FOR READING AT LEISURE Working in a Field of Tensions 6:
Cultural Mediation – Between the Need for
Legitimization and Critique of Cultural Hegemony

*"At this point, one probably has to ask whether there is a way out of these manifold
entanglements. If pedagogy is one of the major technologies of control, can arts
education ever be progressive or emancipatory? […] The question is an essential one
because there is no middle way – no 'neutral pedagogy'."*
(Marchart 2005)

There are as yet very few places which have recognized the equal and
autonomous status of cultural mediation (both as a practice and as a field
of discourse) in cultural institutions and with respect to the arts, called
for at the end of text 5.RL.

This circumstance gives rise to another field of tension for cultural
mediation which wishes to see itself as a critical practice. Its representati-
ves are forced to lobby for their field of work, to seek legitimacy in the eyes
of the institutions, of the art world, of cultural and education policymakers
and, last but not least, of their own colleagues. It might seem natural for
them to turn to the arguments set out in the "Quick Read" texts in this chapter.
Yet those striving for a critical practice are aware of the critiques of those
legitimizations, also set out in these texts; indeed, to some extent they are
the source of those critiques.[1] Before we turn to consider how this field
of tensions can be influenced, we will present a survey of the key points of
criticism. At the same time, this review will serve to recapitulate the
discussions presented in the in-depth texts in the foregoing chapters.[2]

One central critique relates to the instrumentalization of the arts
and of art education as a factor affecting economic success and the
attractiveness of a location. The potential of the arts, in this view, is in its
engagement with that which has no utility, is not exploitable, the provo-
cative, the uncomfortable, the incalculable, the different, the untranslata-
ble. Initiatives like "Kompetenznachweis Kultur" of Bundesvereinigung
für Kulturelle Jugendbildung [German Association for Cultural Education for
Youth] in which young participants in cultural mediation programmes
are issued a certificate of cultural competence, are pointing in the wrong
direction from this perspective, because their arguments for cultural
mediation are closely tied up with benefits for the employment market in
the sense of improved "employability" of participants. This entails an
implicit economization of art and education. It views the increase in the
ability to compete in the job market and willingness to perform as
fundamentally beneficial, ignoring the fact that the arts are a source of
alternative visions for how societies should be structured. One also
has to point out that, thus far anyway, artists and so-called "creative

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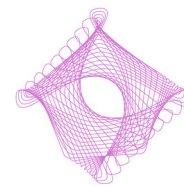
practitioners" are still being pushed into → *precarity*, despite the enhanced status of their field of work. In the context of the deregulation of markets and social system, the attributes associated with artists, i.e. flexibility, willingness to take risks, willingness to perform and take on responsibility independently, make them excellently suited as role models.

Arguments emphasizing the so-called "transfer effects" of cultural mediation, with reference to the findings of neuroscience, are also permeated with the competition paradigm. They focus on individual development and increase of performance capacity, without addressing conditions in society. Moreover, neuroscience-based rationales for cultural mediation have tended to equate culture with conservative concepts of the canon of high culture absolutely. Parents should play classical music for their embryos, not punk rock.

Studies such as François Matarasso's 1997 "Use or Ornament?", with its list of fifty positive transfer effects of cultural mediation, have had an enormous impact on funding policies, primarily in the English-speaking world. There, too, one finds criticism challenging the validity of such studies, those based on neuroscience or on social sciences (Merli 2002). While neuroscientifically supported arguments for cultural mediation focus on individual cognitive abilities, social science studies, such as that of Matarasso, stress the beneficial transfer effects that cultural mediation has on the social environment and social behaviour. One aspect of this legitimization worth criticizing is the fact that it uses "cultural participation" as a substitute for genuine involvement in political decision-making. A conservative government in a German federal state can serve as an example here: having taken office, it cut funding for regional anti-racism initiatives and simultaneously introduced a new requirement for the region's free art schools to run projects in secondary schools "with a high proportion of immigrants" (Mörsch 2007). This constitutes the redirection of efforts to combat racism away from those who perpetrate it and towards those affected by it. Implicitly, it is also a case of the → *culturalization* of a political and societal problem. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that culture is a doubly loaded term: "Recourse to the concept of culture is associated with a problem of identification since one culture can be defined only in opposition to other cultures. In the name of culture, the shift away from traditional values, a characteristic phenomenon of our time, is regularly being reinterpreted to promote a fantasy of emphatic self-definition, which per se defines cultural differences asymmetrically as dominant or inferior characteristics. [...] From this point of view, every culture should be considered to be colonial" (Rölli 2006, pp. 30 – 41). Thus the suggestion that cultural mediation is per se good for "the people" must be put into context: it frequently involves the transmission, at least implicitly, of moral concepts that are distinctly Western or even bound up with national identity. Conversely, the notion of promoting "cultural diversity" harbours the risk

