

It's all Mediating



It's all Mediating:  
Outlining and Incorporating the Roles  
of Curating and Education  
in the Exhibition Context

Edited by

Kaija Kaitavuori, Laura Kokkonen  
and Nora Sternfeld

Produced by the Finnish Association  
for Museum Education Pedaali

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

It's all Mediating:  
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Edited by Kaija Kaitavuori, Laura Kokkonen and Nora Sternfeld

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4775-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4775-9

## EPIGRAPH

“Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving...conflict is a *sine qua non* of reflection and ingenuity.”

John Dewey

*Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922



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## PREFACE

The essays published in this book mostly derive from the international conference *It's All Mediating*, held in Helsinki on 30th and 31st of May 2012. The conference focused on the two core functions of museums: exhibiting of the content (art or other cultural material) and educational activities directed to audiences.

The conference was organised by the Finnish Association for Museum Education Pedaali, the Finnish Society for Curators SKY and the Curating, Managing and Mediating Art (CuMMA) Masters' Programme at the Aalto University, together with the hosting venue Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma.

The conference speakers were invited to look at two sets of questions. On one hand, there was a quest to understand how the professional field is outlined at present: How do these two aspects—the responsibility to foster the content of the museum and the responsibility for its audiences and visitors—relate to each other? What is the division of labour between curators and educators? What kind of interests and values guide their work? What are the current models and what would be the ideal ways of organising their relations and collaboration?

The other focus was on the individual level of how the specialists incorporate their roles: What are the specific skills of a curator or an educator? How (and why?) do we develop a professional identity? What is gained and lost in the process of specialisation?

The invited speakers came from six different countries in Europe, and the over 200 participants and case study presenters represented 19 different nationalities. The speakers were Lindsey Fryer, Valérie Lagier, Maria Lind, Carmen Mörsch, Nora Sternfeld, Sally Tallant and Adela Železnik. Felicity Allen was later invited to contribute to the publication.

The invitation to sit around the same table came from the museum educators' side, which is reflected in the slightly stronger presence of educational voices. We consider this publication, however, as a start in an important dialogue and hope there will be many more occasions for cross-professional debates.

Editors

Kaija Kaitavuori, Laura Kokkonen & Nora Sternfeld

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This as any international conference and publication is a collective effort of a large group of people. The editors wish to thank the following organisations and individuals:

Finnish Association for Museum Education Pedaaali.

The conference organising committee: Erja Salo, the president of Pedaaali, the Finnish Museum of Photography; Henna Paunu, the president of SKY, Rauma Art Museum; Henna Harri, CuMMA; Minna Raitmaa, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma; Kaisa Kettunen, Helsinki Art Museum; Anni Venäläinen, Pori Art Museum; and Ilana Rimon, the secretary of Pedaaali. The conference was organised based on the initiative and concept by Kaija Kaitavuori.

The partner for conference arrangements, the Finnish Museums Association and the project coordinator Tuuli Rajavuori.

Kati Kivinen and Kiasma staff.

engage, the National Association for Gallery Education (UK), the Director Jane Sillis and the engage International Summer School 2012 organisers.

Sponsors of the conference: Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation, Arts Council of Finland / Arts Council of Uusimaa.

The speakers and writers who kindly provided their texts for publishing. Salla Fornaro for editorial help.

Nicky Kozicharow for proofreading.

All the participants of the conference for engaging and participating in discussions and for making it a memorable event.

# INTRODUCTION

## KAIJA KAITAVUORI

### **Professional matters**

The museum is a configuration of interests. It is at the same time a heritage institution—collecting and safeguarding art and culture—and a public cultural institution, inviting the public to visit its premises and to enjoy its possessions. In the first role it is compared to archives and monuments, in the second to libraries or to theatres, concert halls and other cultural venues putting on shows. Additionally, the museum is often defined as a learning environment, hence comparable to schools, universities and other educational institutions. On a more user-friendly level, it can even function as a community centre or a public space, meaning a forum where people are able to participate in activities and debates, and to produce and share ideas. Internally, depending on the administrative structure, the museum is regarded as a bureau of a national or local government, a charity, an office, a production unit... Increasingly, it is also a business. It is also, more or less openly, a scene for social stratification and distinction.

Approached from these various directions, the museum appears as a very different beast indeed. From each side, multiple expectations are directed towards the same institution, and the beneficiaries and stakeholders with their specific requirements feel they are entitled to have their say in the matter. It is a different thing to see the museum as a research institute serving mainly scholars or as a place in which to spend a nice afternoon with the family; as a target for a pilgrimage to see one's favourite paintings or as a venue to take a group of pupils on a study trip; or as a potential buyer of an artwork and as a place to chill out with peers. Contemplation, education, entertainment and commerce live side by side in the same institution.

Fulfilling these various functions requires specialised staff, and museum jobs have indeed multiplied and diversified in the past couple of decades. Vera Zolberg calls the era since the 1970s “post-professional”, in which the operational occupations—managerial and administrative experts—have outnumbered the general, substantive jobs in the museum.<sup>1</sup> Also traditional museum occupations have undergone tremendous changes.

*It's All Mediating* focuses on the two core functions of art museums: the curatorial and the educational and the relationship between them. These functions have been part of the core mission since the beginning of the pub-

lic museum institution but have not always been separated into individual professions. In the early days curators (those people handling and exhibiting art objects) were often also the public face of the museum: they would receive visitors' groups, talk to them and introduce them to the collection.<sup>2</sup> The curators were also public workers, dealing with objects as well as people. In their modern form, the curator and the educator are both relatively young professions and born out of the process of the specialisation and professionalisation of museum work.

