## **9.2** Challenges in transmitting cultural mediation

A museum's website promotes its cultural mediation programme. Two images are shown. On the left is one showing an older couple, leaning towards one another and looking at a painting on the wall of the museum. Both man and woman are → _white_, thin, dressed in simple but elegant clothing and very well-groomed. The way the light falls lends an extra shimmer to their silver hair. The picture speaks of cultivation, permanency, bonds between people and bonds between people and art. The link under this picture reads "For Adults". The picture on the right shows a woman in profile, seated at a table in a room with a workshop atmosphere. The lighting is diffuse, probably from a neon source. The woman is overweight; she is wearing a headscarf and a beige coat. Her features, combined with the clothing, suggest that she is an immigrant from Turkey. The way she is seated at the too-low table exaggerates the thickness of her figure. She is unpacking a box with crafts supplies evocative of a kindergarten. The link under the picture says "For Special People". The combination of text and imagery on this webpage is more than simply an announcement of a cultural mediation programme. It is also a narrative about who is seen as the natural museumgoer and who is not expected to be found there. Though perhaps well meant, the categorization of the woman in the coat as a "special person" sets her apart from the "adults". Had the picture's caption had read "an arts mediator prepares for the family workshop", the page would have had quite a different message: it would have spoken about the museum's interest in diversifying its staff. This example effectively illustrates one difficulty associated with the presentation of cultural mediation, in connection with both its promotion and its documentation. Wherever different audiences or interest groups are depicted, implicit attributions and dominant interpretative frameworks inevitably come into play.

However, it is possible to → _address this problem consciously_ – for instance, by having the group of people being depicted collaborate in the documentation and rendering transparent the confrontation with the attributions in the depiction.

Another phenomenon associated with the depiction of cultural mediation is the repetition of a type of imagery which says very little about the process, and thus the actual substance of the cultural mediation work. Laughing or bored children sitting at a crafts table, group photos taken in a museum or theatre space, a circle of people around an individual who is explaining something: imagery like this, used to document cultural mediation for the past century or so, seldom says anything about the social energy or the complexity of the content, let alone the intriguing field of

→ _white_ see Glossary

→ _consciously addressing_ see Text 9. RL
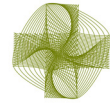
tensions and processes of recognition which take shape during cultural mediation.

On a practical level, it must be noted that usually little in the way of time and staffing resources are available for careful, imaginative documentation of cultural mediation, due to the usually quite tight → *cultural mediation budgets*. Therefore, thus far the image archives of cultural mediation have tended to be fragmentary and spotty – particularly in comparison with the extensive archiving of cultural production.

→ *cultural mediation budgets* see Text 7.2