, why is it needed, what are its objectives?

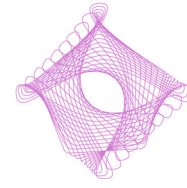
Children and young people fail to take up the offer to participate; already scant resources are depleted further to organize and finance the projects. In addition, the teachers themselves are often poorly networked: they are active as representatives of a subject of instruction, an artistic discipline, but not (yet) as cultural ambassadors who have their own positions on cultural mediation. We should not forget to mention, too, the lack of a common understanding as to what constitutes cultural mediation.

However, sustained engagement with artistic ways of thinking and acting issues an unremitting challenge: exploration-based learning requires one to confront uncomfortable questions and doubts.

Cultural mediation is a must for schools! Curiosity-driven exploration of culture and appropriate education about it are quite simply predestined to cause not just students, but teachers as well, to continue learning and growing. Professional teachers see themselves as cultural-communication experts, who examine their own work in a questioning/improving and critical approach and thus continually enhance their own abilities.

Cultural mediation requires this open, exploratory attitude from teachers: teachers are no longer people who prepare learning material, but the initiators of ideas, observations and perceptions which it is their job to put into context, to exchange, to communicate, to realize and to analyze with their students.

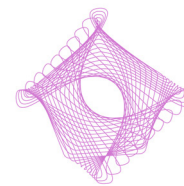
In order to take on this role, teachers have to be willing and able to scrutinize their routine perspective on things, to call into question that



which they would otherwise see as self-evident, to transform themselves into an research object. Only then is an experimental approach possible, only then can something new take shape, can something other than the expected sometimes occur.

Engagement with art as a “school of the multiplicity of meaning, the multiplicity of interpretation, of grappling with dichotomies and with conflicts, including irresolvable conflicts” trains teachers to get close to the required exploratory attitude, and “There can be no substitute for that.” (Adolf Muschg).

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CHANGING PERSPECTIVES Eszter Gyarmathy: Cultural Mediation: Why?

What is interesting about the survey of the different legitimizations for cultural mediation is the cookie-cutter approach taken in each case. This illustrates the impossibility of extracting cultural mediation from its societal and economic environment or trying to comprehend it in the full complexity of its larger context.

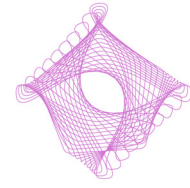
The argumentation relating to power structures is striking. It frames all the legitimizations as a proof of performance for a paying customer: one whose expectations are also reflected in these reports on activities. Those providing funding want performance and outcomes. Those doing the performing may have defined their offer themselves, not per request, but they still have to deliver on their promises. This “conformity with the system” determines the rationales set out in the survey.

Cultural mediation is not the same as art making. It is a meta-cultural production, it communicates that which has been created by others using other means. Yet with respect to the justification for its existence vis-à-vis the public coffers, it is scarcely different from the creation of culture funded in the same way. That too is subject to the requirement that it justify itself in the eyes of the public.

Publicly funded cultural mediation, and certainly also some of the creation of culture, serves to meet societal needs which have been identified in the political sphere. To this extent, cultural mediation and culture creation can be understood as services. Policymakers and administrators justify them, in turn, to their customers. And why do those customers want cultural mediation? Probably for the sake of culture alone, or the repercussions that the creation of culture has on all of us.

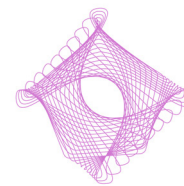
Something is missing from all of the legitimizations presented here: the art, the artwork, the artist, the human being (*c’est le regardeur qui fait l’œuvre*). Yet they are present wherever there is art. The appalling term “cognitive capitalism” can be understood as the exploitation of the receptor, the person doing the receiving. Thus the exercise of political power takes its place alongside that of the power of the (cultural mediation) market.

So why should we have cultural mediation? Public support for culture must step in to ensure that the creation of culture and its perception by



individuals does not (or does not only) take place according to the dictates of power structures or economic necessities in order to preserve artistic freedom. If we do not provide such support, we are putting artistic freedom up for debate, and by doing so, undermining the meaning of art for our society.

Eszter Gyarmathy *is the Delegate for Culture of the City of Biel.*

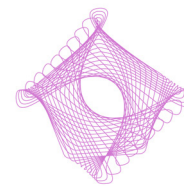


CHANGING PERSPECTIVES Raphaëlle Renken: I Love Cultural Mediation

When I, at 16, declared my ardour for cultural mediation (which I called “introduction to the arts” back then, to define an occupation which almost no one had ever heard of at the time), there were two things motivating me. One was my newly discovered passion for contemporary art, combined with a boundless desire to help people to understand it. The other was the irresistible urge to throw open the museum doors flaunting “No public admittance” signs. The urge to explain and the desire to lift the veils have remained with me, but my motivation has changed: I want to encourage the public to engage in active, yes, even creative participation.

What good are all the efforts of cultural institutions to preserve and exhibit art if they are not combined with the aim of stimulating visitors in some way with the objects on display? That is the job of the cultural mediator! The cultural mediator, like Dr. Knock in Jules Romains' play, ignites the twitching, tingling and itching in the visitors. Cultural mediation is a way to trigger symptoms through the perception of a work or an object. The cultural mediator displays an unshakable optimism: nobody is insensitive and everything has potential to promote sensitivity. Unlike the aim of the conniving doctor, the objective here is not to provoke imaginary symptoms to inflate the treatment price. Nor is it to believe in the healing power of art, for no one can ever recover from art. The cultural mediator makes sure of that too.