The role of the curator has changed during the process. The advent of the independent curator has shifted the curator's responsibility from caring for collections to more often or solely organising exhibitions; this emphasis is related to exhibitions becoming the main medium through which art becomes public—also collections mediated as exhibitions—and the dramatic increase in the number of contemporary galleries, exhibitions and biennials.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the role of the specialised museum educator has taken up the task of welcoming audiences and proceeded to develop theories and methods for nurturing the educational side of the museum. **Maria Lind** in this publication takes the history of educational work in American art museums as her starting point to reflect on the models of mediating contemporary art and communicating with the audience today.

In a polarised mode, the division of labour between curating and educating has been described as caring for objects versus caring for people; or aesthetic versus educational; or scholarship and research versus public education. This composition was documented in the mid 1980s by Dobbs and Eisner who described the educator as “the advocate of the viewer” while and the curator as “the advocate of the work of art”. It still seems to be the case for Terry Smith who now notes how the thrill for the curators is really in conceiving and installing an exhibition and spectatorship remains only a notional interest for them.<sup>4</sup> Nobody would, of course, categorically claim that curators would not care about visitors or that educators would not care about the content and art. Nevertheless, we now have in most museums people who are in charge of choosing and exhibiting the content and other people who are given the responsibility of taking care of the people who come to see what the others have put on show: the distinct professions of curators and educators with separate responsibilities, routines and practices, specialised training, their own associations and publications, etc.

Curator and educator are both professions in the making: questioning, defining and re-defining themselves; they arrange seminars, publish anthologies of essays (most often the proceedings of these seminars), write pamphlets and discuss the various models of curating and learning. People who practice these jobs have multifaceted and idiosyncratic educational backgrounds and working careers, and mostly have learned their jobs at work. A sign of the coming of age of these professions is the specialised training

programmes that are multiplying and becoming more established. The proliferation of curatorial studies, in particular since the 1990s, has given a reason to talk about “the age of curatorial studies”<sup>5</sup> and has aroused many debates<sup>6</sup>. Also museum education, which Dobbs & Eisner in 1987 defined as an “uncertain profession”, lacking professional structure, theory, training, research etc., has come a long way in becoming an established profession.<sup>7</sup>

There are also programmes that bring both perspectives together. One of them is the Master’s Degree Programme on Curating, Managing, and Mediating Art at the Aalto University, Helsinki, headed by **Nora Sternfeld**. She writes in this publication about the museum as a post-representational space, locating curating and educating within power relations and asking how they can make a difference as critical practices.

The situation regarding training and work opportunities, however, looks different in different locations. This publication brings together contributions from different parts of Europe, showing that there are significant variations and diverse traditions even within this continent.

## Tensions and polemics

While the specialisation of curatorial and educational professions has brought focus, self-consciousness and quality to the practice, we may ask if something has been lost in the process. Is there a risk that the flexible and experimental attitude allowed by undefined practices is straitjacketed by standardised qualifications and “best practice” assessments? Is it possible that our institutionalised professional identities limit rather than open up possibilities and contacts over borders? And have the two professions drifted too far apart from each other in the course of their professionalisation: Do curators know what educators actually do and why? Do educators know what curators are doing and discussing?

The *It’s All Mediating* conference was organised to think about the best ways of working together and how to bridge the distance. It intended to bring curators and educators together to think about what we are doing and how to best take care of the two functions: How do we mediate between the professions? **Valérie Lagier** represents a rare professional who embodies both roles and considers in her article the pros and cons of her job description. Central questions are authority and professional trust among colleagues working on the same ground but in different departments. **Sally Tallant** is another who works in both areas. In her text, she reflects on her own learning as she has moved from one position to another and from one location to a different one. Her thought flows free of institutional or academic divisions. Tallant has also been a long-term practitioner of so-called “integrated programming”—whereby the staff working in education, ex-

hibitions, performance and public programmes are conceived as one team rather than separate departments.<sup>8</sup> **Lindsey Fryer** describes some successful examples but also the challenges of integrating programmes.

Most professionals working in art museums, however, have specified responsibilities of one or the other job. Both professions have their own inner debates and factions, and both are also criticised from the outside and by each other. As an example, the interdependence between curators and artists creates tensions, and star-curators are blamed for stealing the artists' position in the limelight or using artists merely to illustrate their theoretical fabrications.<sup>9</sup> Educators, for their part, are accused of patronising audiences and of cramming the galleries with art trolleys and other educational paraphernalia.<sup>10</sup> In their mutual criticism, educators accuse the curators of using esoteric language and imagining everyone in the audience is like them, i.e. academically trained and an art lover by nature. Reciprocally, curators point their fingers at educators for "dumbing down", underestimating visitors and covering art with an excess of simplifying explanations.

Education has come under scrutiny recently in connection with the augmented attention to educational issues in the form of the "educational turn". Despite the reference to education, those working professionally in pedagogical roles in museums have been largely excluded from the debate, and it has become clear that the phenomenon of the educational turn is relatively hostile to the education work that takes place in museums and galleries. In the book bearing the title *Curating and the educational turn*, when gallery education is mentioned, it is in a negative light, as something purely didactic or something to be avoided.<sup>11</sup> In her present article, Maria Lind observes that educational and pedagogical approaches in museums are "generally considered more annoying than useful by the professional community". This "professional community", obviously, does not include educators. Even worse, the whole field is seen to operate a "terror of education".<sup>12</sup>

Rather than signifying a new turn, this sort of discourse is only a new chapter in an old book. It is largely the outcome of a standing hierarchy. When we talk about the relationship between curating and education, we have to bear in mind the existing power balance, or rather, the unbalance between them. The difference in status between curatorial and educational functions has been noted by many writers and observers.<sup>13</sup>

Mick Wilson, one of the editors of the book *Curating and the educational turn*, is one such observer, and he also has an explanation for the status hierarchy. In his talk titled "Whose turn is it now?" at the Engage conference of gallery educators in 2011,<sup>14</sup> he indeed identified "a tension" in the professional field between gallery educators, curators and artists. Gallery education, according to him, has traditionally functioned in the logic of "service economy" which is characterised by serving goals set by other sectors and having less control over one's own work. The art world, which for Wil-

son includes artists and curators, on the contrary, functions within the logic of “reputational economy” whereby the field produces its own legitimacy, and the actors typically “produce” themselves as special. Here, according to Wilson, lies the heart of the problem: gallery education, traditionally and by nature a service economy, is now seized by status anxiety and wants to be credited in the reputation economy and be recognised as a professional activity, not a service.

