

Meaningful Experiences and Art Mediation Laboratories*

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[...] because a bridge—even when you want to build it, and even if all artwork is a bridge from one thing to another—, a bridge isn't really a bridge until someone crosses it.

Julio Cortázar

The present paper outlines the public policy approach and reflections around an art pedagogy program for public venues exhibiting contemporary art. The program assembled a multidisciplinary group of researchers and educators in a fourth month long laboratory, to debate, design and test new strategies for engaging local audiences in different art settings in Bogotá. As the curricula developer, I coordinated the lab and tutored the research of the fellows, to finally edit a book with the results of their experiences in 2014. The program was developed with the support of the Visual and Fine Arts Office of Instituto Distrital de las Artes IDARTES, the public office funding the main programs that foster the arts in the city.

The Art Mediation Lab integrates two long standing professional interests of mine: an academic line of research in philosophy and multicultural ethics, and my work experience with publicly funded art organizations in Bogotá developing mediation practices and debating public policy for contemporary art. Both have come to be addressed in an empirical research around mediation practices as critical pedagogy that not only embraces the critical aspirations of contemporary art, but has a quite interesting potential for addressing dilemmas of contemporary ethics in our democratic societies.

In this essay I provide, firstly, a general framework of research, where I present the interests and concerns rooted in my research on ethics and philosophy and the career development leading to this specific project, as I took part in a series of programs, during ten years, aiming to enlarge the access and quality of the public engagement with visual arts and literature, but also some pedagogical initiatives involving the interaction of citizens. In the second section, I describe my specific approach to mediation practices, and present the questions and general perspective of audience engagement with art as a terrain for critical thinking and meaningful interaction scaffolding in public galleries and museums. Finally, addressing a set of issues that are at stake in the art field, I present the outlines of the

* This paper constitutes the first chapter of a larger on-going body of research on art mediation practices for contemporary art.

program, as implemented from July to October 2013 and a brief assessment of the challenges encountered when developing mediation strategies for audiences.

1. Background research and pedagogical experiences

To properly unfold the questions and interests underlying this research, I will begin tracing the line of inquiry that led me to it, through a few projects and explorations I have undertaken in academic and public policy fields.

My BA and MA thesis research in Philosophy focused on politics and ethics in multicultural societies, addressing complex dilemmas present in contemporary democracies. I searched for possible parameters to deal with interaction and diverse world views, under a global frame of equality or rights and co-existence based in respect and solidarity. However, despite the appealing answers philosophy provided, an awareness of the limits of theory developments became pressing after writing both dissertations. Theory would always fall short of accounting for concrete ethical dynamics and would have scarce if any incidence on actual ethical beliefs behaviors in context.¹ The arguments of Hegel's dialectics of recognition and of Rawls' grounds for justice and equality I investigated, rendered illuminating explanations of ideal ethical perspectives able to reconcile differences, but they were still hopelessly far from our day to day struggling with discrimination, inequality and intolerance (Villa 2001 and 2005). I very soon realized it was in a different arena that the development of ideas, findings and analysis were required. That is how my interest shifted to a much less conceptual and rather concrete ground of study, where ethics are linked to symbolic, narrative, performative and behavioral dimension: the daily life of people, and in particular, their quotidian aesthetic experiences when shared with others.

1.1 Multicultural democracies: understanding behavior and its ethical grounds

The focus in actual interaction directed my attention, since 2007, to observe and study such experiences. My interest in mediation processes of cultural production came about in the field of publishing (my main line of professional work), where editing and translating call for communicative dynamics where the receiver is the main focus, and the ability to mediate between artists and broader audiences, and to "educate"² those audiences at the same time

¹ Despite the appealing and significant findings and insights one can have (in terms of normative parameters and psychological grounds for ethical interaction) when studying system provided by philosophy of justice, no matter how precise and elaborated the general frame for democratic values and citizen's interaction —i.e. the liberal perspective encompassing different worldviews and traditions offered by John Rawls (2002)—, the deep debates and the cultural changes required for an actual mutual recognition, understanding and respect for each other, might always escape the range of analysis of this well intended theory.

² This was my initial way to approach the problem —the motivation to *educate* understood as the advancement of social awareness and critical reflection of citizens, how is it possible to "educate" citizens ethically, aesthetically, humanly. This idea has progressively been challenged and adjusted over the years thanks to direct practice with workshops in different contexts, turning *what "educating" might mean*, or rather, *how learning and transforming each other can happen*, into one of the core questions.