Raphaëlle Renken has been responsible for cultural mediation in Geneva's Musée d'art et d'histoire [Museum of Art and History] since 2001. From 2003 to 2009 she also worked in Lausanne's Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts [Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts], developing and heading a sector for welcoming visitors. In 2010 she was commissioned by Association Vaudoise de Danse Contemporaine [the Vaudoise association of contemporary dance] to develop and coordinate a platform for dance education for the Swiss Canton of Vaud. She also lectures on dance history and art criticism.



CHANGING PERSPECTIVES David Vuillaume: Cultural Mediation and Museums

The ubiquitous use of the term “Vermittlung” [cultural mediation, but also literally mediation] in today’s museums owes a great deal to the struggle of cultural mediators for the recognition of their profession.¹ The International Council of Museums explicitly included education professionals in its list of → *22 occupational profiles* making up the spectrum of museum professions. Yet we must not forget that the museum itself is a mediation tool, since museums and thus all of those who work in them function as a nexus between various spaces and divergent interests. Between here and elsewhere, today and yesterday, immediacy and permanency, the museum is a place of confrontation and negotiation between visitors and objects, between members of the public and [cultural] heritage.

Mediation processes are also necessary within an institution. It has been well established that a museum is an institution “which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”.² Conserving, researching, promoting, educating: these four activities, which give the museum its identity, create a tension specific to museums. While a museum may tend to look inward in its research and conservation activities, in its promotion and exhibition activities it opens itself to the outside world. The institution must seek a way to balance out this fundamental contradiction. Then, too, the museum is an instrument of mediation between elitism and democratization. Other sources of tension associated with the functions museums are supposed to fulfill require other forms of mediation, for instance, between market and pedagogy, passivity and action, or between high and popular culture, to name only binary alternatives.

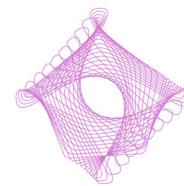
Since cultural mediation calls for negotiation and the search for balance, it is ideally suited to museums, which are continuously causing different worlds to collide and have to attain a certain degree of harmony among innumerable viewpoints.

David Vuillaume is Secretary General of VMS (*Museumsverband Schweiz: [Swiss association of museums]*) und ICOM Schweiz [*International Council of Museums*].

¹ For instance, mediamus, Schweiz. Verband der Fachleute für Bildung und Vermittlung im Museum → <http://www.mediamus.ch> [15.2.2013].

² Definition of the International Council of Museums ICOM (Ethische Richtlinien, 2004 → <http://www.museums.ch/standards/ethik> [15.2.2013]. For other definitions of museums, see Desvallées 2011).

→ *22 occupational profiles* <http://www.museums.ch/publikationen/publikationen/museumsberufe> [15.2.2013]



CHANGING PERSPECTIVES Federal Office of Culture, Culture and Society Section: Why Does the Swiss Confederation Support Cultural Mediation?

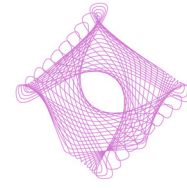
This text also serves as a Changing Perspective text for section 5. What Does Cultural Mediation Do?

There are many good reasons to fund cultural mediation from the public coffers. Arguments for doing so can be framed along economic, fiscal, pedagogic, didactic, artistic and social lines, depending on one's point of view.

For the Swiss Confederation, societal dimensions take centre stage. The legislature pointed the way forward by declaring in the Swiss Culture Promotion Act [KFG] that one of the objectives of the Confederation's cultural promotion is to allow and facilitate access to culture (art. 3(d) KFG: Kulturförderungsgesetz). Projects with that objective receive preferential status for Confederation support (art. 8(a) KFG). The official "Botschaft" [message] accompanying the legislation directly links the promotion of access with cultural mediation (explanatory commentary on art. 8 KFG).

The emphasis on the aspects of participation and inclusion is explained by the level of importance that the Federal Council attaches to culture: "...culture is an essential factor of political and social life, an effective instrument of integration and social cohesion. Therefore, active cultural policy is not restricted to promoting artistic creation or safeguarding cultural heritage. It is also aimed at encouraging as far as possible participation of all groups of the population in cultural life. [...] The arts sharpen our perception and enlarge our consciousness. There is no better school than art to teach us to see, to enhance our awareness, our capacity to differentiate. Careful and critical listening, watching and thinking teaches people to be alert, to express themselves and to discern. Once a sensorial perception makes the transition to become emotional or intellectual realization, it takes on significance for a broader society. The intrinsic value of culture lies in its ability to allow people to understand themselves and their surroundings and to make themselves understood" [Message on the Promotion of Culture (Botschaft zur Förderung der Kultur) 2012–2015].

Participation of a broad and diverse audience has relevance for the legitimacy of cultural promotion: in past decades cultural offerings available in Switzerland (and in other countries as well) have expanded dramatically while the level of audience interest has not kept pace. Thus if this expansion is to be sustainable, cultural promotion cannot be restricted to subsidizing



providers of cultural offerings (expansion and consolidation of offerings). It must also encompass measures to develop future users of arts and culture.

The primary tools used by the Confederation to improve access to culture in the 2012–2015 period are language promotion, promotion of musical education, promotion of literacy (measures of the Federal Office of Culture) and the support of arts mediation projects (measures of Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council).

The Culture and Society Section addresses issues of cultural mediation and participation in culture, specifically in the areas of promotion of language skills, literacy/reading, musical education and lay and folk culture.