This account raises more questions than it settles. Is education a service and not a profession? And would there be something wrong with it being a service? To be sure, education work is mostly un-spectacular, even rather tedious labour, often consisting of “unglamorous tasks”, as Nora Sternfeld puts it in her insightful article.<sup>15</sup> It cannot compete with the shine of star-curators or artist celebrities. Subordination to curatorial work can also be part of the self-recognition of educational work, as is articulated in Valérie Lagier’s article. So if reputation economy is the name of the game that we all subscribe to—fighting for our share of glory and recognition and for a place in the sun—as Wilson suggests, this could explain at least in part the lower status of education compared to curating.

But is reputation really the baseline of the art world? There might be alternative accounts to the professional hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> One factor may be the gender divide within the art world: gallery education is almost one hundred percent female. Being a woman does not make anyone better or worse in her job, as such, but the total gender unbalance certainly is an issue that has some meaning and should be tackled. **Carmen Mörsch** points out how “soft skills”, qualities considered as feminine, might be those that are needed to navigate between the various and contradicting expectations directed towards educators. She goes on to ask how this might also contribute to the increasing precariousness of this work.

Equally, the fact that curators align themselves with artists and educators with visitors, confirmed once again by Wilson, may be the reason for unequal accumulation not of reputation but of symbolic capital in these positions. The professional positioning of educators with the audience—the “other”, the non-professional—puts them in a disadvantaged position in a field that defines its value as a specialised field of expertise. Focusing on fame therefore does not explain, but on the contrary bypasses, the causes of inner hierarchies in the professional field. Describing curating as an intellectual profession and education as a *métier* (service) basically defines the field by excluding education from the professional art field altogether. The field of art—as a relatively open profession—has to defend its borders against the outside world and the profane, lay and unqualified amateur. Gallery education represents a threat.

It is not so long ago since the understanding of the concept and the role of the curator changed from caring (*curare*) to creation. It involved the forg-

ing (or “bastardisation” as Alex Farquharson calls it)<sup>17</sup> of a new verb “to curate”. Curating itself became a focus of interest, discussion and study.<sup>18</sup>

The role and position of artists in this pattern is manifold. In addition to being exhibiting artists, they can work either as curators or educators. The status hierarchy, nevertheless, is reflected also in the respective roles: the artist-educator hardly enjoys the same prestige as the artist-curator—or exhibiting artist.<sup>19</sup> However, participatory art forms bring all these functions closer to each other and assemble artists, non-artist participants, educators and curators in close collaborations. As Maria Lind notes, contemporary art itself has taken over part of the mediation. New trends in curating, sometimes under the title of New Institutionalism,<sup>20</sup> further blur the roles of the different agents in the field: if a work of art as well as an exhibition can be conceived as a platform, including conferences, debates, publications, events and workshops, it is perhaps not as important who initiates and organises them. Sometimes it is impossible to judge from a product whether it is the result of a curatorial, educational or artistic process.

Talking about power is always a bit uncomfortable, and quite often one hears the argument that we should leave antagonisms behind and focus on collaboration instead—we are all working for the same goal: *It's All Mediating*. But closing our eyes and ignoring the question of status and power is not a solution and talking about it should not prevent good collaboration. And moreover, the issue of power relations is not the concern of the educators only: on the contrary, it is, or should be, as much a concern for the curators; in a parallel sense, we are not saying that gender inequality only concerns women and is a problem to be dealt with among them exclusively. Power issues are relational. We should keep in mind from which position remarks are made and what meanings this may entail; it is not only individuals but also positions that speak.

## Self-criticisms

Getting beyond the “tension”, educators should of course interrogate themselves about whether the claims are valid and justified: Is the pedagogical practice in reality, as it is described, patronising and didactic, and if yes, why and what should be done about it?

What makes it difficult to respond to most of the (published) allegations against educational activities is that they are made by art professionals based on their own experience of not needing any of it. How do they (we) know if there is too much education in exhibitions or if it is of the wrong kind, is it too much or wrong for whom? It does not show particular sensitivity or respect to other visitors’ needs to declare that “the enemies are those audio

guides (...) they're already a nightmare",<sup>21</sup> to describe how "I've stumbled across my share of these objects [children's art trolleys], cursing the way in which they obscure an exhibition's hang",<sup>22</sup> or to dismiss education because "I like to read my Dostoyevsky without explanations" and to call textual information "the pile of info for dummies".<sup>23</sup> Declarations such as these give no credit to visitors' own capacity to judge which means of information or educational activities—if any—serve them best.

To get a more detailed picture of different approaches in gallery education, Carmen Mörsch has developed a four-category analysis of the functions of education. Without going into details, it is enough in this context to say that the model recognises the difference between affirmative, reproductive, deconstructive and transformative strategies.<sup>24</sup> Affirmative—passing on knowledge and values—and reproductive—dialogue-based and more exploratory approach—take the institutional structures and values as the starting point. Deconstructive methods introduce a critique of the taken-for-granted canons and values and examine them together with the public, but it is the transformative strategies that aim not only to analyse but also to change them. Using this model or other analytical classifications, e.g. based on concepts of knowledge and learning,<sup>25</sup> it is possible to start criticising specific educational tools and activities on more substantial ground.

