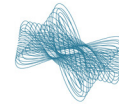


## **CHANGING PERSPECTIVES** Margrit Bürer: All About Cultural Mediation

The attention being enjoyed by cultural mediation is a positive development since it is contributing to cultural mediation. New occupational fields have been established, various training programmes are available, professional associations have formed, and research findings and funding opportunities will make it possible to improve the working conditions of cultural mediators and perhaps even allow the effective employment of volunteer work – the achievements to date are numerous and substantial. Those who are interested in culture can choose from a plethora of cultural mediation offerings. Every domain has its own cultural mediation experts; practitioners have consolidated their role within the cultural sphere and the ratio of those mediating to those consuming is acceptable. Along with the satisfaction we feel with all that has been achieved, we should allow space for doubts about whether things are heading in the right direction, if we haven't already.

Surveys reveal that the absolute numbers of people interested in culture are not increasing with the growth of the spectrum of cultural offerings; instead, the same people are availing themselves of more offerings. Those findings, if correct, suggest that the investment in cultural mediation is resulting primarily in the development of skills among the “specialized audience”. In itself, this is not a bad thing, but neither does it provide a rationale appropriate to the cultural-policy ambitions implicitly tied to the cultural mediation. The continually increasing numbers of cultural events, artist and institutions suggest that engaging actively in cultural activity is more attractive than consuming it. Both this and the basic ideas behind cultural mediation suggest that one should continue exploring cultural mediation approaches which allow the boundaries between “those producing” and “those consuming” and between teachers and learners to dissolve and which open up opportunities for interaction and exchange. Thus along with calling for professional and differentiated cultural mediation, I am advocating respect and use of ordinary and effective cultural mediation, first and foremost, of the kind that is stimulated by a cultural work or production, lets that be known in its immediate environment and makes it accessible to other people.

*Margrit Bürer holds an advanced degree in social pedagogy, certification to supervise in-service training in social pedagogy and an Executive MBA HSG. She has served as Cultural Officer for the Canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden since 2006. She worked as a freelance filmmaker, 1982–1994 and was employed in various capacities at the Swiss Art Council Pro Helvetia 1995–2006.*



## **CHANGING PERSPECTIVES** Franziska Dürr: Cultural Mediation – a Balancing Act

In the last 20 years, many cultural institutions have come to appreciate the importance of cultural mediation. An exhibition, a museum or a cultural event: visitors, especially for their first visit, need an invitation or a guide to draw them in. Thus we are seeing more and more museums and other cultural institutions announcing art mediation programmes and reaching out through them to both new audiences and their traditional audiences.

Who does the cultural mediation work though? Who can build the bridges? Is a history degree or teacher training what is needed to do cultural mediation in a historical museum? Should a person get an advanced professional qualification in cultural mediation or perhaps even do a course in marketing?

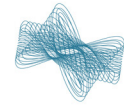
Cultural mediation work involves coming up with an offering, putting it into practice and then reviewing and analyzing it. The challenges begin to arise far in advance of the actual event: how are visitors going to find out about the offering, how can it be structured in a way that will ensure that visitors play an active role in the substantive area, not just passively consume, that their encounter with culture becomes an individualized experience?

In addition to specialist knowledge and pedagogical skills, cultural mediators need to be able to innovate, to devise new approaches. They need stamina, tenacity and aptitude since their aim is to inject new elements into existing structures.

Cultural mediation also entails actively pushing for structural conditions which allow the mediation to keep evolving over time. If it is going to develop into something which will endure, cultural mediation requires space, budgetary resources and attention.

Both a sound grasp of the subject and skills appropriate to the type of cultural mediation are prerequisites. Cultural mediators have to be interested both in people and in culture. Thanks to their own artistic and cultural practice, they share a common bond with culture and thus in-depth expertise about the cultural domain they are working in. They also need pedagogic expertise and aptitude, founded on education or their own experiences. It is because they can tap into both of these areas that cultural mediators are predestined to be the hosts, to invite new audiences, to build bridges and open the doors to culture. Personal initiative and a solid base of professional and life experiences are also key for a successful career.

*Franziska Dürr is the Director of Art Mediation of the gallery Aargauer Kunsthaus and the “Kuverum” training course in cultural mediation.*



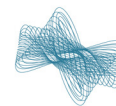
## **CHANGING PERSPECTIVES** Gianna A. Mina: Museo Vincenzo Vela and Cultural Mediation

Every exhibit, whether permanent or temporary, is in itself an act of cultural mediation. By compiling and presenting objects or artworks and presenting content in a specific arrangement, curators convey a vision, a common thread, an interpretation which is intended to engage the audience as far as possible, to engender an enriching and stimulating dialogue. When this act of displaying and conveying content takes place in what was once an artist’s studio, a dwelling and a private museum, it takes on an additional relevance and an evident rationale.

