

# Art Education Research No. 7/2013

microsilions: Marianne Guarino-Huet and Olivier Desvoignes

## Inhabited, familiar, disrupted.

### An «other» institution of contemporary art in representations of gallery education?

In viewing gallery education<sup>1</sup> (the word used in the original text is the French: *médiation*) material that is produced by art institutions dedicated to contemporary art in Switzerland, it appeared to us that there is an important difference between these and the «general» representations of these institutions. Describing the specificities of these two structures of representation and proposing several interpretations of them is the objective of this article.

We started working with a relatively complete gallery education sample (collected for the purpose of the group research) for the past six years and have chosen, for the «general material», to concentrate on a collection of documents from the institutions' internet sites, which offer a condensation of the institutional discourse and are often the first interface of the institution with the public.

We have identified, among the photographs extracted from the collected documents, recurring patterns that seemed to be significant to us. Starting from our observations, we have interrogated the manner in which these representations of the institution articulate themselves and formulated some hypotheses on the reasons for this differentiation. What symbolic roles might the institution attribute to the representations of gallery education without mentioning this specifically in their written communications?

From our hypothesis, it seems possible to pose a central argument that we are developing in this article: the representations of gallery education show a museum distinct from its traditional representations and propose a specific vision that at times suggests a type of irreverence towards the traditional missions attributed to museums. We will discuss later the possible functions of this distinction.

#### IRRECONCILABLE MISSIONS?

In *The Birth of the Museum*<sup>2</sup>, art historian Tony Bennet proposes that museums have difficulty in reconciling two different roles that are almost antithetical: that of an elitist temple of art and that of a useful instrument for «democratic» education. For him, there exists a conflict between an engagement professed to be in favor of universal address and the fact of the limited audience of that address, which speaks only to/for an elite.

Conscious of this difficulty, those responsible for cultural politics and institutions of art charged with applying these politics have tried for many years to overcome the difficulty of addressing all.<sup>3</sup>

«Innovative, wide ranging art education program»<sup>4</sup>, «Guided tours and educational programs for various target audiences»<sup>5</sup>, «Diversified didactic practices»<sup>6</sup>, «Place for enlightenment and education in art»<sup>7</sup>: these mission statements of museums and spaces of contemporary art in Switzerland show that the role of education remains a central preoccupation of the institution.

In fact, a large part of the visual material serving to communicate about gallery education seems to have as an objective making the museum more accessible, even familiar, especially for people who are unfamiliar with it and have an elitist image of museums.

Considering this brings up numerous questions. Does the representation of gallery education describe an «other space» of the institution? A place where it would

<sup>1</sup> See the general introduction for a general description of the material and our methods of research.

<sup>2</sup> One course for future research would be to study and reflect on the reasons that lead to whether gallery education is represented as part of a larger document or in the form of independent documents.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically following Pierre Bourdieu's reflections. See the French example of the Commission of Cultural Affairs from the VI plan (1969-1971).

<sup>4</sup> *Aargauer Kunsthaus*.

<sup>5</sup> *Kunsthaus Langenthal*.

<sup>6</sup> *Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Geneva (Mamco)*.

<sup>7</sup> *Center for Contemporary Art, Geneva*.

be possible to live experiments which would be simultaneously exceptional to the expected use of the museum as a place of preservation while being, paradoxically, more in touch with everyday life, thus permitting those who are perceived to be excluded from this «temple of the elite» to embark on a process of identification with it? Could one, in the following, interpret the production of documentation specific to gallery education as a means for keeping apart two poles of tension inherent to institutions of art, assuming different codifications and ways of addressing these roles? Or to the contrary, could the representations of gallery education – in moving away from a classical conception of the museum, and in proposing a more «democratic» vision – be a tool for reducing this tension? This is what appears to suggest the usage, of the French word «médiation»<sup>8</sup> to designate the activities targeted towards public attention, since the word contains the idea of «resolution of conflict».

Is gallery education, for the institution an «internal other», the former procuring for the latter that which it is lacking? Can gallery education, perhaps, in return, benefit from a certain freedom and transgress institutional norms? In this case, in what way would these transgressions – and their representation – be beneficial for the whole institution? Does the representation of gallery education serve as an alibi for the institution in order to evade reconsidering seriously its relationship to the public?

### THE MUSEUM: A SANCTUARY?

The hypothesis according to which gallery education makes a differentiated representation of an institution – of which it remains, however, a full component – calls for a reflection on the manner in which the institution of the museum is generally perceived. We are proposing to broach this question through the connection commonly made between the museum and death.

In an article comparing the points of view of Valéry and Proust on the museum, Adorno writes that museums are close to tombs:

*«Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture.» (Adorno 1981: 173-185)*

The historian Krzysztof Pomian, in his analysis of the collection, identifies a principal commonality of collections of objects – in any type of collection : their usage value is paradoxically annulled as their exchange value rises.<sup>9</sup>

In a dialogue with Robert Smithson, the performer Allan Kaprow opined that, even in their attempt to be

more alive, museums only propose a «canned life» (Kaprow and Smithson 1967: 57). This argument recurs in the studies and reflections of artists on the museum<sup>10</sup>.