For example, educational methods based on disseminating knowledge can be defined as *affirmative* or *reproductive*: convincing, explaining, illuminating the uninitiated and delivering information as unquestioned truth. The educational approach is not, however, simply a function of the medium (e.g. guided tour or audio-guide)—one needs to look much more closely into the content of the specific device in order to understand whether it actually follows the conventional affirmative approach or possibly provides opportunities for a deconstructive experience.<sup>26</sup>

The critique usually takes the most conventional forms of gallery education as the target, disregarding, out of dissimulation or sheer ignorance, the more progressive or experimental professional education. In reality, critical education would have a lot in common with critical curating.<sup>27</sup>

There is a lot to criticise in educational practices, of course. To begin with, education and educators are not always aware that they are themselves complicit in reproducing power and contributing to a hierarchical society. By presenting and promoting the knowledge produced and consecrated by the expert professionals (by *affirming* and *reproducing*) education serves the "learned" institution and converts new art believers; it can hence be praised or accused—depending on the view point—of consolidating the expert culture and maintaining the *status quo* of the art world. In her article in this book Carmen Mörsch introduces the concept of second order reflexivity as a model for a critical gallery education to address this question.

On the other hand, education has subversive potential and simply by

aligning itself with non-professional audiences and by promoting access and inviting participation it challenges the closed circuit of art and the original function of museums to maintain social power structures. The curatorial complaint that educational materials are not faithful enough to professional standards and dilute the correct content can therefore be interpreted, at least in part, as a cry of feeling of losing control, ownership—and power.

A more serious reason of (self-)critique against education is that it is easy prey for multiple external interests. Due to the audience connection, education easily falls in the lap of neo-liberalism and pleasing audience expectations at any price, because within the institution, education is often accountable in quantitative terms for attendance and media success. Maria Lind notes how a great deal of the public communication taking place in the museums has shifted from curatorial and educational responsibility to marketing and PR. A lot of educational work is also funded on social terms to follow local or national governmental agendas. What this means for museum work in practice is dealt with in Lindsey Fryer's article on measuring "social impact". As an important national institution, Tate Liverpool is conscious of being expected to fulfil social agendas. If social instrumentalism is the Scylla, then Charybdis is the gearing of education to marketing and the demand for positive, entertaining and exciting experiences.<sup>28</sup> Educators can with good reason ask themselves how and when are educational activities in fact designed for and led by external policy targets or marketing goals instead of independent, let alone critical ambitions.

These pressures are felt also in the curatorial realm, but education as a professional field is probably more heteronomous than curating, which can more readily call upon the autonomy of art and expertise. Curating is perhaps more prone to succumb to publicity and media attention, particularly if reputation economy or its counterpart attention economy is embraced uncritically as the baseline: in a mediatized environment all topics are consumed and seen through exceptional individuals such as star-curators and star-artists, turned into brands, and the success of exhibitions depends on the attention they attract. Education, for its part, is asked to contribute to this success. In addition, it is bound to a positive ethos: to justify its work and existence, education has to show objective learning outcomes and positive effects—the "sparkling eyes syndrome", as Carmen Mörsch calls it.

## Contents

If museum is, as I suggest in the beginning, a meeting point of various and even contradictory interests, then mediation is one of its main activities. The word mediation can be understood in its two meanings, both as an effort of building bridges as well as of settling a conflict. In the light of the many

“tensions” dealt with in this text and many more remaining untouched, it is important to understand the museum not only as a contact zone (in the meaning launched by James Clifford)<sup>29</sup> but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a conflict zone. Issues of access, control, rules, knowledge production and whose knowledge is valued, whose interests are attended to, whose needs are catered for, etc. by definition introduce conflicts and are issues of mediation.

The zone should also perhaps not be understood as a predefined space where people come and meet but rather a dynamic process through which the museum is formed. The museum is not simply the space where the coming together, in harmony or in conflict, happens but this coming together itself. Therefore, the idea of (curatorial and educational) mediation is not to do away with conflicts but to engage with, facilitate, and even produce them. There are many dimensions to the idea of conflict: they can be internal, among those who work within the institution, or between the museum and its audiences or among the public itself. **Adela Železnik** talks about projects that address these tensions on many levels: during a process of transition in the Balkans, the museum renegotiated internal professional relationships while at the same time working with audience groups in a time of crisis when cultural, ethnic and political relations were in turmoil. **Felicity Allen**, writing from the other edge of Europe, considers how the forces of globalisation affect an established national gallery, how the museum politics and international politics are intertwined and how these developments are reflected in the educational collaborations and collecting from outside Europe.

Helmut Draxler proposes “crisis” as a model of mediation, not only as a response to perceived crisis in institutions or in art production, but also as an interpretive model that guards against risks of being co-opted into the dominant patterns.<sup>30</sup> This would be useful for education and educators who are usually assigned the role of bridging and liaising rather than disputing and conflicting. The paradox there is that this in fact becomes an act of imposing the hegemonic order. This leads Carmen Mörsch to reflect on internal conflict and, as a solution, to “contradict oneself”. Nora Sternfeld takes Spivak and Foucault as a starting point to develop the idea of the museum or exhibition as a space for agency, or rather, multiple agencies, and starts to dismantle the role of mediation as the middleman and to move from analysis to action. Then, as she says, something can happen.

