

LET'S DANCE!?

PRELUDE

I was recently at the theatre and I saw a dance performance, the latest piece by the French choreographer Xavier Le Roy, "(Title in process)". As the public entered the theatre, seven dancers were sitting in a row in front of the stage, waiting for everyone to take their seats.

Then one dancer said, "We would like to initiate a discussion with you, we still have about 15 minutes." Then he remained silent and waited. Now what? Confusion reigned in the hall. Some laughed, some whispered, but most remained silent. I was excited! I thought: "Wait, that is my job! Speaking with the public? That's what I enjoy!" Nevertheless, I still didn't say anything and I was disappointed at myself. The rest of the public wasn't any better. Somehow a conversation did occur, but it was very superficial and not at all stimulating. When the lights went out and the performance began, I was relieved. Later, when I was back home, I asked myself: do the visitors who are with me at an exhibition feel just like I did tonight? Do I sometimes challenge them with a conversation that is too much for them?

PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES IN ART MEDIATION

This contribution concerns art mediation and performative practice. Recently, the Institute for Art Education (IAE) of the Zurich University of Arts (hdK) posted the new edition of its journal on-line¹. The contributions are based on the symposium "*KUNST [auf] FÜHREN. Performativität als Modus und Kunstform in der Kunstvermittlung,*" (*ART [per] FORM. Performative Practice as Modus and Artform in Art Mediation*) which took place in Kassel in 2009. The essays reflect the latest theoretical considerations in this field on which I will be basing my own contribution.

Here I would like to engage with the practical aspects of this theme by using just a few examples. I am assuming that art mediation *per se* disposes of a performative character² and that through their activities, art mediators have the possibility to make this more or less visible. Not every art mediator demonstrates the will to artistically shape his/her work, but I believe that most of them realize that when they are working, it is like standing (or being placed) on a stage, and that the exhibition setting encourages certain rituals.³

The question is: how can the visitors be brought onto this stage?

ROLES

Knowledge Transfer is a term which, since documenta 12⁴, has become an integral part of each facet of art mediation. For many colleagues, it is no longer conceivable that information should pass only from the mediator to the visitor, and not in the other direction as well (or of course in a third direction, namely from visitor to visitor). Developing a discussion or an exchange in an exhibition so that the participants become active, requires a particular methodology and ability, whereby each single personality in the group can play an essential role in this game. Above all, the art mediator requires a framework: you can't simply stand in front of an artwork and expect that people will begin to talk and discuss the work. We could also call this framework choreography. In choreography, every dancer performs a role. At the start of an art mediation situation, the roles are clearly allocated. When the certainty of this unwritten agreement is broken, new motivations can be generated through which the visitors can become active in the process of formation.

ALLOCATION OF ROLES

When a group is standing in front of an artwork, there are many very different ways to begin speaking about the object: to speak about technique, about artistic and historical background, or first about the artist. When something is suggested, it then comes to playfully contriving and allocating the roles.

The art mediator can always form the dice anew according to different groups. Whoever would like to speak should roll the dice and then talk about the artwork as if he/she were the person whom the dice has indicated. The game makes it possible to think about the work from various perspectives and to discuss it accordingly. What's interesting and always surprising in doing so is that even if, for example, there is no fruit vendor in the public, some wonderful descriptions of fruit might emerge, or whatever object may be described in the work. The performative aspect of this method allows participants to overcome inhibitions and it makes distinct personal knowledge accessible to a wider group (there are more fruit vendors than you may think!).⁵