(not just entertain them) was essential. Editors need to have a deep understanding of meaning, the message or worldviews of authors, and figure out the best ways to help them convey it to their readers. As editor, one constantly deals with questions such as: Who are the interlocutors that enter the interpretative dialogue with texts and what are their own worldviews? How do they read and what gets transformed inside them in that encounter, or after some exposure to it with others? What perspectives are opened and which closed? What questions or tensions are triggered by them? —all of them question quite close of those of the art mediator.

Working with children and youth literature, firstly, gave me access to reflections on the impact of early reading processes, complementary reader pedagogies developed in libraries and classrooms, and especially with field experiences and studies like those of the French scholar Michelle Petit (1999), with reading programs in jails, public libraries and hospitals, and immigrant communities in France. It was then, following her and other authors' analyses of case studies of the impact of narratives in ethical debates of readers (and their role in identity configuration) that a case for an oblique approach to ethics was first suggested to me. The potential that their mediation work revealed in the case of underserved people, especially immigrants, being exposed to cultural products, the way such exposure made room for symbolizing life and identities, and created space for assessing and engaging in critical stands around everyday situations made a strong argument for its role in reconstructing social fabric in response to inequity and other burdening complex phenomena in contemporary societies.

I then engaged in cultural agency projects and citizenship culture research initiatives with the consulting office of Antanas Mockus (ex Major of Bogotá) during 2008 and 2009, and later explored to some extent both creative writing and visual arts pedagogies (through field and documental research), as a consultant for the governmental offices fostering programs on a local and national level (National Ministry of Culture of Colombia). In all these, I very soon realized how the access to artistic and narrative creations became the source of dialogue and symbolic engagement, offering an excellent basis for critical dialogues of the public about reality, but also a possible base for gathering, recognizing each other and so, for reconstituting social fabric. My main concern became finding experiences that could shed some light or provide evidence of mechanisms that would lead to ethical and critical reflection from childhood and during other phases of social life.

At this point I need to clarify that whenever I refer to ethics, here and bellow, it is fundamentally a reference to considerations, questions, and dilemmas we are all faced with in daily life interactions. I do not primarily regard ethics as a matter of personal or universal norms (moral standards or *oughts*), not even social codes (culture) —although these are often considered and may be highly influential in the ethical landscape each of us inhabit and build around us. I also refer to *moral emotions* (following David Hume and P.F. Strawson), as part of what shapes our ethical exploration and insights. But it is an empirical, intuitive exploration that I focus on, rather than being interested in discussing or choosing one among the many structured theories and definitions philosophy or psychology might provide. The subject matter of my research then, is primarily one concerned with what takes

place in the ethical dimension of everyday life, not an inquiry about how to change it or towards which ethical model of wellbeing should we direct it.

Put another way, my core interest is not teaching ethics or changing behavior through art according to some specific idea of good or wellbeing (with therapeutic concerns). In this respect, I consider the ethic and political layout of this project closer to the Socratic approach than to contemporary or modern scholarly debates around the consistency or applicability of ethical and moral systems. This research wants to explore the basis for building awareness, critical thinking, and mutual recognition in the sense of opening dialogues that address ethical dilemmas and reflections (both individual and collective, and how one level links to the other), by investigating how they might be triggered or tuned in with artistic creation, appreciation, exchange of opinions and personal expression. Within time, as I explain in section 3, this research has become one about *disquieting* and *shaking* beliefs and certainties and redirecting attention to each other; an exercise that seems healthier than one aiming at comforting and reassuring us personally through the usual self-expression and handcraft work offered by most art education programs for audiences, or those reaffirming identities or cultural values through art.

I first had the opportunity of working on pedagogical design and analysis of cultural change and ethical awareness strategies (beyond the realm of theoretical debate) with Antanas Mockus at Visionarios por Colombia Corporation. I was able to explore then a fairly down-to-earth framework describing interaction between strangers and diagnosing the possible causes of varied behaviors in crowded and complex cities like Bogotá and Medellín, among many others in Latin America. By detecting systems of beliefs that inform rational action (through observation, social data on violence and law violations, and surveys inquiring for justifications and perceptions around citizen's actions), the research team I was part of studied antisocial behaviors, violations of the law, and distrust and disrespect for the public sphere, and linked all of them to cultural beliefs or informal social codes. As a result, a set of tools for cultural intervention and change in perception and conduct of citizens were developed and their impact assessed in the field (Mockus, Murrain & Villa 2012). These strategies incorporated art and symbolic devices to intervene or activate urban interactions, relying on moral emotions of citizens and calling for their ability of self and mutual regulation (to protect life, the environment, and respect each other in many levels). The resulting dynamics implemented in Bogotá (Mockus' programs were in action for almost a decade), and later in other cities of the region, are widely renowned for their efficacy in improving co-existence, cooperation, mutual respect, awareness of the value of public infrastructure and goods (not just streets but air, water, parks, and issues related to civil rights and duties, taxes, education, corruption control, and responsible voting) and the overall improvement of quality of life and productivity.

