

Ten Fundamental  
Questions of  
Curating

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Why Mediate Art?

Maria Lind

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Publishing director  
Edoardo Bonaspetti

Editor  
Jens Hoffmann

Copy editor  
Lindsey Westbrook

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by Maria Lind,  
with artwork by  
Marysia Lewandowska

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## Why Mediate Art?

*Text — Maria Lind*

*Artwork — Marysia Lewandowska*

*Vermittlung*—“mediation” in German—signifies a transfer from one party to another, the pragmatic transmission of a message. It also stands for attempts at reconciling parties who disagree on something: nations, for instance, or people in conflict. Although there is an abundance, even an overproduction, of traditionally didactic activities within art institutions today, I believe that now is the time to think more and harder about the mediation of contemporary art. About whom we as artists and curators want to communicate with, and the associated questions of how art actually functions in contemporary culture. It is a seeming paradox: an excess of didacticism and simultaneously a renewed need for mediation.

The two different conditions to account for here, before the dance with the question of mediation can begin, occupy different positions in discussions about art and curating. The first is generally considered more annoying than useful by the professional community. The second is by contrast little-discussed, even below the radar of most practitioners. I am referring to the educational and pedagogical approaches that are in place at most art institutions. On the one hand they can be overbearing, and they may even obscure the art. On the other hand there is the increasing bifurcation between experimental, cutting-edge art and curating, and the ambition of institutions to spread art beyond social and economic boundaries. An effect of the latter condition is a growing sense of isolation between spheres of interests and activities in the arts, not to mention an almost total lack of mediation beyond relatively closed circles in the more experimental arenas.

The one institution that has played a greater role than any other in setting the standard for mainstream museum education is the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The model that its founding director Alfred Barr instigated in the 1930s did not add pedagogy at the end of the exhibition-making process, as icing on the cake, but rather integrated it into every exhibition. In the brilliant book *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, the art historian Charlotte Klonk demonstrates that exhibitions at MoMA have always been consciously didactic, promoting Barr's formalist view of art. His main purpose was to refine the aesthetic sensibility of visitors and to mold a mode of spectatorship based on what she calls "the educated consumer," in contrast to the 19th-century ideal of the spectator as a "responsible citizen." Despite Barr's famous charts of stylistic developments and well-written, accessible catalogue texts, the educational approach in his exhibitions tended to be more visual and spatial than discursive. The paintings were hung low on the white walls, and numerous partitions created more [organized the?] wall space. The selection of works and the display strategies themselves were of utmost importance. "Points" were made in the exhibitions: for example, in the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, the identification of historical and non-Western visual sources for 20th-century Western geometric abstraction.

The fact that MoMA from the outset quite literally situated itself as a mediator between industrial producers and distributors (a powerful interest group with a strong presence on the board of trustees) and a "buying" audience cannot be underestimated. MoMA openly borrowed display techniques from department stores and other commercial settings. And visitors were considered not just consumers, who in conjunction with certain exhibitions could even buy the displayed design objects in the museum shop, but tastemakers who were expected to become responsible members of the emerging society of

consumption. Thus market strategies and business interests merged and shaped new ideals of spectatorship. Given MoMA's influential status, its approach was taken up at innumerable other art institutions in all different parts of the world. The idea of "winning people over," of persuading them, was central to MoMA's didactics from the outset, just as it was in the contemporaneous advertising industry, which was itself coming of age and transforming for the new modern era. Within this largely commercial scheme, unconventional and "innovative" art was accepted as long as the innovations remained on a formal level and did not allude to, let alone provoke, any practical overlap between the sphere of art and the sphere of social and political action.