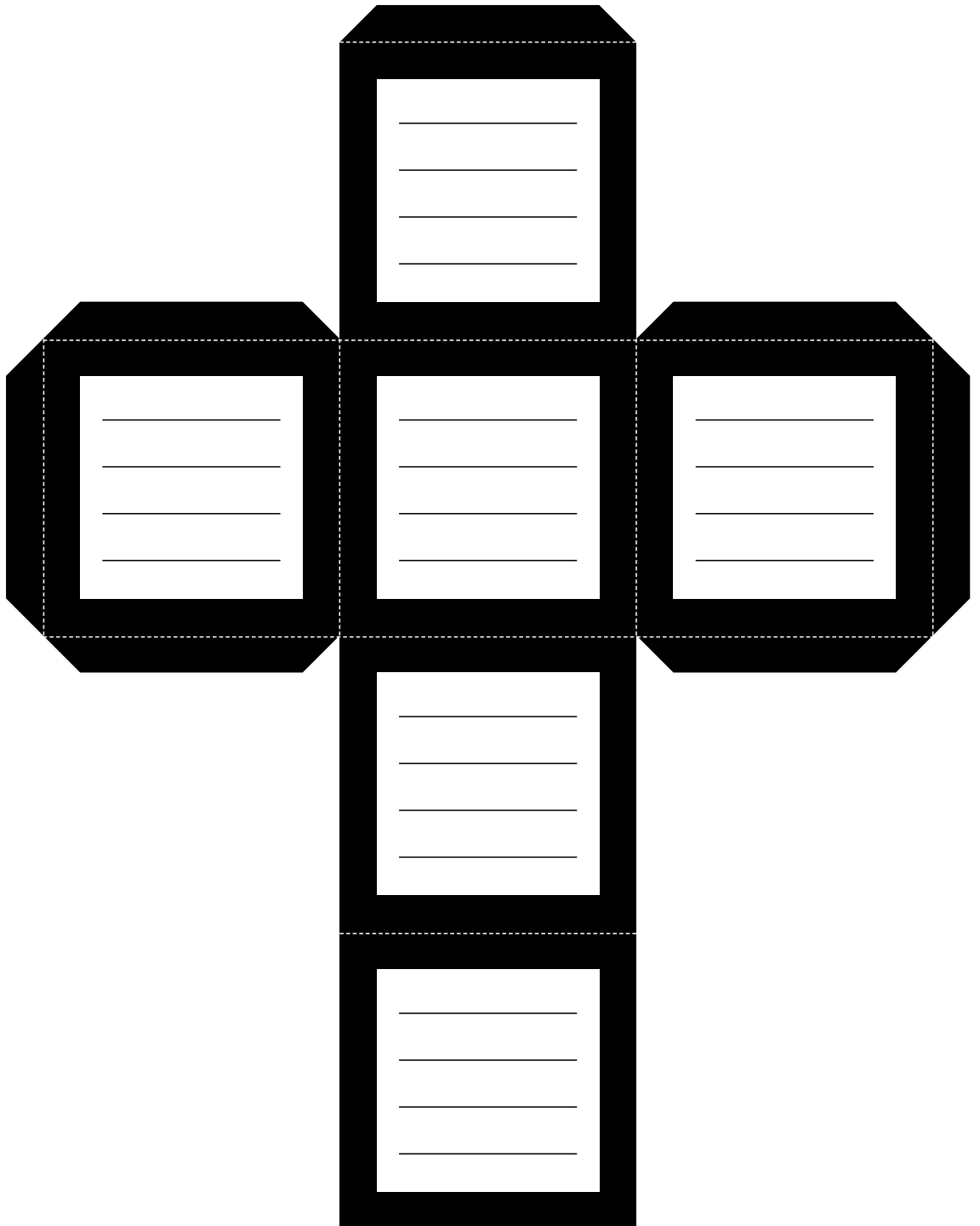
Cut out the dice on the following page and write a different role on each side, such as:

THE ARTIST
THE CURATOR
MY MOTHER
THE GALLERIST
MY TEACHER
THE POLITICIAN
THE FRUIT VENDOR
THE DOCTOR
THE FASHION DESIGNER
THE ANIMATOR
THE BANK CLERK
THE COOK
THE ART COLLECTOR
THE WRITER
THE BUILDING ENGINEER
THE PSYCHOLOGIST
MY FATHER
THE PHOTOGRAPHER
THE RADIO MODERATOR
THE NATURAL SCIENTIST

...

...