Despite how appealing this approach to the context and to moral emotions and beliefs of people seemed, and its ability to impact a culture of informality and high levels of corruption and distrust, very soon the general frame of description of human interaction, motives and ethical reflection revealed what a serious shortcoming to me: the focus on whether actions and ideas adjusted or not to the law/norms blurs or dismisses a huge spectrum of ethical and cultural reflections and struggles. While wanting to describe and modify cultural clashes and dilemmas, the research was blind to many aspects of moral

emotions related to colonialism, inequality, ethnic and symbolic grounds of tension; all of them social dynamics that affect and cannot be covered by (and in fact may escape) the more basic values of utility, individual strategic thinking, moral gratification of citizenship virtues, and productivity. This approach did not encompass in its full extent what subjectivity and personal expression of ethical beliefs entail, which might involve many different motives and concerns of individuals and groups where dignity is built or undermined, and where critical thinking and disobedience to the norms of the consumer society, the market, or the *status quo* might find a fertile ground. On the other hand, it was clear how art (conceptual and visual creativity) entered this approach basically as an instrument in a somehow uncritical or one-sided fashion: in support of optimizing the operation of the legal system and an organized and efficient flux of events and coexistence under an unquestioned Establishment. Art served not as a way of opening a broader spectrum of analyzing reality with citizens, but as a tool to make people realize why behaving better (being more considerate to each other, one could say) under a democratic system (however flawed or perfectible) might provide overall benefit for all in the long run. Politics were left to the politicians and a critical approach to contemporary order of affairs was completely put aside in favor of a more efficient, peaceful coexistence and basic social welfare.

The deeper I went into the aims or ends of the citizenship culture approach to ethical dynamics the narrower it struck me as a frame of thinking for addressing people's motives for action and expression and their political or ethical dimension as human beings. A more radical and open approach to ethics, political thinking and social empowerment —perhaps closer to that of Michael de Certeau— and a more critical understanding of institutions in historical, memorial, contextual and inequity terms was necessary; one which Mockus' project overlooked to make a stronger legalist argument about equal rights and social stability (that is in fact quite necessary in the densely populated, highly politicized and informally structured societies of Latin America). Also, I regarded art as something with value in itself for many different reasons, not as an efficient tool to promote a given cause or didactically convey a message. Again, departing from the idea that we know what the right path to follow should be, in its potential for polysemy art surfaced instead as a much more interesting tool to address the complexity of our ethical compass.

Visual arts seemed to have a clear potential to elicit debates and challenging questions and promote connection between strangers in ethical and symbolical grounds at the same time. I had a notion of how far literature could go in this direction for certain individuals that would channel their ethical explorations and concerns through creating writing or sharing their readings. But since Colombia is a country with low quality schooling coverage, very low average levels of reading (and self-directed learning), programs for fostering familiarity with books are often designed and perceived as a branch of the efforts to strengthen literacy and school performance. They fall into another category of cultural imposition or "civilization"; that is, the intellectual standards and competitive culture of developed countries. And so, these programs inherit the tradition of cultural colonization and the usual social resistance that goes with it. I discovered later how contemporary visual arts, even when they seemed cryptic and conceptual, were much closer to popular culture understandings and response, more intuitive and suggestive for audiences than literature and written creation might be. Visual arts and visual culture then became my field of exploration

and later the terrain where art mediation³ revealed a significant source of tools to activate critical reflection between strangers.

1.2 Exploring art engagement in the public field

Becoming a consultant for a few cultural management programs of the government from 2009 on, I worked as researcher for the program RELATA, the National Network of Creative Writing Workshops, a program run by the Literature Department of the National Ministry of Culture supporting more than 40 creative writing initiatives in the country. The aim of the research was to structure its public policy and guideline documents through field work and analysis of the historical documents it was based on. At the time, the Ministry needed to develop the methodological standards for good practices to guide creators and support the practice of docents, but also to construct an institutional reflection on the social and cultural implications of the program, including its professional effect on participants and cultural communities. This experience provided an opportunity to learn how cultural public policy was being formulated and implemented on a national level, but it also gave me a chance to take a closer look into the way the arts were being assessed as ingredients in the life of creators, audiences, and all the agents involved in the cultural industries; a standard against which the actual experience of workshops with writers and readers needed to be evaluated. Assessing the social and learning impact of workshops in many different local scenarios was part of my job as a consultant (Villa 2010).