The German word for mediation, *Vermittlung*, carries the conflictual dimension as well: the prefix *Ver-* could also be understood as *un-* in unlearning; *Vermittlung* hence is mediation and un-mediation at the same time.<sup>31</sup> Mediation refers both to curating and education. “Gallery education” is used in this book as the general term to denote the more specialised educational or pedagogical practice in museums as well as activities directed

at various audience groups. This is a slight injustice to the terminologies in other languages but adopted as a practical solution; also many British museums have recently changed the names of their departments from “education” to “learning”. As the target of this book, however, is not to discuss the details of educational work in museums but rather its relation to other functions and its position in the museum in general, “education” serves as a relatively neutral denomination to cover the various aspects of that field. The British “gallery education” instead of “museum education” is chosen because all the writers are dealing with mediation in art institutions: “gallery” here refers to art museums and all kinds of art contexts, such as non-collecting exhibition spaces, art halls and biennials.

The book starts with some theoretical considerations about mediation and its philosophical frameworks and then moves on to concrete projects and cases from various locations in Europe, to finish with a perspective inclined towards a wider global view. The last chapter is a report from the conference *It's All Mediating* where most of these essays are derived from; it gives an overview of the context of these papers and takes up some of the discussions that arouse among the participants in reaction to the keynote papers and case study presentations during the conference.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vera L. Zolberg, “Conflicting visions in American art museums”, *Theory and Society* 10 (1981), 103–125. Reprinted in *The Sociology of Art: A Reader*, Jeremy Tanner (ed.) (Routledge, 2003), 194–205. See also David Elliott, “A Fine Mess!”, *Art Asia Pacific*, Issue 74 Jul/Aug 2011, online <http://www.artasiapacific.com/Magazine/74/AFineMess>.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. John Reeve & Vicky Woollard, “Introduction”, in Caroline Lang, John Reeve, Vicky Woollard (eds.) *The Responsive Museum: Working with Audiences in the Twenty-first Century* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Alex Farquharson, “I Curate, You Curate, We Curate...”, *Art Monthly* September & October 2003. Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse”, in Judith Rugg (ed.), *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance* (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 13–28.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen M. Dobbs and Elliot W. Eisner, “The Uncertain Profession: Educators in American Art Museums”, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1987, 77–86. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, (Independent Curators International 2012), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson quoted in O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn”, 20.

<sup>6</sup> See for example “Look & Learn”, *Frieze*, Issue 141 September 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See Helen Charman for an account of the professionalisation of education from a British perspective: Helen Charman “Uncovering Professionalism in the Art Museum”, *Tate Papers*, 2005, online <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/uncovering-professionalism-art-museum-exploration-key> (Accessed 5 January 2013). In 2006, Vicky Woollard still calls education an “unsettled profession”, Caroline Lang et al., *The Responsive Museum*, 220.

<sup>8</sup> See also Sally Tallant, “Experiments in Integrated Programming”, *Tate Papers*, Issue 11, 2009. Online <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/experiments-integrated-programming>

<sup>9</sup> See O’Neill “The Curatorial Turn” for a review of the history of “curator as artist” discussions. At the same time, artistic processes have begun to resemble curatorial processes. See also Helmut Draxler, “Crisis as Form. Curating and the Logic of Mediation”, *Oncurating.org* Issue # 13/12, Institution as Medium. Curating as Institutional Critique? / Part II; and Boris Groys “Multiple Authorship” in Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Exhibitions and Biennials* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2006), 93–99.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Tom Morton’s rant about art trolleys “Are You Being Served”, *Frieze* 101, September 2006. For Max Rynänen, education seriously overshadows art. “Institutional Stress. When Bureaucracy Replaces Art...” Artpulse, undated, online <http://artpulsemagazine.com/institutional-stress-when-bureaucracy-replaces-art> (Accessed 23 April 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Paul O’Neill & Mick Wilson (eds.), *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010), 12, 93, 126, 190, 218.

<sup>12</sup> Rynänen, “Institutional Stress”.

<sup>13</sup> Janna Graham, “Spanners in the Spectacle: Radical Research at the Front Lines”, *Fuse Magazine* April 2010, online. <http://www.readperiodicals.com/201004/2010214291.html#b> (Accessed 19 October 2011); Carmen Mörsch, “Alliances for Unlearning: On Gallery Education and Institutions of Critique”, *Af-terall*, Spring 2011 (London: Central St Martins), p. 4–13; Nora Sternfeld, “Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?”, *e-flux* 03/2010, online <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/125>. In 1986, Dobbs and Eisner observed the uncontested hierarchy: rather than seen as complementary, the curatorial function was considered primary and educational function secondary. Even worse: the educator was seen as a technician taking the lead from the curator who “really knows”, i.e. possesses the right knowledge. Dobbs and Eisner, “The Uncertain Profession.”

<sup>14</sup> Engage the National Association for Gallery Education, “Work in Progress: Artists, Education and Participation” conference in Margate, 14–16 November 2011. Wilson’s talk online: [http://www.engage.org/conference/2011\\_resources.aspx](http://www.engage.org/conference/2011_resources.aspx).

<sup>15</sup> Sternfeld, “Unglamorous Tasks”. See also Graham, “Spanners in the Spectacle”.

<sup>16</sup> See also Mörsch, “Alliances for Unlearning”, 5–13; Felicity Allen, “Border Crossing”, *Tate Papers* spring 2009, online [http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09spring/felicity-allen.shtm#\\_edn4](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09spring/felicity-allen.shtm#_edn4).

<sup>17</sup> Farquharson, “I Curate, You Curate, We Curate.”

<sup>18</sup> O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn”, 13–14.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Ernesto Pujol, “The Artist as Educator”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3, (Autumn 2001), 4–6.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Farquharson, “I Curate, You Curate, We Curate.” Also Draxler, “Crisis as Form”.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating But Were Afraid to Ask* (Berlin: Sternberg Press 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Morton, “Are you being served”.

<sup>23</sup> Ryyänen, “Institutional Stress.”