This should ring more than one bell for those familiar with contemporary art museums and curating. Another familiar phenomenon is the concept of the education or pedagogical department. Despite the fact that its particular brand of curating was based primarily on integrated didacticism, in 1937 a separate education department was started at MoMA. Under the leadership of Victor E. D'Amico, it deviated from Barr's ideas about a more or less detached spectator and promoted visitor participation. Instead of emphasizing enjoyment or judgment of the art on the wall, it encouraged visitors to explore their own creativity. John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy and theories about art as an emancipatory activity with great potential to stimulate political participation in democratic societies played a certain role. Nevertheless, in the cases of both Barr's educated consumer and D'Amico's participant, a heightened sense of individuality was promoted. This was markedly different from the collectivist approaches to spectatorship, influenced by Constructivism, that around the same time and even before were promoted by artists such as El Lissitzky and curators such as Alexander Dorner, both in Europe. Collective spectatorship was inspired by the Russian Revolution and by

Einstein's theory of relativity. It encouraged a varied and active experience through dynamic exhibition design, where things looked different from different angles, while simultaneously emphasizing the totality of the installation. It also promoted ideas of shared, collective encounters with art.

Today, Barr's didactic model of "educated consumer spectatorship" can easily be identified in the operations of most major museums and other exhibiting institutions, from MoMA in New York to Tate Modern in London to Moderna Museet in Stockholm. The idea of "Constructivist spectatorship" has been largely left behind, although it has hibernated and survived in the work of Group Material, the group around Shedhalle in Zurich in the late 1990s, and artists such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, and Liam Gillick. At the same time museum practice in the United States has, since the early 20th century, promoted itself as reaching out to a wider audience. European welfare states have done some of the same in the postwar period and in the name of equality they have supported both broader access to high culture and reformulations of what constitutes high culture. Educational concerns are important, maybe even essential in democratic societies. But this attitude often clashes with high-modernist ideas about art not imposing itself on its viewers—that it is, or at least should be, strong enough to stand on its own feet and speak for itself, removed from "external" contexts. Which leads to decontextualized "What do you see and what do you feel" pedagogy.

Again the art in question does not typically challenge the status quo; it is about enjoyment and judging. We can call this method "the establishment of the canon," relying mostly on developments internal to art and certainly echoing Barr's ideas. This method aims at producing a genealogy of artists, and to a certain degree also a sequence of accepted themes,

whose work can be included in a master narrative of the history of art. Importantly, however, this maneuver happens at the expense of more investigative approaches where a stated ambition is to contextualize artistic practice and to study and question current phenomena and inherited norms and procedures. In other words, to decode and recode artifacts and activities that pertain to contemporary life, guided more by what is interesting and relevant than by what is "pleasurable," "good," and "lasting." Nowadays this model can itself be contextualized within the widespread call for canons of culture, blueprints of "eternal quality" to be implemented in school and university curricula.

So what does this have to do with mediation? All of the above count as forms of mediation, employed more or less consciously: integrated didacticism, supplementary participatory education and pedagogy, and finally narrative information deployed both inside and outside the institution. This last was historically generated by educational and pedagogical departments but nowadays it comes more and more from PR and marketing people. Whereas the added participatory education is based on an assumption that there is a deficiency among the visitors—a gap to be bridged, a hole to be filled, or even a conflict to be solved—the other two are concerned more with a perceived lack of contact between parties, a "misunderstanding," or a conflict to be straightened out. The idea that a sort of "dating service" is needed to put the right people and "things" in touch with each other. At the same time, mediation can be much more than this: It is essentially about creating contact surfaces between works of art, curated projects, and people, about various forms and intensities of communicating about and around art. As a term, mediation seems to be open enough to allow for a wider variety of modes of approaching exchanges among art, institutions, and the outside world. In short, mediation appears to provide room for less didacticism,

less schooling and persuasion, and more active engagement that does not have to be self-expressive or compensatory.