Following this, during my last position in public management, I was in charge of the educational programs for the Visual Arts Office in IDARTES (2011-2012), and had the opportunity to work directly with educational and research programs in the art field. The programs I ran operated at Galería Santa Fe, the venue exhibiting the winning projects of Bogotá District's creation grants. For two years I coordinated and instructed the gallery's staff, Escuela de Guías, the educational team giving the tours and workshops for the public. I had the challenge of designing educational tools and other complimentary activities for the shows. In the design, I focused on events and dynamics intended to open room for debate, reflection, and appreciation of artwork displayed with quite diverse audiences. The job covered many different tasks, the first of which was providing guided visits to public school children (aged 4 to 16), college students, families and specialized audiences of the art field; all with very different interests and educational backgrounds for approaching and understanding art. It also included organizing lectures and the international colloquiums for *Errata# Visual Arts Journal* (twice a year), coordinating the publication of the "Research Grant on Colombian Art History and Criticism", implementing workshops and training the mediators to host groups of diverse audiences. The whole programming responded to one single key concept to public policy for the arts: audience engagement and education.

³ Briefly described, *art mediation* aims to enable access to art by promoting and encouraging the engagement of the public, facilitating visitors' discussions, creative exploration and reflection upon art. In this context "mediation" or "facilitation" is the preferred concept in the German and French tradition of museum education, and may be considered equivalent somehow to the more common term used in North America ("interpretation") but, under a critical pedagogy perspective, it entails much more.

This challenge might seem distant from the other concerns and projects I just described, as museum or gallery education can be considered basically a tool for disseminating the ideas and codes of the smaller intellectual community of art and of those concerned with an elaborated means of expression, to make it reachable for the bigger audiences; that is, to promote “literacy” for the fine arts and its more contemporary practices, products and specialized conceptual debates. In terms of public policy design, however, there is a pending discussion today (not just locally but in the traditional centers of contemporary art) about the way public offices and cultural organizations in general serve the different aspects of their mission of *promoting the arts*. Where should the emphasis, the major investment of activity, money and infrastructure, be made? How should we balance needs and priorities?

Traditionally, supporting production and circulation of artwork (from financing residences, to creation grants, to exhibiting and publishing) has received the majority if not all of the resources in most public agencies in Bogotá, while little or very scarce energy and attention is given to how that art is received, re-used, interpreted and actually impacts society.⁴ This impact is, of course, taken for granted once exhibitions are mounted and art becomes “accessible”. The role of educators, in turn, is traditionally considered a role meant to provide information to more or less “ignorant” and passive listeners. However, on a deeper level, this dilemma points to a fundamental debate as to what the purpose of fostering the arts should be: whether it consists primarily of a system to subsidize the production of artwork and strengthen institutions that offer jobs for the different agents of the art field; or whether it is rather a concern with what art brings to society as a whole—a concern that becomes salient when we consider what would be missing for overall communities if art wasn’t part of social life, or if it was directed only to those professionally concerned with it, and mostly reserved to the elite private and intellectual enjoyment and commerce.⁵ Of

⁴ Comparing the percentage of direct investment in art education and engagement programs in Bogotá in the past years to the budget destined in the same bracket of time to creation and circulation of production (over 75%) reveals a clear imbalance. And such imbalance is even more striking when we look at the surveys on art consumption and spare time usage in the city: according to the Observatory of Culture (Bogotá’s Culture Survey 2011-2013) only an average of 6% of the overall population actually attend art exhibitions, and 60% of those visitors are in the highest income layer of society.

⁵ Cultural Public Policy in Colombia has been thought of in the past two decades as an integral system where 5 dimensions are taken into account to develop programs fostering the arts: education, creation, dissemination (circulation), research and appropriation of art production (engagement); all of which work together in a cycle involving several kinds of cultural agents (audiences are one of them). This is why, according to the mandate of the *National Plan for the Arts of Colombia* (2001-2010), one of the main concerns of the art field when working as an organic, balanced system with all these dimensions, should be to democratize the arts ensuring, as a result, not just the audience access and the understanding of its products, but engagement and social re-appropriation of its practices. This means also breaking the isolation of artists (making their jobs socially valuable, and their work visible), and reaching a general sustainability for art as a productive cultural field (improving “consumption”, strengthening the industry) while reducing dependence on public investment. If achieved, this state of affairs is hoped to improve overall cultural development, allowing arts to have a wider and deeper social and cultural impact (on audiences/artists/teachers, etc.).

course all arts, but contemporary visual arts in particular, could and should gain a much wider social relevance, as I try to show in what follows.