→ *precarity* see Glossary

→ *culturalization* see Glossary

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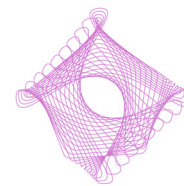
of → *ethnic essentialization*, because it involves relegating persons to categories on the basis of the cultural practices – attributed to them by others – of their countries of origin. Almost no other position within the cultural field is granted to people who are addressed in such a way (→ *Steyerl 2007*, pp. 21 – 23). This objection takes on particular urgency in view of the present-day shift from "biological" to "cultural racism": racially motivated aggression, policing, stricter laws and reporting in the media are increasingly oriented towards a matrix of culturally-marked oppositions, such as "anti-western Muslim" (Taguieff 1998).

There may be good intentions behind a requirement like the one described above, imposed on art schools for young adults. However the social context which gives rise to discriminatory treatment in the first place is seldom part of the efforts to create change connected with such measures. It is usually the job of the individuals concerned to overcome their situation and display an interest. The → *paternalistic* dimension involved in assigning attributes associated with the targeting of groups defined as minorities is ignored to a similar degree. Another problematic aspect of the inclusion idea is that it presupposes that culture and its institutions are indisputable constants which are good for all human beings, and need themselves never to change.

This review makes it clear once again that the points of criticism presented all have something in common: they analyse ostensibly natural social conventions and relationships and ostensibly neutral contexts like cultural or educational facilities as the basis for the reproduction of inequality and for the production of social standards. Thus these objections are critical of hegemonic structures, in the sense explored at the end of Text 1.RL.

Multiple authors, all of whom are involved in both theoretical and practical work in cultural mediation, have outlined guidelines for alternative approaches to shifting and reworking the hegemonic structures under the banner of arts education as a critical, change-promoting practice (Sternfeld 2005; Sturm 2002; Mörsch 2009 a). Having reviewed the points of criticism above, we will now turn to present a summary of these guidelines.

Cultural mediation as (hegemony) critical practice emphasizes the potential represented by the experience of difference in education with art and opposes the idea of efficiency with the upgrading of the value of failure, of exploratory movements, of open processes and of offensive non-utility as a source of disturbance. Instead of presenting the desire to continually optimize oneself to individuals as the best survival option, it makes spaces available to them in which problems can be identified and grappled with – in addition to fun, pleasure, the joy of making, training of perception and the transfer of specialized knowledge. These are spaces in which dissent is seen as constructive and in which attributes which are ostensibly indisputably positive, like the love of art or the willingness to work, are challenged

→ *ethnic essentialization* see Glossary

→ *Steyerl 2007* http://eipcp.net/ transversal/0101/steyerl/de [21.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0602.pdf

→ *paternalism* see Glossary

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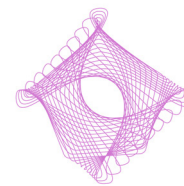
and where people can discuss what the good life means for whom and how a good life for everyone can be attained. The point is less lifelong learning than life-prolonging learning.

Cultural mediation of this kind opens up spaces for action in which no one suffers discrimination on the basis of age, origin, appearance, physical dispositions, sex or sexual orientation, in which no supposed knowledge about others is produced or used as a foundation, but rather, one in which proceeds with partiality with the aim of communicative, pedagogical reflexivity.