Let us return for a moment to the current abundance of didacticism. It is an excess that pertains in equal measures to what is typically considered the very nucleus of the craft of curating (for example, Barr's model of selecting, installing, and in other ways contextualizing work) and what is tagged onto a curated project (gallery tours and workshops, wall texts, labels, audio guides, et cetera). Whereas the latter is frequently deemed over-didactic, the former is not commonly thought of as "didactic" at all but rather as common practice, the normal thing to do. It is almost not visible, like curating before Harald Szeemann—invisible hands selecting and arranging. In addition to the type of curating described above (the didactic establishment of the canon, with narrative information added on), among the most common modes of interpellation in art education within exhibiting institutions today remains the participatory format promoted by D'Amico. Experience-based guided tours and workshops where visitors are asked to share what they see and what they think and feel about what they see, to discover "the creator" in themselves, are part and parcel of this.

The division of labor in larger art institutions involves the educational and pedagogical departments taking responsibility for educating the audience, in essence for "fixing" what ought to be the responsibility of other social institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. The collections and temporary exhibitions departments take care of the more persuasive, integrated, and therefore probably more efficient didactics. An interesting feature of D'Amico-style formats within this scheme is that they are easy to avoid—we don't have to join in unless we really want to—as opposed to Barr's model, which is baked into the institution or exhibition. This is also

the case with the many overly simplified and often promotional wall texts, brochures, and other presumably generous narrative techniques, which tend to render art at the same time more simple and more spectacular. The pure promotion has reached almost obscene levels, particularly in press releases. Marketing and PR departments have gradually taken over responsibilities that used to be shared between curators and educators. In many art institutions, marketing and PR take the lead on any added narrative, and they can for example decide *not* to provide written information about a specific project, even though it is up and running, because it detracts attention from the blockbusters. It is not unknown for marketing and PR people to interfere with the program itself, even.

But do we really need more mediation? Maybe what we should call for is different types of mediation, and in other contexts. As well as a heightened awareness of the specific forms of mediation that are already employed in institutions, not least the persuasive mediation embedded within the traditional craft of curating. We as professionals would certainly benefit from methods that help us reflect upon what we do and how we do it, as a form of consciousness-raising. Furthermore, most of the methods of mediation in use today have been modeled upon modern art, which functioned in radically different ways than contemporary practice. Formats derived from one paradigm are being applied to art from a different paradigm.

But most importantly, it is time to consider and take seriously the fact that the art and curated projects at the forefront of experimentation, which formulate new questions and create new stories, are growing increasingly remote from the mainstream. These sidestreams, many of which test various forms of "Constructivist spectatorship," trickle further and further away from the situations where most people encounter art and curated projects (large institutions in big cities), and here

mediation, whatever type it may be, is marginal. This kind of strategic separatism is in many ways a survival strategy in order to guarantee other proportions of self-determination; the mainstream is not particularly welcoming to the sidestreams and the sidestreams prefer to stick to themselves. And yet the inevitable result is self-marginalization, where only the already-converted are reached.

Another reason for asking what is the good of mediation: More and more over the last decade, I have observed in emerging curators and students of curating a relatively limited interest in communicating about art beyond professional circles. This pattern stands in stark contrast to the developments in mainstream institutions discussed above, which suffer from too much (and too much one-sided) didacticism. Together with a number of colleagues I am partly to blame for this development, having supported ideas around all kinds of experimentation, both artistically and curatorially, advocating the necessity to try out the unknown without having to constantly glance at the reception. We have been motivated by the need to create other ways of thinking and acting—a direct reaction to a perceived stasis among mainstream institutions, including their overly didactic modes of address. The experimentation has more or less only been possible in the sidestreams. And I will continue to pursue it, but while trying to keep more of an eye on how what we are doing might be communicated beyond the confirmed believers. On how mediation can create space for exchange with something “other.”