Continuing with the previous line of research, in the context of fostering public engagement of visual arts my main interest became developing pedagogical strategies for these quite diverse audiences while, at the same time, figuring out a way to track their responses, focusing on what art triggered in different groups and individuals. Even if not systematically done, and rather empirical, this study included analyzing their experience in the gallery from the aesthetical point of view and the understanding reached in each case on contemporary art practices —promoting art appreciation or literacy was, in fact, one of the tasks of the job. But, most of all, I centered my attention on interaction, developing tools for dialogue and creative challenges for the audience, as a means for achieving comprehension and symbolic, political and ethical aspects involved in the artwork. This meant working very closely with each artist exhibiting in the gallery, along with the mediators I trained in the process, to build a deep understanding of their art work. Exhibits would vary greatly in levels of complexity and, had not been reviewed in books or journals, as most of the artists were often very young. This way the discourses were not just open (as with any other art work from more known and reviewed artists) but radically so: they were being built on art pieces or interventions just made, as we talked about them. As part of this process, I became increasingly interested in artists' widely varied experiences and backgrounds motivating their work and creative search rather than just focusing of formal decisions and crafting of the pieces —as often might happen in more traditional museum education and art interpretation by guides—. It was the questions, stories and challenges behind art which often made it interesting and worth-while: as a visual response of commentary to those background searches and concerns.

Working with contemporary art installations and exhibits provided a very rich field of study to advance my initial interests on the impact of arts. However, in this context I very soon learned that facilitating a better understanding and engagement with rather specialized artistic production by the audience had to be in balance with providing a compelling experience for visitors: not only did we need to explain art concepts and ideas accurately, but I wanted to build an exchange with each group that would imply a meaningful connection with art (an experience capable of engaging people on a personal, intellectual and social level). This became a critical objective to meet, but I realized also that one thing would not be achievable without the other: real learning only happens when what you learn *matters*. It is true good art should let you do both often, but we had a mixed bag of exhibits resulting from creation grants. This allowed us to discover that even artwork than is not very compelling or skillfully executed, might hide a valuable notch of meaning —the trace of a meaningful human search (aesthetic or ethical) that created a good excuse for an interesting debate and collective experience for participants. Reaching a balance between offering information and scaffolding that meaningful exchange was itself an art we (interns, mostly visual artists learning to be mediators, and I as their coordinator) needed to master as a team.

The pedagogical exploration these public gallery shows required —with exhibits changing every month throughout the year— rendered a series of experiments with different means of exploring symbolic, aesthetical and ethical dimensions with audiences in what I would call

“pop-up workshops”, that encompassed debate and many other means of expression and improvisation *inside the exhibits*. The experience gained from this allowed me to accept a rather complex challenge for art mediation on a much bigger scale: to develop in 2012 an art engagement space for ArtBO, the International Contemporary Art Fair in the city (the largest event of this sort in Colombia). I designed the pedagogical approach for school groups and the general public (adults and families) attending the fair during 4 days in a 1000 m² pavilion next to the main venue where the fair took place. ArtBO lodged dozens of galleries displaying artwork of hundreds of national and international contemporary artists, and was visited by a huge number of agents of the field, collectors and art students.

The mission of the project was to provide an experience that would let the varied audiences actively explore and gain familiarity with the visual languages and content of contemporary art they would see in the main venue next door and switch their role from that of passive observers to one of active and creative interlocutors. The key concept was to move beyond traditional information delivery (the “lecture” another sort of more or less human “audioguide”) and encourage them to create art themselves with similar rules (away from the representational art and craft and into collective, more critical, in situ, and conceptual ways of expression). To that effect, I worked with a team of architects and graphic designers on the infrastructure required for activities; which needed to be both suitable to the experience of debating, creating and exhibiting the workshops results. After our proposal won the contest with Bogotá’s Chamber of Commerce, the event’s host, I developed a full project for activities, shaping the space requirements, and coordinated and trained a group of 25 experienced mediators to implement them. The project’s workshops were attended by more than 1700 participants during four days.

To the extent that it was a fast implementation for a large stream of people not expecting to spend more than one hour in this space, this was a very complex and productive experiment. A logistic challenge, certainly, but the core challenge was mostly breaking the window-shopping attitude of visitors —that meant deciding which aspects of contemporary art were relevant to focus on, but also, how to convey them to the audience and make them compelling and engaging. People looking for simple weekend entertainment or a curiosity cabinet of strange contemporary luxuries, would not be drawn in by a complex lecture. Turning the lecture into a provocative starting point for half an hour of collective creation was what we hoped for.