<sup>24</sup> Carmen Mörsch et al. (eds.), *documenta 12 education II. Between Cultural Praxis and Public Service. Results of a Research Project* (2009, Berlin: Diaphanes), p. 9–31.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Carla Padró about didactic, discovery, constructivist and social constructionist approaches to gallery education, in Padró, “Learning Theories Employed within Museum & Gallery Education: A Short Overview”, in *Collect & Share: Good Practice, Training Needs, and Action Points* (2005), p. 15–17 (available online [www.collectandshare.eu.com](http://www.collectandshare.eu.com)): Also published in *Lifelong Learning in Museums. A European Handbook*. Edited by Kirsten Gibbs, Margherita Sani, Jane Thompson, (2006), 20–22. These typologies, albeit more detailed, echo also the debate around “democratisation of culture” versus “cultural democracy” in the 1970s.

<sup>26</sup> Discussions about whether and to what extent information transfer is oppressive or emancipatory are quite active among education professionals, and a lot of critique circulates e.g. about the “banking concept” of learning (Paulo Freire) or “stultification” (Jacques Rancière).

<sup>27</sup> Janna Graham notes that the term education flattens the many notions of pedagogy and in people’s minds refers to school education only. In Marijke Steedman ed. *Gallery as Community: Art, Education, Politics*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery 2012), 88. Wilson, however, suggests in his talk (see footnote 11) that flagging up critical educational practices is a strategic means of claiming ground in the terrain of the educational turn.

<sup>28</sup> See also Kaija Kaitavuori, “Museum Education: Between the Devil of Business Model and the Deep Blue Sea of Public Service”. *Engage Journal* 28/2011. Online [http://www.academia.edu/1373643/Museum\\_Education\\_Between\\_the\\_Devil\\_of\\_the\\_Business\\_Model\\_and\\_the\\_Deep\\_Blue\\_Sea\\_of\\_Public\\_Service](http://www.academia.edu/1373643/Museum_Education_Between_the_Devil_of_the_Business_Model_and_the_Deep_Blue_Sea_of_Public_Service).

<sup>29</sup> The term is adapted from Mary Lousie Pratt and refers to the space of colonial encounters. James Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones*, 1997, republished in many anthologies.

<sup>30</sup> For Draxler, mediation means mainly curating. Interestingly, the translator (German) has added a note in which “mediation” is distanced from the meaning of conflict and defined as communication and understanding—in my mind somewhat contradicting Draxler’s idea. Draxler, “Crisis as Form”.

<sup>31</sup> This was pointed out by Nora Sternfeld.



THAT CERTAIN SAVOIR/POUVOIR:  
GALLERY EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF POSSIBILITY  
NORA STERNFELD

Since the 1990s, the debates within the field of gallery education have become reflexive. Now, guided tours must do more than simply convince and captivate; in mediation projects, approaches to artistic work, trends and themes should do more than simply be as interactive as possible. Rather, in art mediation theory, language and action have become focal points in themselves. In numerous seminars and conferences, in mediation teams and in the multitude of museum and exhibition study programmes that have increasingly been cropping up, their own position within power relations and institutions has been discussed.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, with recourse to approaches from New Museology<sup>2</sup> and institutional critique within the art field,<sup>3</sup> mediation has been located in the middle of the knowledge/power nexus.<sup>4</sup> Art educators have critically examined their everyday practices and found many of their basic assumptions shaken to the core. But that is no reason for resignation: because right between knowledge and power might also be the space for agency within art mediation.

Now that art mediation's institutions, methods and language have been critically reflected upon and questioned over the past few years, this text seeks to examine the field of possibility within art education from different perspectives. In her book *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak deals with the question of agency and with devising a critical theory of agency. In an essay entitled "More on Power/Knowledge",<sup>5</sup> she reads Foucault using the theoretical instruments of Derrida, enabling her to gain a new and empowering perspective on the knowledge/power nexus (*savoir/pouvoir*). In French, *pouvoir* means not only power but also "to be able to". Spivak reads the combination of the verbs *savoir/pouvoir* as *savoir-vivre* [an understanding of social life and customs], as "being able to do something only as you are able to make sense of it."<sup>6</sup> With this re-reading, she fundamentally shifts the focus: knowledge and power are not only the two relations between two forms of agency but they also produce a space by placing them in relation to one another. In this Spivakian sense, this text seeks to locate the agency in the middle of a critical praxis of art education.

Gayatri Spivak's reading of Foucault makes it possible to use theory to

locate agency, which is never innocent and always operates in the middle of things, on a theoretical level. What is this “in the middle of things” in an exhibition space: How can it be conceived of as a public space of negotiation and agency? Who are the actors and by what means do they act? And if, following Spivak’s line of argument, there is no longer such a thing as an outside perspective or a bird’s eye view of knowledge, then art education can cast aside the powerful distinction between the production and reproduction of knowledge and begin to act.

### **Acting in the middle of things**

At first glance it may seem that reflexivity, discussions on the power of discourses and institutional critique could have allowed agency to fade into the background. Much of what was considered self-evident, important and progressive within mediation—the opening of institutions, working with visitors’ free association or employing interactive strategies of mediation, for example—has been critically assessed and closely examined with regards to ideology, hegemony, bourgeois-institutional or paternalistic strategies.<sup>7</sup> This revealed the institution’s role in the construction of values, tendencies, truths and histories, so that it was no longer possible to view the visitors as autonomous subjects who had to be enlightened and brought to maturity. Thus, one could reason that since we, as autonomous subjects, along with our strategies of mediation, have so strongly been called into question, nobody knows how to act appropriately anymore.