Supported by the Confederacy, Museo Vincenzo Vela is one of the few museums in Swiss territory where all of the above applies. It is one of the most original of Europe’s 19th century Künstlerhäuser [dwelling cum studio cum gallery of an artist or artists]. It was designed by the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891), who was active, primarily during the Italian Risorgimento, as a sculptor and defender of the ideals of that unification movement.

Following the museum’s reopening after major renovations and restructuring work (1997–2001), its director, aware of the premises stated above, made cultural mediation one of her primary concerns. In 2001 she established a cultural mediation service, which serves as a motor for the whole region. The service expands its offerings for various audience groups from one season to the next, in an open dialogue. We have built up a relationship based on mutual trust with the teachers of several schools, by organizing discussion series and laying out our intentions clearly: museum mediation which is not a continuation of school instruction but rather is intended to be understood as a complementary learning process involving all of the senses.

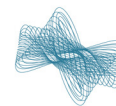
Our positive experiences with schools encouraged us to expand the museum’s public engagement process to encompass other interested visitor groups. Thanks to the contributions of experts in other fields and of our visitors themselves, who act as the museum’s “ambassadors”, we developed activities over the years for blind people, people with disabilities (including severely disabled people) and, starting five years ago, for asylum seekers. The fact that we have a very distinctive and unusual permanent exhibition enabled us to develop projects which involve not only the artistic experience, but also and just as seriously, a historical perspective and an engage-



ment with psychology and other humanistic disciplines. Music has become an important element of our cultural mediation concept as well. Regular musical events inspire an interested audience to come in for a new museum experience and provide an occasion for contemplating the intersections between different forms of artistic expression and their differences. And theatre, like sculpture a “plastic” form of expression – the one in motion, the other static – also has a firm presence in our programme.

In my opinion, appropriate cultural mediation, which makes all of this possible, is based on certain key principles: a generous, sensitive reception of the audience, a serious engagement with the themes proposed, an ear attentive to the needs and desires of the audience and the ability to interpret the permanent exhibitions anew over and over again, to approach them with curiosity and imagination along a path which is anchored in the past but directed towards the future.

*Gianna A. Mina has served as the Director of Museo Vincenzo Vela in Ligornetto since 1992. She led the Swiss Commission for UNESCO from 2007 to 2011 and is a board member of the Verband der Kunsthistorikerinnen und Kunsthistoriker in der Schweiz [Association of Art Historians in Switzerland]. Since 2012 she has served as President of the VMS [Verband Museen der Schweiz].*

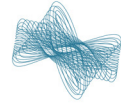


## **CHANGING PERSPECTIVES** Anne Catherine Sutermeister: Cultural Mediation as an Indicator of the Quality of Cultural Policy?

By establishing itself as an independent cultural and artistic practice, cultural mediation became part of the system for promoting culture, while at the same time questioning what lies behind it and creating turbulence within it. The priority attached to it in the different cultural spheres is therefore a valuable reference point for assessing the reactive ability of policy and its capacity to position itself coherently vis-à-vis a new mandate.

Cultural mediation enjoys a long tradition in Europe, though it was institutionalized in Switzerland rather late in the day. Whereas in France it was and still is bound up in a political vision (democratization of the audience), in this country it often figures in more pragmatic or even utilitarian considerations. Once funding instruments contingent on offerings were developed to support institutions and artists, the focus shifted to programmes aimed at a wider public. In today's apprehensive political climate, the question arises as to whom the subsidized cultural programme should target. At times, cultural mediation has been misused as an answer to every question.

The advent of cultural mediation as a support instrument raises cogent questions and speaks to the way culture is structured and how policy-makers view their own role. Most institutions, artists and associations have developed some form of cultural mediation, and provide a plethora of offerings. However, audiences do not always make use of them. This failure is due to inadequate coordination of promotional activities, redundancies and the heterogeneity of target groups. Despite extremely professional efforts on the part of a great many individuals and institutions, the view of cultural mediation as a service to the public – rather than as a series of short-term one-off offerings – is only slowly gaining ground. How can one put in place cultural mediation which, in accordance with its genuine mandate, is target-group oriented and not developed with a dependency on the artistic sector? How are the various visions of artists and cultural organizations to be reconciled with an approach that takes urban geographic and socio-cultural factors into account?



As a new form of established cultural and artistic intervention, cultural mediation can be seen as a challenge to rethink the inner workings of the cultural system: How can cultural mediation competence centres be coordinated with the institutions existing in the individual cultural domains? How can the array of artistic strengths and qualities be harnessed together to put them in the service of the population? With its specific features, cultural mediation is triggering an interesting dynamic in the cultural system. How the public sector responds to these questions will reveal a great deal about its reactive capacity.

*Dr. Anne-Catherine Sutermeister is a university lecturer, and the Director of the Research Institute for Art and Design at Geneva University of Art and Design.*