The design of strategies and activities drew upon the previous experiments at the gallery, varying substantially with the theme of each section: from visual and perception games, to narratives and poetic or imaginative challenges with objects and shapes, to more conceptual and critical exercises where a call for a position or self-expression around specific topics of daily life were expected from participants. This way it was possible to provide activities with a varied range of complexity suitable for different ages and interests of the expected audience groups. The project relied this way on the lessons provided by the informal pedagogical school of Galería Santa Fe in the previous two years, where I had tested tools and several strategies. The mediators hired, in turn, had quite a relevant experience as guides for contemporary exhibits at the Gallery and in the Art Museum of Bank of the Republic, among other venues. Unfortunately, due to lack of time and resources, no trials

were conducted for specific activities beforehand, but adjustments were made in real time, during implementation and from one day to the next; also, an overall evaluation of the pedagogical design was done at the end to assess the success or failure of each activity.

Shortcomings of certain designs for ArtBO, as well as success in others, were invaluable input for my long term research. Of the twenty workshop activities designed, one third turned out to be really successful, another third was probably too complex or required much more concentration on the part of the audience than was available, and the last third was either less interesting as challenge, or flawed in their design somehow: many depended on a careful follow-up of mediators that wasn't always done; others had to do with interaction or commitment of third parties, like teachers or responsible adults, or involved processes that escaped our control. However, In the general aftermath, the main result for ArtBO and us as developers was that the space provided a means for engagement that audiences had not experienced at this art fair before, and it was also inspiring for artists, curators and art teachers taking part in it.

2. Reflections on mediation practices from experience

This process of trial and error with contemporary art mediation, both pedagogical (in terms of methodology and training of mediators) and in content (regarding what made strategies work and what they might trigger or not in different audiences and circumstances), offered the basis and the core research questions to undertake more structured research on people's engagement with art —or the social impact of art— in 2013.⁶ It was obvious to me how these creative exercises and debate experiences with audiences demanded a more informed and critical collective research, one that would provide better grounds for mediators to understand the scope of action of their role and the possibilities of pedagogical innovation, as well as room for debate on what teaching, exploring and engaging in contemporary art should mean or work towards.

⁶ Despite collecting some evidence of responses in each case, the specific outcomes of each strategy haven't been assessed in detail or systematically studied so far. However, in my current research I am working on a general account of the determinant conditions found relevant in prompting what I call a "meaningful experience" with art.

From these different lines of approach to art, pedagogy, social studies, and ethics, what became salient and interesting within time were the persistent intersections I found between one field of study and another (visual culture / pedagogy / social processes/ ethics and politics), and the way they overlapped one another making it almost impossible to dissect

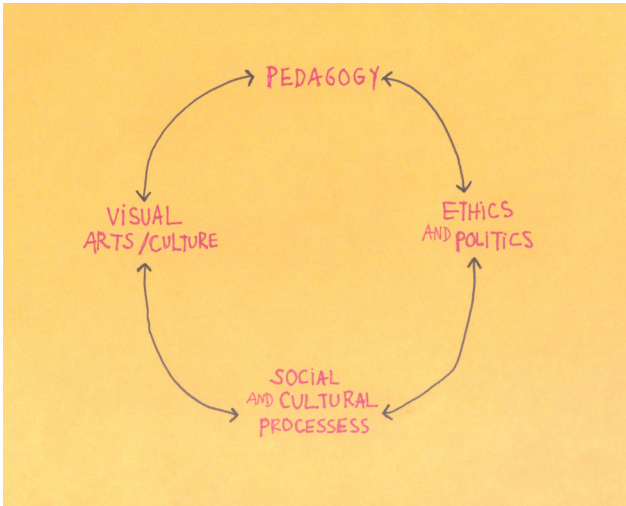


Figure 1 Four fields of research articulated to the project of contemporary art engagement and art mediation.

the processes belonging to each and study them separately. In the particular case of ethical debates and dilemmas (my point of departure and main concern) both theory and field experiences suggested very early how ethical exploration was fueling creative processes in young writers. It was not only a strong reason for them to engage in creative writing but a drive for their artistic choices and findings (to a large extent, creative writing exploration started, and often crossed roads in different stages of their artistic career, with their autobiography). In fact, these ethical tensions were a significant part of what led readers or audiences to engage in a variety of personal ways in their work, and what made it meaningful to them as a cultural

experience.⁷ In this process, it was increasingly evident how aesthetic exploration is often linked or deeply mingled with ethical and political concerns and inquiries not just of authors but of readers/audiences.

That is why, while working with art promotion institutions, it became more important to me to address ethics obliquely or, rather, as a particular kind of search everybody is more or less imbued in, and that might not find room for reflection easily in daily life interactions between strangers but may find it in the safe environment of art dialogues.⁸ Finding out

⁷ As Michelle Petit shows (1999) through an extensive case study of such connections between readers' empowerment and their encounters with certain types of books and mediators.

