FOR READING AT LEISURE   Working in a Field of Tensions 7:
Research on Cultural Mediation – Between
Demonstrating Effects and Scientific Impartiality

"Cultural heritage institutions are increasingly seen as instruments for government policies on social inclusion, cohesion and access […] and required to present evidence of their performance. […] Funding levels across the sector are contingent on being able to present such evidence." (Brown 2007)

In Text 6.RL, we pointed out that research in the field of cultural mediation is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The last 15 years have seen increasing efforts towards research-based analyses of current practices and a differentiated historiography. Traditionally scepticism vis-à-vis theory has prevailed in the education professions (Patry 2005), but recently more and more individuals working in the cultural mediation field have become interested in new stimuli, conceptual analyses and augmentation for the formation and substantiation of their practices. For example, in 2012 an Austrian virtual "salon" focusing on cultural mediation theory was established, → *Salon Kulturvermittlung*.

   Text 7.5 mentioned the tension that exists in cultural mediation between legitimization efforts and the aspiration of unbiased research in cultural mediation. Below, the research field will be described from this viewpoint in greater detail.

   "Visitor orientation" has emerged as a key concept in the debate about the future sustainability of publicly funded cultural institutions. At the turn of the 21st century, David Anderson (then Director of Learning and Visitor Services at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, now General Director of National Museum Wales) spoke of a museum's switch from being "object focused" to "user focused" (→ *Anderson 2000*). Current position statements put forth by the management of cultural institutions in the German speaking region are aligned with Anderson's statement, for instance, in the search for a position "between education on culture and cultural marketing" (Mandel 2005) and in the interest in arts and cultural mediation (Kittlausz, Pauleit 2006).

   The notion of visitor orientation is coupled with the concept of cultural institutions as societal learning venues, in which the situation outside of schools and universities is taken as an ideal model for self-motivated "lifelong learning" (John, Dauschek 2008), with the associated transfer effects on the individual's willingness to perform and social behaviour. Accordingly, a considerable share of the research activities in the field of cultural mediation is framed along those lines. As the quotation introducing this section suggests, the greater the emphasis on transfer and educational effects in rationales for the public funding of cultural institutions, the more imperative
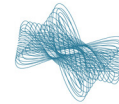
→ *Salon Kulturvermittlung* http://salon-kulturvermittlung.at [10.10.2012]

→ *Anderson 2000* http://www.cultivate-int.org/issue2/networked [10.10.2012]; see Resource Pool MFV0701.pdf

becomes the pressure to demonstrate those effects. Another part of the research being done concentrates on the evidence and the promotion of the → r*eproductive function of cultural mediation*. In this area one finds primarily assessments of cultural mediation projects' educational effects on participants or tests of displays, performance venues and infrastructures with a view to the ways they can be used by visitors and the aims of optimizing utility and expanding audiences (for examples in the museum sphere see the offerings of the working group for empirical education research → *Arbeitsgruppe für empirische Bildungsforschung*).

Evaluations and surveys are the most commonly found and also the oldest form of research examining cultural mediation. As early as in the 1940s, there were studies conducted in the United Kingdom and in the USA which examined the educational mission of museums and their status quo in the area of cultural mediation; they were funded both by governmental agencies and associations (Low 1942) and as individual initiatives by people who wished to rethink the role of museums (Wittlin 1949).

The methodology of audience research includes both investigative methods[1] drawn from cognitive psychology, such as "thinking aloud" (Dufresne-Tassé, Lefebvre 1994), in which the visitor is motivated to participate as a subject in an experimental set-up, and quantitative and qualitative investigative methods drawn from social and market research, i.e. focus groups, observation of visitor behaviour and surveys designed to record their demographic data and attitudes. One recent example drawing on neuroscience, cultural sociology and artistic processes to examine a question of marketing strategy is the study → *eMotion* (Tschacher et al. 2012), conducted out of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts – Northwest Switzerland in a partnership with the art museum Kunstmuseum St. Gallen.
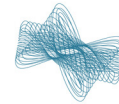
Basically, two distinct perspectives can be distinguished in audience research: one, the older historically, see visitors as forming a more or less homogenous group whose needs and behaviours can be described, and whose learning gains can be measured. The other, prevalent since the 1990s, sees visitors as a heterogeneous group whose members actively interpret content and take in cultural institutions in a performative fashion. From this perspective, research is understood as an activity which interprets and construes meaning rather than one which describes it objectively (Harrasser et al. 2012, p. 15). The lattermost approaches have also been used to obtain evidence of effects. Against this backdrop, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill at the School of Museum Studies of the University of Leicester, working on a commission from what was then the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, developed the instrument known as the → *Generic Learning Outcomes* (Hooper Greenhill 2007). Her objective was to provide a tool which state-supported museums, libraries and archives could use to obtain the required evidence of effects. The tool is designed to enable the institutions