Cut out paper dice



BODIES

My second methodological proposition offers the visitor the framework (or choreography) of expressing him/herself with his/her own body. Body language is already an integral part of communication and it is consciously applied by many art mediators as instrumental to their art mediation. Using the example of an artwork by Bruce Nauman⁶, I would like to describe the following action⁷:

The visitors are invited, separately, to enter the spatial installation and to investigate it (10 minutes). Directly afterward, they fill out the following questionnaire.

1. HOW DID YOU FIND THE TEMPERATURE IN THE SPACE?

2. HOW DID YOU FIND THE LIGHT IN THE SPACE?

3. HOW QUICKLY OR SLOWLY DID YOU GO THROUGH THE INSTALLATION?

4. WERE YOUR FIRST THOUGHTS POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?


5. COULD YOU MAKE A SMALL SKETCH OF THE SPACE?

6. DID YOU FEEL SAFE? OR CONSTRICTED?

7. HOW DID YOU PERCEIVE THE MATERIAL? TRY TO DESCRIBE IT IN A FEW WORDS.

8. DID THE ARTWORK CALL FORTH ANY ASSOCIATIONS IN YOU? WERE ANY MEMORIES CALLED FORTH?

After this action of analyzing personal experiences, the participants are asked to find a place in the spatial installation which particularly stood out to them or impressed them (either positively or negatively), and to position themselves there. In doing so, they should (if possible) take on a bodily position, which in their opinion best expresses their experience of the artwork. The visitors can carry out this action one after the other (this allows for an immediate discussion about it), or all at once. In the second case, the art mediator should take photographs of the individual presentations, so that a discussion of them can take place afterward.

This method views the movement and body language of the participants as material. In this case the artwork does in fact become a stage where thoughts and experiences can unfold. The choreography is co-written by the individual visitors.

EPILOGUE: BACK TO THE DANCE PERFORMANCE.

What the dancers were trying to do with their action was to translate dance into language. Examples from the praxis of art mediation may point to the exact opposite, namely: “speaking about art” can also be accomplished solely through the body. The audience is given a chance to be part of the performance, they are allocated a role, or optimally, they are allowed to choose one. But it may have been too early for the audience to participate at first, even before dance performance had begun. At the end of the performance, the lights did not go on. We heard the same dancer who had spoken at the beginning say: “Now we can continue our conversation, for another 15 minutes.”

This time, the premise worked remarkably better. The public now had something concrete to discuss. The audience was active and posed questions. And it was dark. The choreography was thus reposed and this time it was there not only for the dancers, but for us as well. We were part of the dance-piece. I would almost have liked to have stood up and yelled, “Let’s dance!?”

NOTES

- 1 Art Education Reserch No. 2/2010: “KUNST [auf] FÜHREN. Performativität als Modus und Kunstform in der Kunstvermittlung,” Ed. Nora Landkammer, Anna Schürch, Bernadett Settele, Sandra Ortmann, Danja Erni. See also: <http://iae-journal.zhdk.ch/no-2/>
- 2 See “Quergelesen und zurückgespröchen, Gehardt Fink, Landkammer, Schürch” in: Art Education Research No. 2/2010, S. 1.
- 3 See here, among others, Carol Duncan: *Civilizing Rituals: Inside public art museums*, London, New York 1995.
- 4 *Ich glaube, da ist unsere Einladung an die Leute, sich verstärkt einzubringen, aufgegangen. Man hat gemerkt, dass das Bedürfnis da ist und dass die Leute auch etwas zu sagen haben.* (Ulrich Schötker, Leitung Kunstvermittlung documenta 12). See also <http://www.documenta.de/75&html> for the project of the art mediators.
- 5 The idea of this game goes back to a colleague of mine at documenta 12. She had the idea of letting school students enter into a leadership situation as artists in order to speak about the artworks. I then often fell back on this idea and developed it further.
- 6 Bruce Nauman, *Room with my soul left out, room that does not care*, 1984. For more images see: http://www.monopol-magazin.de/img/articles/tn_750_500_bruce-nauman-hamburger-bahnhof-1.jpg
- 7 This action can of course be carried out with other artworks or even with exhibition spaces, without being restricted by individual works.