⁸ According to the Observatory of Culture' Survey for Bogotá 2011, the level of distrust between citizens, among other indicators of attitudes that deteriorate coexistence and are contrary to pro-social interaction (i.e. personal injuries, and domestic violence), is quite high in Bogotá; and this is so, despite a consistent reduction of violence since 2002 and the relatively low rates of aggression and murder in the city between 2006 and 2011 (Mockus, Murraín & Villa, 2012). In question C30 of the survey: "How free do you feel to express your opinions in front of others?", the immediate familiar circle is the social environment where 90% of people declare they feel *free* or *very free* to speak their minds; while at work and study places only 46% and 18%, respectively, would express their opinions. A significant 26% declare they do not feel free at all to do it in front of neighbors and strangers. Family is again a priority when it comes to breaking the law: according to the Survey, between 2001 and 2008 an average of 45% of citizens declared family interest was a good reason to break the law —contrasting with reasons like honor (27%), high likelihood of impunity (16%), and profit (13%)—. The study of

what the general moral system or paradigms people adhere to, or evaluating their consistency, was of course the main approach from philosophers to study everyday behavior and ethical thinking. Moral coherence and consistency between actions and emotions or beliefs was, to some extent, the approach that Mockus' citizenship culture analysis worked with, and achieving consistency or harmony between sets of values and norms was what his "artistic" or symbolic interventions pursued. Artistic education, on the other hand, would often focus on mastering techniques or, in the case of museum education for art appreciation, on analyzing artists' achievements in terms of formal proposals, overlooking the underlying social, historical and critical dimension of artwork in what's compelling or confronting for observers. An educational approach that is able to encompass the strengths of both ways of exploring human emotions, symbolic dimension, and ethical motivation is what I aimed at with 2013 Art Mediation Lab. Direct experiences with ethical and aesthetical dialogues in the context of contemporary art exhibitions prompted and inspired this more decided research on the topic. The fundamental question behind it was how is it possible to open dialogues between deep human concerns of the audience, and a particular type of art that is often political, critical and aesthetically challenging of social taste and visual codes. Is it possible to open a space for debate in this context despite the polarized public political debate of a country in war, and deep social division and distrust we have in our cities? How may the critical perspectives of an artist on reality contribute to develop a critical awareness of the contemporary society dynamics and the local context?

For the Visual and Fine Arts Office of IDARTES, as for many other public venues of art today, building a relevant educational agenda and training their staff for the development of innovative programs for varied audiences is a complex task. In fulfilling it, professional art educators, curators and visual artists compete against many other ways the general public may choose to use their leisure time, and the institution still has to figure out how to provide broad democratic access and a social and cultural validation for visual arts. Furthermore, it is expected to provide evidence of the actual impact of the government funds designated to the area. My proposal of a collaborative *charrette* devoted to innovative mediation practices and research concerning the reception of art was presented to the public agency as a way to shed light on the interaction between art and its audiences and to advance the debate on the role art it may play in a multicultural democracy.

The Art Mediation Laboratory was launched by IDARTES in 2013 as a public contest (fellowship) in Bogotá, with the support of two universities interested in this line of research: Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano y Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (the first private, the second public). The program opened an unprecedented frame of debate on art education and critical research, detached both from the simple need to provide services to a given exhibition venue and from other research attempts of the field directed to train critics, educators, or curators on an intellectual level. Instead, it was an alternative that collapsed the division between these traditional roles, to study and develop educational strategies related to contemporary art that would have cultural relevance, implement them with different audiences, and begin to analyze their impact on a conceptual, personal, social and

tolerance for diversity (positive) and tolerance for corruption (negative) in Bogotá done by Mockus' Corporation makes this case on "privatized" life even stronger.

cultural level. It was my particular bent, as coordinator and designer of the syllabus to add an emphasis on tools and specific literature of reference to explore the ways the projects could raise ethical awareness and debates among exhibition visitors as citizens.

The objectives of the program were structured aiming to open a path to specific training and professional debate for those in charge of audience education in different art venues and art education initiatives in the city. It aspired to allow them to develop both theoretical and practical research on engagement and debate processes on visual arts inside museums, galleries and unconventional exhibit scenarios. The core concept for the laboratory was inquiring into what constituted a meaningful learning and critical thinking experience of visitors of contemporary art locally. However, we also wanted to validate and analyze the know-how and current practices of educators of the field, while providing recognition and professional certification to them, a need that has been put forward not only locally but internationally (Ebitz 2005). This way, the program presented a double appeal for local cultural development: it provided professionals and students of different disciplines (arts and humanities) a creative think-tank on innovative alternatives for democratizing the arts —today absent from the offering of professional studies in Colombia—, and also aimed to develop empirical and collaborative initiatives as education experiments and means to analyze their impact on different levels in local audiences and communities.