Spaces where it is therefore also necessary to reflect on the cultural mediator's own privileged status, to contest it and to exploit it strategically to promote greater justice. Despite a possible dearth of material resources and a weak position within the institutional structure, the majority of cultural mediators do enjoy a great many privileges, such as the right skin colour, access to the right knowledge and the right culture (Castro Varela, Dhawan 2009).

Constituent attributes of cultural mediation spaces of this kind are a re-flexivity with respect to the concept of culture and an active resistance to the culturalization of conflicts and political problems, as well as a reflexivity vis-à-vis the values and myths associated with "art". Cultural mediation work thus also serves to promote exchange about how the arts and their → *subsystems* function.

Instead of "fostering talent" and "self-development", critical cultural mediation attempts to permit a transparent transmission of tools for learning. This attempt is based both on a thoughtful approach to one's own starting points and circumstances as well as to the potential associated with the arts to design, to intervene, to reinterpret and to change (including collectively and across borders between knowledges and languages). And, to complete the circle, this work is based on the special possibilities offered by the arts to give form to all of that, forms, however, which remain open to many interpretations and, in the best case, avoid instrumentalization.

As suggested above, the attempt to institute cultural mediation as a critical practice is a destabilizing enterprise at multiple levels. In a field which at present is still struggling to establish its status and against being pushed into precarity, one which is still being forced to justify its own existence, this approach produces yet more stumbling blocks. It means that, along with constantly questioning themselves, cultural mediators may well face a lack of broad acceptance, even among their own colleagues. Moreover, a critical approach to cultural mediation can hardly be said to have a documented history to draw on as a matter of course. It was not so long ago that cultural mediation was a field of practice only; its historiography and theoretical framework is still quite young.

However, there are growing numbers of cultural mediators who are interested in developing a critical practice in its many possible facets, which
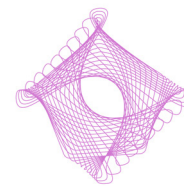
the guidelines above highlight. These mediators are developing ways of dealing with the field of tensions mentioned above, taking a position between an attitude critical of hegemonic structures and the need for legitimization. One can describe their approaches as two related strategies: i) network building and thus reinforcing and improving the position of the individual through collective cohesion and ii) the struggle inherent in any criticism of hegemonic structures against becoming hegemonic oneself, and with that, the formation of alliances. Networking of cultural mediators interested in a critical practice is currently happening in many places. Symposiums play a key role, and above all symposium series because they provide the opportunity for repeated encounters and continuing discussions. One example is the series "Educational Turn" held by → *schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie und praxis* [3], which brought together a very diverse group of people interested in the → *Educational Turn* for discussions in symposiums held in three consecutive years (schnittpunkt 2012).

The symposium series "Prácticas dialógicas" developed by Javier Rodrigo and Aida Sanchez de Serdio Martins in Spain (Rodrigo 2007) took a similar approach. These symposiums were also held on an annual basis in various different Spanish museums and made a valuable contribution to the formation of an informal network of critically oriented art mediators. Currently, an international network is taking shape under the name "Another Roadmap", motivated chiefly by the critical reading of the → *UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education*. The UNESCO Roadmap is a lobby paper which strongly advocates the establishment of cultural mediation (chiefly in schools, but also outside of them) in all countries of the world. This paper clearly illustrates the dilemma facing hegemony-critical cultural mediation. On the one hand, its practitioners cannot but welcome such vigorous advocacy. On the other hand though, the legitimizations it puts forth are open to all of the points of criticism discussed in this chapter. Such as, for instance, the fact UNESCO Roadmap use of concepts of "culture" and "education" which are influenced chiefly by Western thought and universalized in the Roadmap without examining their colonial past. In addition, it advocates education in the arts primarily as a way of producing a flexible workforce and mitigating social tensions; it is dominated by a concept of indigenous artistic creation which frames such creation as "traditions" to be conserved rather than as a part of contemporary cultural production; it is influenced by a conservative concept of the family (and, linked with that, a narrative about the loss of moral values) which does not correspond to the plurality of existing social forms in which people are happily living. Unsurprisingly, like every result of international negotiations, in many ways the UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education reflects the dominant hegemonic order, and thus does not represent the positions of those see the development of alternatives to that order as the reason for their work. Still, the paper has caused people in the field of cultural mediation to begin to see themselves as comprising a

