

Premises in theory and methodology

Context

For several years now, the cultural outreach department at MCBA has been actively encouraging the public's participation in culture, in other words, helping those who come to the museum to play an active role in their visit and in the life of our institution generally. It was in this context that the participatory culture programme 'Culture connectors: Dare to approach art differently!' took shape in 2014. The programme is based on five theoretical and methodological premises.

Premise 1: coming together of cultural and social sectors

The programme exists at the meeting point of two fields. It is designed to bring together artists, audiences and communities, and more broadly actors from two distinct areas, the cultural sector and the social sector, who often work solely in their own particular area, cut off from the other. Yet if we look for complementarity in their professional skills and resources, and consider their shared outlooks and aspirations beyond how these are articulated in seemingly different languages, there is the possibility of transformation and building other ways of working. These ways can take shape and attain greater efficiency by reducing mutual ignorance for the benefit of all the people involved.

The museum's partnering with a group from the social sector indeed helps the art institution to find its audience and work with them in a way that is adapted to their needs. Collaborating with an actor from the social sector means understanding and adapting to a methodology and timing that are different from those practiced in the cultural sector. It means integrating quality tools and benefiting from their use, especially for devising new ways to bring people, artists and art together and run such events when they are together. It also means rethinking the museum's missions by embracing certain missions usually carried out by the social sector such as working to create or reinforce ties between people and foster social cohesion, instil confidence in vulnerable individuals and offer them a rewarding role to play, and finally enable them to take an active part in cultural life. Collaboration between partners from the cultural and social sectors makes it possible to redraw institutional lines. Each partner benefits from this complementarity of their respective skills and professional know-how while seeing their mission made deeper, broader, and all the more interesting.

As Carmen Mörsch puts it, "Cultural outreach – and as I see it, that's its main and irreplaceable function – makes possible spaces... where one is forever negotiating what art and culture are, for whom, and to what end. Understood in this way, cultural mediation is able to transform all who are its partners, institutions, mediators, the relevant audience, and art and culture themselves."¹

¹ Excerpted from 'Le temps de la médiation', published by the Institute for Art Education of the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) on behalf of Pro Helvetia, as part of the 'Programme Médiation culturelle' of the Fondation suisse pour la culture (2009–2012).

Premise 2: an exchange flow

Located at the point where the social and art sectors meet, the programme 'Cultural connectors: dare to approach art differently!' recognizes that the contributions of art history, information on works of art, the creative processes of artists, the emotions and interpretations generated by a work of art are inseparable. The programme aims to break down the hierarchies of knowledge while highlighting the flow of exchanges between audience, works, artists, and institutions, directly referencing the definition of cultural mediation – cultural outreach – laid out in *Le temps de la médiation*:²

'...cultural mediation is understood less as transmitting knowledge than as establishing exchange flows between the audience, artworks, artists, and institutions, and its mission as connecting different points of view. The essential thing in mediation work then is to promote individual perception of artworks by the participants. It is not a matter of filling in the gaps of people's understanding but rather of taking [those gaps] as the starting point of a dialogue and an aesthetic experience.'

The expression 'Cultural connectors' captures participants' role of intermediary and catalyst in the access to art. They pass along what they themselves have seen and share a new experience, fostering the initial reception of the artwork.

Nothing then is unidirectional. Experiences circulate, accumulate, influence one another, and merge. In other words, the present programme works like a space for experimentation and expression. It offers the possibility to assert an individual voice while inviting individuals to a collective elaboration of meaning by sharing their own practices and questions. The museum then becomes a place where one can tell one's own story, question, and debate.

Premise 3: the group as actor

The Cultural connectors programme is true adult education; it includes the participants as partners in thinking about the programme itself and the discussion around its ramifications for art, society and citizens living in that society. It is also, perhaps above all else, a human adventure in which the social connection can play out in all its potential in terms of otherness, social cohesion and recognition.