This could lead to the question: “what’s left for us to do?” In fact, this question was not raised, or more precisely, it was not raised as a gesture of resignation: reflexivity is far from being simply paralyzing, as it has led to a number of forms of expression within a kind of art mediation that perceives itself as a critical praxis.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore clear that critique has changed. It can no longer set itself apart and assume an outside perspective; instead, its place is just as much in the middle of discourses and power relations as that to which it refers. Within this process, critique fulfils a double function. On the one hand, it functions as a critique of something and, on the other hand, critique also entails its own claims to validity. Therefore, the place from which critique comes becomes a subject of critique itself, and it, too, becomes suspicious. The result is critique in a dual sense: self-critique and social critique.<sup>9</sup> This “double occupation” of a critique that does not take itself out of the equation is what theorist Irit Rogoff calls criticality:

In “criticality” we have that double occupation in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyse and unveil while at

the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through. As such we live out a duality that requires at the same time both an analytical mode and a demand to produce new subjectivities that acknowledge that we are what Hannah Arendt has termed “fellow sufferers” of the very conditions we are critically examining.<sup>10</sup>

Rogoff also makes it clear that learning involves being taken apart in the process of learning because “one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old.”<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that art education theorist Carmen Mörsch calls art education a critical praxis: art education becomes a context in which one grapples with society, with institutions and with oneself.

So, if the analysis of the last few years has revealed that art institutions are powerful sites where canons and values are produced and established, then it could be said that precisely those spaces in which the canon is (re) produced are the spaces where something can happen. In this sense, exhibitions and art institutions are located at the interface between dominance and liberation. They are structured spaces of administration, but they also harbour the possibility of acting within the social realm. And it is precisely at this point that counter-narratives and critique can take place—without, however, ever remaining fully innocent. “You take positions in terms not of the discovery of historical or philosophical grounds, but in terms of reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding,”<sup>12</sup> says Gayatri Spivak on the role of postcolonial educators, thus clearly emphasising that an outside perspective is just as much a fiction as is the possibility of using it as an excuse to withdraw from a position. Here, art education should be understood as a framework within which this certain savoir/pouvoir can become effective and within which, in the middle of the institutions, in the middle of the power/knowledge nexus, a space opens up, in order to be able to do something.

## **Taking issue with the apparatus of value-coding**

Critically examining institutions and their functions—from collecting, conserving, researching, narrating and exhibiting to educating<sup>13</sup>—therefore also means perceiving them as constructed, historically contingent and transformable, actively unlearning the powerful production of knowledge (for instance, what counts as good art), and thereby, in the midst of the apparatus of value-coding, taking issue with it. This means not only simply listening to other forms of knowledge but also allowing and enabling the existing order of knowledge to be fundamentally questioned, seized and changed.

In order for this to happen, it is necessary to deconstruct the role of ed-

ucators and curators as “mediators” between the object and the visitor and to try to unlearn many of the fundamental truths within the art and exhibition field: What if educators were no longer the ones with knowledge and visitors no longer those in need of knowledge? What if mediation processes were conceived as spaces of collective agency, in which to engage with different forms of knowledge?

Looking at agency from this perspective enables us to see potential for change, beyond simply calling for participation, by addressing the power relations involved in defining the institution itself. If we understand art institutions as public spaces that are not only open to everyone but also strive to be sites that belong to everyone, then we are dealing with the question of the possibility of change. This crucial differentiation between what merely appears to be participatory and participation in a political sense affects our understanding of art education and mediation. Carmen Mörsch distinguishes four different types of education and speaks of affirmative, reproductive, deconstructive and transformative approaches: according to Mörsch, affirmative approaches are frontal forms of passing on the knowledge and values of institutions, while reproductive approaches tend to work with dialogue-based and interactive methods for acquiring institutional knowledge and values. In both cases, however, the institutional canon remains unquestioned. The questioning takes place in the third category, through employing deconstructive approaches. While these reflect on the logics of institutions and the institutions themselves, only the transformative strategies go a step further: they aim to not only analyse but also transform the institutions.<sup>14</sup>

It is precisely at this point, when art education and mediation allow for something to happen—something that is not predetermined and that not only questions social and institutional logics but also intervenes in them—that art education steps off the path of reflexivity and deconstruction and begins to engage in transformation. Taking this into account, it would make sense to cease to conceive of art education and mediation merely as vehicles for the transfer of knowledge but rather as ways of engaging with different forms of knowledge.

## **Objects that act**

Which forms of knowledge come together in exhibitions? Against the backdrop of the various critical discussions on “how” to educate, methodological questions regarding “what” have somewhat receded into the background in the past few years. In order to create a perspective that not only entails an awareness of the gallery educators’ role and work, we should also question the possible roles of objects and art. What if we were to imagine that we were no longer dealing with important and valuable objects, from which

we extract knowledge simply by looking at them? We are only too familiar (as numerous catalogue and exhibition texts in the field of contemporary art have shown) with assigning artwork an enigmatic character and imagining that its meaning lies silently within, a meaning that cannot be deciphered through words, but the multiplicity of which can be “sounded out”<sup>15</sup> with a great deal of compelling knowledge of iconographies, contexts, tendencies, theories and discussions. Here, I would like to propose engaging with works of art in exhibitions in a way that does not overload them with a particular aura, or treat them as an enigma, but instead understands them as agents that act within power relations and prerogatives of interpretation, with their own materiality, history and positionality.

In the last few years, French sociologist Bruno Latour caused quite a stir with the thesis that things act. He assumes that things are actors and asks: “what would an object-oriented democracy look like?”<sup>16</sup> He clearly shows that the idea that things are constructed through the way we imagine them, or our access to them, is a modern construct that harkens back to the era of order and classification. He proposes that things themselves are to be understood as actors within networks and writes: “Procedures to authorize and legitimize are important, but it’s only half of what is needed to assemble. The other half lies in the issues themselves, in the matters that matter, in the res that creates a public around it. They need to be represented, authorized, legitimated and brought to bear inside the relevant assembly.”<sup>17</sup> For Latour, objects not only undergo construction they act themselves but also act themselves, impose things, implicate others, disregard rules and, in turn, are regulated and demand that one positions oneself.