The members of the multidisciplinary group were selected by means of a public contest organized by IDARTES as part of the Capital District Art Grants of 2013. The terms of application were also part of the design I presented to the Institute, and included submitting individual projects on art mediation linked to local art shows, and giving individual and group interviews.⁹ The result was the assembly of a qualified group specifically profiled to develop innovative strategies in an open and collaborative way. Under my coordination, 3 docents of the two supporting universities and the laboratory's docents provided individual tutoring for the projects to be developed in the 5 months of the Lab.

The laboratory consisted of two main modules (adding up to 100 hours of group work): one in Art mediation, pedagogical design and interaction (led by myself and a professional contemporary dancer in charge of the voice/body improvisation sessions), and another in Museography, curatorial practice and art as social practice (lead by 3 docents with strong background on each topic). The participants attended 25 sessions with a theoretical-practical methodology —including a seminar to discuss texts and also pedagogical practical experiments—; and another 6 field sessions were devoted to observe mediation processes with different audiences in Bogotá, and analyze displays in several exhibitions in the city.

Parallel to the sessions, with the support of one of the docents as tutor, each fellow developed their individual or group research projects with different audiences in

⁹ Fellows to be admitted included professionals in creation, education, exhibiting or management of contemporary art, and people undertaking research and pedagogical activities: junior and senior museum or exhibition guides, college students who had completed their 7th semester of a BA (Visual Arts, Graphic Design, Art Pedagogy, or any Social Sciences), curators, and informal art educators with at least one year of teaching experience.

contemporary art shows/practices happening at the time in the city. Projects had to encompass several aspects of mediation: from observing and analyzing current strategies in museums with specific audiences, curatorial and museographical elements supporting the visitor's experience, to reflections on verifiable impact of them on local communities. They were expected to cover all the stages in pedagogical design: from research on the exhibition content background, curating process, establishing a precise pedagogic approach for mediation, to building and testing the mediation strategies and material, implementation with audience and tools to evaluate its impact. In this way, the group was led to debate on pedagogical innovation, the relationship between the art world and its audiences, and to inquire into the transformative potential of contemporary art when creatively and critically mediated.

As final product to obtain certification, all fellows had to present a final report on their project and the best projects submitted by participants became part of a publication. The book *Experiences and Tools for Mediating Contemporary Art* (Villa et ál. 2015) involved several rounds of debate and re-writes of experiences with eleven of the fellows completing the program, in order to achieve compelling narratives and meaningful reflections around the outcomes of each mediation experiment. Edited in 2014 and finally printed by IDARTES in 2015, the book also presented the outlines of research of the program, and is being distributed free of cost in more than 200 venues devoted to art education, contemporary art and to professionals of the field, as a reference material to share the tools for art mediation and support the practice of museum educators and teachers in the city. As coordinator, I also delivered a full report to IDARTES with a complete account on the achievements and shortcomings of the program syllabus and implementation, the collective research process, and the findings and lessons of the Laboratory as a whole.

Faced with the task of disseminating art to a broad audience, the Lab opened the discussion on a rather complex challenge rarely addressed by traditional art academies: the gap between the aesthetic codes of different layers of society and those of contemporary artists, and the clashing expectations of art intervention on reality vs. art as décor or beautiful objects.¹⁰ How may we connect contemporary art —not decorative or plainly figurative— with emotions, claims, and memories of visitors, regardless of their educational backgrounds, allowing for new relations between them and art works that aren't shaped under the classist notion of "good or bad taste"? How are the popular stereotypes (*imaginarios*) pictured in these art practices instead? Or may we say, how are we to build strategies capable of verifying such dialogue is actually taking place and impacting society and democratic culture?

¹⁰ Most programs of art education still come about as technical training in fine arts for decorative purposes or individual self-expression. In this sense, it is necessary to underscore the difference between pedagogical practices aimed at educating artists in a more general sense, and the ones aimed at triggering art's potential for critical debate and social engagement. On this tension between teaching critical art as means to make sense and build a perspective on reality, and the long standing tradition of art education devoted to technique and craft, see Luis Camnitzer (2011 and 2009).

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I have also worked as an independent editor for over ten years, focusing in projects related to art, culture, theory and literature, working with authors and artists, with the opportunity to influence which content is brought to the broader public and how, ensuring that it happens in meaningful, engaging and accessible ways. I was the Editorial Coordinator of Visual Art Journal ERRATA# between 2013 and 2016.