→ *reproductive function of cultural mediation* see Text 5.2

→ *Arbeitsgruppe für empirische Bildungsforschung* http://www.arbeitsgruppe-heidelberg.de/ [7.12.2014]

→ *eMotion* http://www.mapping-museum-experience.com [10.10.2012]

→ *Generic Learning Outcomes* http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplates/genericlearning [10.10. 2012]

themselves to conduct surveys which depict various dimensions of informal learning classified within six categories, including, for instance, "learning and understanding" and "values and dispositions".[2] Two years after the study was published, about half of all English museums were using the Generic Learning Outcomes. They have since spread within the German speaking region as well (e.g. in the children's museum → *Frida und Fred* in Graz, Austria, through a partnership with the → *University of Graz*). The Generic Learning Outcomes approach does consider audiences as active and heterogeneous, but one has to point out that although it provides potential opportunities for self-reflexivity on the part of institutions and cultural mediators (or users), the instrument is difficult to reconcile it with the aspiration of impartiality and being receptive to unanticipated outcomes, key criteria for scientific work. This is true above all when the continuing existence of the institutions under study is implicitly or explicitly tied up with a favourable assessment of its educational effects (Loomis 2002). In such cases, research is sometimes difficult to distinguish from services rendered, since the positions and intentions of the commissioning body are seldom made the subject of analysis or criticism. Moreover, the level of self-reflexivity involved is also frequently minimal – e.g. with respect to the → *normative positions* introduced by the analysis categories used. Thus they have not kept pace with the "reflexive turn" (Bachmann-Medik 2006), i.e. they do not involve critical self-analysis with respect to the scientific aspiration to produce an accurate depiction of the truth, or with respect to the authority and power of the researchers and their effects on knowledge production, despite the fact that self-reflexivity of this kind has been an established element in the scientific approach for several decades. Hence, rather than tending to contribute to an understanding of cultural mediation within the field as an independent and critical practice, they may be in danger of subordinating it to institutional and political objectives (Mastai 2007).

However, growing numbers of research projects on cultural mediation are based on the reflexive turn. Many retain the established constellation of researchers and subjects but attempt to provide a critical analysis of culture, its institutions and mediation practices rather than evidence of effects. One such is the project "Science with all Senses – Gender and Science in the Making", which used ethno-methodological means to investigate knowledge acquisition of children in Vienna museums based on categories of class, ethnicity and gender (Harrasser et al. 2012).

Other projects present themselves as attempting to use → *action research* to intensify the ties between research and development of cultural mediation by involving cultural mediation practitioners as researchers. There are also approaches which liberate visitors from their role as subjects and draw on their work and thoughts to design research. For instance, the Swiss project investigating aesthetic communication in children's theatre "Ästhetische

→ *Frida und Fred* http://www. fridaundfred.at/cms/5780/ Evaluierung_und_Forschung [7.10.2012]

→ *University of Graz* http://www. uni-graz.at/weiwww_tagung_ outcome_vortrag-schrittesser.pdf [7.10.2012]; see Resource Pool MFV0702.pdf