→ *schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie und praxis* http://www.schnitt. org/wer-spricht/educational-turn [14.10.2012]

→ *Educational Turn* see Text 5. RL

→ *UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education* http://portal.unesco. org/culture/en/files/40000/ 12581058115 Road_ Map_for_ Arts_Education.pdf/Road%2BMap %2Bfor%2BArts%2BEducation.pdf [11.4.2012] see Resource Pool MFE060501.pdf
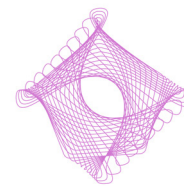
professional field of global dimensions. Confronting the UNESCO paper and similar statements, the international network with the working name → *Another Roadmap for Arts Education* is developing research and projects. To some extent this involves creating alternative rationales for cultural mediation based on specific examples. It also involves the attempt to create a historiography of cultural mediation which encompasses its global dimension, the transfer of concepts like art and education in colonialism, as well as their revision in post-colonial contexts. This is not intended to stake out a position beyond any contradiction, but rather to make an active contribution from a critical perspective to the contemporary de- bates about the reasons for cultural mediation from the inside.

A study examining the business models of freelance cultural mediators in Austria, Germany and Switzerland showed on a different level that criticism of hegemonic structures is never positioned outside of the relationships on the ground. Its author rejects her initial hypothesis and concludes that the actions of critical and artistic oriented cultural mediators are economically more successful than are those who take an → *affirmative* position with respect to the art field and whose offerings are a better fit with the services domain (→ *Pütz 2012*). One could explain this in part by pointing to the fact that in their project acquisition they are able to draw on a comprehen- sive knowledge of the system which their critical approach has caused them to acquire. The fact that their clients are primarily public cultural and educational organizations, might also be interpreted as suggesting that the proposals of a critical approach to cultural mediation have been taken up in the mainstream, at least in some places.

1   This applies to the author of this text or to individuals such as Nora Landkammer, Nanna Lüth, Javier Rodrigo, Nora Sternfeld, Rahel Puffert, Stephan Fürstenberg, Janna Graham and many others who are actively engaged in establishing the field of work of cultural mediation and are also contributing to the critical discourse surrounding it with analytical and programmatic texts.
2   As the following is a summary of positions already described elsewhere in this publication, the relevant citations and references have not been inserted a second time, for the sake of readability. Relevant works are cited only where new aspects emerge.
3   "schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie und praxis is an open, transnational network for active participants as well as or interested in the field of exhibitions and museums. As a non-institutional platform, schnittpunkt presents it members the opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange, information and discourse. One of our aims is to create a general awareness of how interpretation and operation patterns in institutions are determined by cultural and social conditions, as is the creation of a critically reflexive exhibition and museum public" (schnittpunkt 2012).

→ *Another Roadmap for Arts Education* http://another.zhdk.ch [15.3.2013]

→ *affirmative* see Text 5.1

→ *Pütz 2012* see Resource Pool MFV0603.pdf
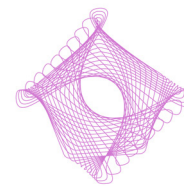
Literature and Links

The text is based in parts on the following previously published paper:

– Mörsch, Carmen: "Glatt und Widerborstig: Begründungsstrategien für die Künste in der Bildung", in: Gaus-Hegener, Elisabeth; Schuh, Claudia (eds.): Netzwerke weben – Strukturen bauen. Künste für Kinder und Jugendliche, Oberhausen: Athena, 2009, pp. 45–60

Further reading:

– Castro Varela, Maria do Mar; Dhawan, Nikita: "Breaking the Rules. Bildung und Postkolonialismus", in: Mörsch, Carmen, und das Forschungsteam der documenta 12 Vermittlung: Kunstvermittlung 2. Zwischen Kritischer Praxis und Dienstleistung auf der documenta 12. Ergebnisse eines Forschungsprojekts, Zurich: diaphanes, 2009, p. 350
– Marchart, Oliver: "Die Institution spricht. Kunstvermittlung als Herrschafts- und als Emanzipationstechnologie", in: schnittpunkt (Beatrice Jaschke, Nora Sternfeld) (eds.): Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen, Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2005, pp. 34–58
– Matarasso, François: Use or Ornament. The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts, London: Comedia 1997/2000
– Merli, Paola: "Evaluating the social impact of participation in arts activities. A critical review of François Matarasso's 'Use or Ornament?'", in: International Journal of Cultural Policy, No. 8 (1), 2002, pp. 107–118
→Mirza, Munira (ed.)Culture Vultures. Is UK arts policy damaging the arts? London 2006; http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/culture%20vultures%20-%20 jan%2006.pdf [21.2.2013]
– Mörsch, Carmen: "Im Paradox des grossen K. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Signifikanten Kunst in der Kunstschule", in: Mörsch, Carmen; Fett, Sabine (eds.): Schnittstelle Kunst – Vermittlung. Zeitgenössische Arbeit in Kunstschulen, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007, pp. 360–377
– Mörsch, Carmen, und das Vermittlungsteam der documenta 12: Kunstvermittlung 2. Zwischen kritischer Praxis und Dienstleistung auf der documenta 12. Ergebnisse eines Forschungsprojekts, Zurich: diaphanes, 2009 (Mörsch 2009a)
→Pütz, Joline: Mapping der Selbstständigkeit in der Kunstvermittlung. Eine Untersuchung anhand von vier Beispielen aus der Schweiz, Österreich und Deutschland, Masterarbeit im Master of Arts in Art Education, Vertiefung Ausstellen und Vermitteln, Zurich University of the Arts 2012; see Resource Pool MFV0603.pdf
– Raunig, Gerald; Wuggenig, Ulf: Die Kritik der Kreativität, Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2007
– Rodrigo, Javier (ed.): Prácticas dialógicas. Intersecciones entre Pedagogía crítica y Museología crítica, Palma de Mallorca: Museu d'Árt Contemporani a Mallorca Es Baluard, 2007
– Rölli, Marc: "Gilles Deleuze: Kultur und Gegenkultur", in: Moebius, Stephan; Quadflieg, Dirk (eds.): Kultur. Theorien der Gegenwart, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2006, pp. 30–41
– schnittpunkt (Beatrice Jaschke, Nora Sternfeld) (eds.): Educational Turn. Handlungsräume der Kunst- und Kulturvermittlung, Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2012
– Sternfeld, Nora: "Der Taxispielertrick. Vermittlung zwischen Selbstregulierung und Selbstermächtigung", in: schnittpunkt (Beatrice Jaschke, Nora Sternfeld) (eds.): Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen, Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2005, pp. 15–33
→Steyerl, Hito: "Kultur: Ein Begriff ohne Grenzen. Alltag und Verbrechen", in: Köchk, Sylvia, et al.: fields of TRANSFER. MigrantInnen in der Kulturarbeit, Vienna: IG Kultur, 2007, pp. 21–23; http://eipcp.net/transversal/0101/steyerl/de [21.2.2013], see Resource Pool MFV0602.pdf
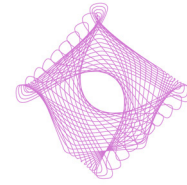
– Sturm, Eva: "Kunstvermittlung als Widerstand", in: Schöppinger Forum der Kunstvermittlung. Transfer. Beiträge zur Kunstvermittlung no. 2, 2002, pp. 92 – 110
– Taguieff, Pierre-André: "Die Metamorphosen des Rassismus und die Krise des Antirassismus", in: Bielefeld, Ulrich (ed.): Das Eigene und das Fremde. Neuer Rassismus in der Alten Welt?, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1998, pp. 221 – 268
→ UNESCO, World Conference on Arts Education, Lisbon 2006/Seoul 2010, Roadmap: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30335&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [30.4.2012], see Resource Pool MFE060501.pdf

Links:

→ Another Roadmap for Arts Education: http://another.zhdk.ch [15.3.2013]
→ schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie und praxis: http://www.schnitt.org [14.10.2012]