The guiding spirit is indeed the same that runs through popular education, such as Paulo Freire once proposed and implemented,³ namely an emancipating education that aims to develop our understanding of the world and capacity to have some purchase on it, and invites us to act and think critically about our actions. For Freire, 'No one educates anyone, no one is educated alone, human beings are educated together through the intermediary of the world.'⁴

² See 'Le temps de la médiation'.

³ See *Pédagogie des opprimés*, Paulo Freire, Maspero, 1974.

⁴ *Pédagogie*.

It is this cultural democracy horizon that is the driving force of our ‘Cultural connectors: Dare to approach art differently!’ programme. Encompassing both individual identities and a collective identity created by being a part of a community, the programme harbours an extraordinary power and potential thanks to its capacity to be ‘us together’, in other words, to create meaning collectively and invent new possibilities.

‘Cultural connectors: dare to approach art differently!’ becomes then a platform for exchange and reciprocal information, for the transmission and construction of knowledge. That is, through the discovery and exploration of the ‘museum’ site, artworks, artists, and processes of making art, art becomes food for thought by being part of an emancipation that is both individual and collective.

In order to encourage, strengthen and foster this platform and especially the people who are behind it, it is essential to have a form of cultural outreach that places J.-M. Lafortune’s proposal at the very core of all that it does, ‘Forms of support that can lead both the people and communities concerned to become actors in their lives.’⁵

Premise 4: a thoughtful empathetic support

The position occupied by the person working in cultural outreach introduces a particular quality of attention and care in the life of the group and the participating volunteers. This position is greatly supported by two actions, presenting the framework documents (values and ethics, the role played by Cultural connectors, agreement to work together) to the programme’s participants, and encouraging these volunteers to discuss them.

As Lafortune explains, it is a position of ‘empathetic communication with the public, directed towards developing sensitivity, subjectivity, and critical sense which is elicited by encountering works of art and the creative process.’

To strive for coherence between talk and the tools that are used, along with providing support to the people involved in the initiative, the following ways of directing and motivating a group are employed. They make it possible to fine-tune and develop the programme in turn:

- Regular reflective critical spaces during:
 - meetings of the group of Cultural connectors, through periodic evaluations of their role, the programme, and their volunteer commitment
 - bilateral sessions – by request – between Cultural connectors and the mediators
 - sessions between cultural mediators who are in charge of the programme, occasionally with the museum’s outreach department and/or directors
- continuing in-house training touching on artistic content and the role of Cultural connectors
- informal moments
- invitations to be a part of the life of the institution and informal fun events to thank volunteers for their commitment

⁵ J.-M. Lafortune, *La médiation culturelle. Le sens des mots et l’essence des pratiques*. Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2012.

These open and friendly spaces make it possible to maintain the volunteers' motivation and curiosity, their gratitude towards the institution, and the regular questioning of habits and 'obvious' truths and givens which may indeed need questioning – done to avoid the ruts that certain ways of working can entail (the size of the group, frequency of meetings, efforts to add new Cultural connectors, etc.)

Premise 5: the ricochet effect

Based on the existence of a priority group and several subgroups, the 'Cultural connectors' programme enjoys a multiplier effect in terms of networks.

The initial circle involves the people who volunteer to be 'Cultural connectors'. While familiar with museums (they join the project by invitation), these volunteers may also be moved to request outreach supports to help in making certain artworks their own. They are interested in, even passionate about, art and would like to pass along that passion. Personal ties are an extraordinary lever for creating trust and a real antidote to the assumptions and beliefs of people who are less familiar with art and museums. Such individuals, accompanied and encouraged by a Cultural connector, can open up to and enjoy a new experience.

The second circle is the outcome of the good work carried out by the 'Cultural connectors'. These volunteers invite to MCBA people from among their family and friends who are interested in, curious about, or even hostile to art (out of fear, disinterest, or ignorance).

A third and still wider circle is formed by all the people who will hear about the programme one way or another. By drawing on the power of the priority group and the subgroups, the programme generates influence of greater magnitude in terms of social, cultural and generational diversity.