→ *normative positions* see Text 3.RL

→ *action research* see Glossary
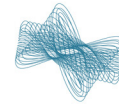
Kommunikation im Kindertheater" used creative writing, drawing and other free design media to learn about the individual perceptions of children during a theatre visit both through observation and through the children's own articulations (Baumgart 2012). In one nation-wide, model programme with an integrated research track in England entitled → *enquire* (2004 – 2011), artists, school pupils, students, scholars, teachers and gallery mediators worked together under the motto "learning in galleries". During the programme, young people developed experimental interpretive tools for working with audiences. The projects were designed to draw on the work of school children while, at the same time, studying their learning behaviour and the dynamics of the partnerships between museums and schools. They also examined the authority of museums to interpret their traditional education practices. One project which takes a close look at that lattermost aspect is → *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture* (Dewdney et al. 2012), conducted by the Tate Britain from 2007 to 2010 in partnership with London South Bank University and the University of the Arts London. In that project, a research group composed of scholars, museum staff and students with a migrant family background, in the broadest sense of that term[3], examined how → *Britishness* is constructed within the museum's curatorial practices and collection. Its results fundamentally challenge the museum's → *cultural diversity policy* and open up prospects for changing the educational and curatorial work in exhibition institutions. The investigators behind Tate Encounters were familiar with the approaches of → *critical museology* and attempted to rethink institutional practice on that basis. The project attempted to make the hierarchies between researchers and their subjects and between teachers and learners transparent and conduct the "audience research" described above as "research in partnership with audiences". In that context, the treatment and consideration of the inevitable hierarchies between professional researchers and participants from other fields was an integral component of the work. For instance, the young adults involved underwent methodological training as "co-researchers". Similar projects have taken place in the German-speaking region in recent years too. For instance, the research project on the cultural mediation at documenta 12 was committed to this aim (Wieczorek et al. 2009; Mörsch et al. 2009). Education was declared as one of three leitmotifs of the d12 by the curators of that international contemporary art exhibit. The result was a cultural mediation concept which put the dialogue about art and the debates about education before the authorized transmission of knowledge. Cultural mediation was seen as a "critical friend" (Mörsch 2008) in its relationship to the exhibit. Twenty of the freelance cultural mediators conducted a team research project which used cultural mediation methods – as research, as performance and as intervention – in an attempt to conduct analyses designed to foster change in the practice of cultural mediation and its relationships with its surroundings, to engage in "radical
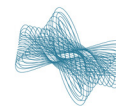
→ *enquire* http://www.engage.org/enquire [7.12.2014]

→ *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture* http://process.tateencounters.org [10.10.2012]

→ *Britishness* see Glossary

→ *diversity policy* see Glossary

→ *critical museology* see Text 5.RL

research" (→ *Malo 2004*, → *Graham 2010*). This example makes it clear, if it was not already, that one aim of research approaches like this in cultural mediation is to → *empower* the people taking part. This is also evident in the 2009 – 2011 "Kunstvermittlung in Transformation" [Art Mediation in Transformation] project, a collaborate project based on action research involving four Swiss universities of the arts and five museums, which aimed at working with practitioners to improve art mediation practices in museums on the basis of research and increase the engagement of universities with the field. At the end of the project, many of who had been involved indicated that the status of the cultural mediation in their institutions had improved. One of the museum professionals described finding that referring to the research context made it easier for her to motivate her team to experiment with practices and think about theoretical issues.[4]

Practical research does not offer an escape from the tension between the desire to document the effects sought and the aspiration of scientific impartiality. However, it can foster the development of the reflexive abilities in the field of practice, produce applicable outcomes and thus contribute to the field's development while neither putting itself at the service of institution and cultural policy imperatives nor simulating indifference to those imperatives. Accordingly, it has the potential to continue the productive use of the existing fields of tension at the research level as well.

1   See for example the publications and projects of the Psychological Aesthetics and Cognitive Ergonomics research focus at the University of Vienna or the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics → http://science-of-aesthetics.org [14.10.2012]
2   For a detailed list and critique of these categories → see Text 3.RL.
3   Participation in the research project was subject to two conditions: The students had to come from a family which immigrated to England (it did not matter where) and had to be the first person from their family to attend a university.
4   At another museum, a three-year position of "curator for education" was established → see Text 5.RL.

→ *Malo 2004* http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en [10.10.2012];
see Resource Pool MFV0703.pdf

→ *Graham 2010* http://www.readperiodicals.com/201004/2010214291.html [10.10.2012];
see Resource Pool MFV0704.pdf

→ *empowering* see Glossary entry on self-empowerment
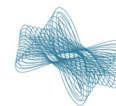
Literature and Links

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

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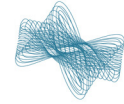
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Links:

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→ University of Applied Sciences and Arts – Northwest Switzerland, Studio eMotion: http://www.mapping-museum-experience.com [10.10.2012]
→ Graz children's museum Frida und Fred: http://www.fridaundfred.at/cms/5780/Evaluierung_und_Forschung [10.10.2012]
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