Drawing on Latour’s theory of objects as actors, I would like to propose attributing agency to artworks in exhibitions as well. The triad has now been fully disbanded, the focus has shifted, and mediation appears to be a situation in which actions are taken, and things can get out of hand.

In this way, gallery education could be conceived as an assembly in a public space where different actors and forms of knowledge come together: the knowledge of the objects and artwork, the knowledge of the institutions and the knowledge of the visitors and art educators. Of course, not all forms of knowledge are legitimised equally. But the division of legitimisation as it is at this very moment has not always been this way, and does not necessarily have to remain this way. And, after all, this is what makes us yearn for that certain savoir/pouvoir...

Translation: Erika Doucette

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Carmen Mörsch et al. (eds.), *documenta 12 education II. Between Critical Practice and Visitor Services: Results of a Research Project* (2009, Berlin: Diaphanes) or Schnittpunkt (ed.): *Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen* (2005, Vienna: Turia + Kant). [German: *Who is Speaking? Authority and Authorship in Exhibitions*]

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Vergo, *The New Museology* (1989, London: Reaktion Books).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g., John C. Welchman (ed.), *Institutional Critique and After* (2006, Zürich: JRP/Ringier), or Andrea Fraser, “Was ist Institutionskritik?” in *Texte zur Kunst* 59/15 (2005), pp. 86–89.

<sup>4</sup> Here, the knowledge/power nexus refers to the space within discourse where knowledge and power intersect, as is elaborated on from different perspectives throughout Michel Foucault’s entire body of work. In this way, art mediation is thus not necessarily different from any other discourse in society, since knowledge and power are the two intertwined aspects that constitute Foucault’s thought and which determine everything that can be said or thought (from categorising to disciplining and from normalisation to resistance).

<sup>5</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993, New York/London: Routledge) pp. 25–51.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Nora Sternfeld, *Der Taxispielstrick. Vermittlung zwischen Selbstregulierung und Selbstermächtigung in: Schnittpunkt, Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen*, pp. 15–33. See also: Oliver Marchart, *Die Institution spricht*; *Ibid.* pp. 34–58.

<sup>8</sup> A number of great examples of this can be found in these two research volumes on art education at *documenta 12*: Ayse Güleç et al. (eds.), *documenta 12 education I. Engaging Audiences, Opening Institutions Methods and Strategies in Education at documenta 12* (2009, Berlin: Diaphanes) and Carmen Mörsch et al., *documenta 12 education II*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Irit Rogoff, “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality” in *translate webjournal* 8 (2006), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/Rogoff1/en> [05 September 2012].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Here, I purposefully refer to the responsibilities of the museum as laid out in the ICOM bylaws in 2001, albeit in a slightly modified form. There it is stated that “[a] museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, 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.” <http://icom.museum/statutes.html#> [7 November 2009]. If art associations are to perceive themselves as public spaces, this raises the question which of the aspects of the museum are important or

applicable to them, and which are not. Part of the definition of the public sphere, according to Jürgen Habermas, is taking up the perspective of all. For Habermas, this necessarily requires linking the public sphere with universality: “The public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access. The public sphere from which specific groups would be eo ipso excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (1989, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press), p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Carmen Mörsch, “At a Crossroads of Four Discourses, documenta 12 Gallery Education in between Affirmation, Reproduction, Deconstruction, and Transformation”, in *documenta 12 education II. Between Cultural Praxis and Public Service. Results of a Research Project*, Carmen Mörsch et al. (eds.) (2009, Berlin: Diaphanes), pp. 9–33.

<sup>15</sup> An extremely popular term used in exhibition texts.

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. B. Latour and P. Weibel (eds.) (2005, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

CONTRADICTING ONESELF:  
GALLERY EDUCATION AS CRITICAL PRACTICE  
WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL TURN IN CURATING  
CARMEN MÖRSCH

**Reflexivity in gallery education**

Gallery educators operate within a field of differing objectives and criteria. Even when they have an affirmative attitude towards the art system, they have to juggle their own requirements, the expectations of visitors and the objectives of the institution, which are not identical. To exemplify the various positions under negotiation I have chosen the most common format—a guided tour of an exhibition.

For the most part, the public expects to receive an explanation of as many works as possible in the shortest possible time, while being entertained and made to feel comfortable. This service should be provided by a person with a habitus suited to the museum, the appropriate dress code and a form of speech that is perceived as fitting. The curators of the exhibition expect the gallery educator, as its mediator, to serve the exhibition by interpreting the curatorial narratives as accurately as possible for the public. However, there is a widespread suspicion that content will be simplified, that there will be some “dumbing down”. Hence the curator also expects the educator to provide evidence to the contrary. The curator expects maximum alignment of the educational with the curatorial habitus. Custodians and technical staff, for their part, expect the educator to avoid causing a fuss, to prevent safety risks and to help as much as possible with overseeing the public. The institution’s management expects the educator to “sell” the institution and the exhibition, and to preclude insurance claims or complaints by any of the above-named positions. They expect this service to be performed for the lowest possible cost. And frequently, they expect it to generate income for the institution.

The outlined expectations are not necessarily contradictory. Nevertheless it is unlikely that the educator will fulfil all of them simultaneously and continuously. Moreover, he or she will have their own requirements of their work, which might lead them to prioritise certain expectations—for example those of the public over those of the curatory or management. Thus educators act within an area of conflict, whose management and control requires the very feminised “soft skills” traditionally ascribed to gallery