This limited interest in communication beyond the select audience of one’s peers manifests itself in two tendencies among younger curators and students. One foregrounds smart curatorial concepts and another privileges collaboration and new production. The first one, let’s call it the “curatorial pirouettes,” focuses on the ideas of the curator. Here art tends to

be included based on illustrative or representational grounds and the outcome is usually a thematic group exhibition. In this category we can also include some of the more self-reflexive curatorial models, which tend to focus on reworking structures and formats. The second one, which we can term the “over-collaboration,” involves close collaboration between the curator/student and an artist with the purpose of creating new work. Although the rhetoric involves “avoiding traditional notions of authorship” and “escaping individuality,” this intense interaction between the two players often ends up being close to a symbiosis. Others are kept outside, and the result is a “super-artistic” subject who has two bodies instead of one and is surprisingly self-expressive.

In both situations, a third term—a wedge to trigger a dialectical dynamism—is missing. Instead there is little exteriority, almost no outside and very few “others.” Again, this is the opposite of the theoretical open-arms strategy of mainstream art institutions. The curator/student creates a separate universe for her/himself and her/his ideas or artist buddy. Of course any show involves detailed work that needs to take place behind closed doors, but I believe that the moment has come to insist on experimentation while simultaneously attempting to develop new forms of mediation—to consider earnestly the question of what art does in culture, what its function can be in society, and to be more generous with the material at hand. And to shift the terms of the existing forms of mediation in mainstream institutions in order to make room for other types of exchanges, and possibly also to let art use more of its potential.

Given that consumption is one of the most widely known and accepted forms of engagement with the surrounding reality, we should ask whether dismissing MoMA’s model of the “educated consumer” is necessarily a good thing. Is it actually the fastest

and most efficient means by which to reach new audiences, or rather, to develop a different “exteriority”? Most likely this model can be used in other ways, for different purposes. At the same time I wonder if we have not already seen the emergence of yet another model, that of “the entertained consumer,” where visitors arrive at the museum with the expectation that they must be constantly amused and entertained. And yet the collectivist spectatorship advocated by the Constructivists continues to have an allure. The theoretician Irit Rogoff has argued for a related version of spectatorship, or rather “terms of engagement,” in which the physical participation that is part of the 200-year-old art *habitus* carries the nucleus of a qualitatively better form of democracy than the separation offered by representative democracy. If we take Rogoff seriously, “reaching new audiences” is less relevant than changing the terms in which we talk about how we together produce a public or semi-public space thanks to, with, and around art, curated projects, institutions, and beyond.

### Twitter Education

This is the time when art is mediated to its audience not only through lectures, seminars, artists' talks, guided tours and publications but when mediation intervenes as a pulsating stream of immediacy, mixing the promotional intentions of the institution with the visitors' desires of sharing their observations and responses. The banal is closely entangled with the political, the randomness is attached to a system as announced by the ubiquitous banner: Twitter is a rich source of instantly updated information. It's easy to stay updated on an incredibly wide variety of topics. By utilising the social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter that emerged over the past few years, the communication between the art institutions and their audiences has grown into a real time stream of information snippets.

What appears on the following pages are graphs mapping tweets sent by three major art institutions, Tate in London, MOMA in New York and Moderna Museet in Stockholm to communicate and mediate their activities as they are enmeshed together with Maria Lind's text. The two text streams have been aggregated as a word chain, where each word is connected with a link to the following word in the sentence. Each word is represented only once as a node in the chain, but in many cases with multiple connections, edges, to the following words. The resulting visualisation is of a network based on the structure of the words in use. The two different sources are distinguished where red lines represent the links between the words in the tweets sent by the art institutions, while the black lines show the flow of the essay written by Maria Lind. The tweets cover the period between 2009-09-16,15:18 and 2010-11-29 16:03. The graphs were developed in collaboration with Fabian Neuhaus [www.urbantick.blogspot.com](http://www.urbantick.blogspot.com)

The mapping of this flow expresses a desire and interest in distributive networks without restriction; it is the desire of being in touch and engaged, of organising one's thoughts and sharing them instantly. The knowledge ecologies of a wider world intersect in unexpected ways and point to the role mediation plays in shaping our current social and political life.