One could accurately state that this perception of the museum as a tomb is not the only existing perception and object that – if we try to relate this vision with our material – the function of modern and contemporary art (for a large part) has never been other than to be exposed in a museum. As a consequence, the first function of art objects has not been suspended by entering the institution, as this has been the case for other objects in other types of institutions<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time the museum-death analogy is still made by a number of theoreticians of culture, including modern museums and contemporary ones. The artist and critic O' Doherty in *Inside the White Cube* was one of the first to make an analogy between the modernist white cube and the sanctuary.

*«Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial, the space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of «period» (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbo-like status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not- or are tolerated only as kines-  
thetic mannequins for further study.» (O'Doherty 1976: 15)*

If the perception of the museum remains in part tied to the notion of death<sup>12</sup>, the idea that this must be corrected, that a particular effort should be made for re-injecting some life into the museum, goes along with it. Here looms a role for gallery education.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The most common term in French to refer to «gallery education».

<sup>9</sup> «On the one hand the collected works are temporarily or permanently kept out of the circle of economic activities, but on the other they are subject to special protection, which is to say that they are considered to be precious. And they actually are, since they each correspond to a sum of money. In short, they have an exchange value without having being valuable in terms of usage.»

<sup>10</sup> On how the museum «places in suspension» the works, see for example Déotte 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Déotte (Déotte 1992: 188) underlines the specificity of the art objects: «Differing from museums of history, of archeology, of ethnology, of antique or exotic art, etc., that collect objects that have had a destination, a usage, a function and that necessarily suspend these finality (in exhibiting the exhibits), the museums of contemporary art collect works the destination of which has been suspended in entering the game.»

<sup>12</sup> For example, George F. MacDonald and Stephen Alford (Macdonald and Alford 1991: 305), attempting to define the transformations that museums have to take on in order to better adapt to the digital age: «Traditionally, museums have focused their attention on the past. Their preoccupation with the material remains of the past has made them object-oriented. This is reflected in the list of key functions of museums: To collect, preserve, study, exhibit, interpret; all are activities performed.»

<sup>13</sup> Even if contemporary art and their institutions, notably by the renewal and frequently by the nature of the works presented themselves, bring certain institutions to define themselves as «in motion».



View of the Pamela Rosenkrantz exhibition. From the website of the Kunsthalle Basel, 2012.



Picture from a Kunsthalle Basel leaflet, 2011.

### ANOTHER IMAGE: THE INSTITUTION OF ART AS A LIVELY PLACE

The underlining of a connection between museum and death can be observed equally in popular culture. A series of US American films, *Night at the Museum*, for example, is based on the idea that the inanimate and silent occupants of the museum come to life at night. The scenario rests on the common conception discussed above and on the idea that this conception can perhaps be reversed so that the museum becomes a place full of adventure, surprising and fun. This transformation can take place only at an «other» time, at night, the moment of transgression par excellence, when the museum is no longer open to its visitors.

As we will see, presenting institutions of art as «inanimate» places remains the norm in contemporary art institutions representations in Switzerland, and differs a lot from gallery education representations, which present a lively institution. Following a psychoanalytical approach, Karl Josef Pazzini underlines that gallery educators' actions are situated between the inert objects of the museum and the pedagogical injunction to «be alive».

*«Death is omnipresent in the museum. For this reason, it is almost invisible. And the museum must – following the theories of current museum pedagogy – be alive.» (Pazzini 2003: 44)*

This imperative to *be alive* seems to traverse representations of contemporary art education in Switzerland. In this way, of the 2129 images in our sample, 1975 represent at least one person. In addition, a strong tendency to represent institutions as full of activity, with users listening, discussing, playing, walking, working is noticeable.

One can see a connection between this tendency to present gallery education as a fertile activity that «makes the museum lively» and the strong feminization of this field<sup>14</sup>. Not only might it be possible to make a symbolic connection between the female capacity to «give life» and the mediation that «brings life» to the museum,

but the numerous «human» competencies attributed in a stereotypical manner especially to femininity are placed in the foreground of representations of gallery education: listening, caretaking, hosting<sup>15</sup>.

### A) REPRESENTING AN INHABITED PLACE

In his essay *Performing the Museum* the artist Charles R. Garoian defends the idea that the museum must be a performative place, produced by its visitors. He proposes that the authority of the institution – notably the intrinsic value of works of art – be challenged, in favor of a critical dialogue.

*«(...) the performance of subjectivity as a strategy through which viewers can engage museums and their artifacts critically (...) broadening the museums institutional pedagogy to include viewers' personal and social knowledge and experiences introduces critical content to museum experiences.» (Garoian 2001: 234-248)*

Such a position argues in favor of a vision of the museum as being alive. This performative, activated museum, constructed by its visitors, is very present in the representations of the gallery education we collected. A first blatant element, as we have mentioned, is the presence of persons in the represented spaces. This contrasts in a strong way with the other images produced by the institutions, where the representations of the spaces containing nothing but artworks (or even entirely empty views) largely dominate.

When the art historian Mary Anne Stanizewski worked on the archives of the MoMA museum to study the history of exhibitions of this institution, she noticed the quasi absence of images showing visitors – except during exhibitions of «popular» design and events for children. She considered this absence to be a characteristic of

<sup>14</sup> As is the case for the ensemble of the pedagogical field. It must be observed at the same time that this feminization reduces itself as the salaries grow. See: Mörsch 2012: 34.

<sup>15</sup> These competencies are at the same time at the center of the process of «feminization» of work, as is described by Pen Dalton (Dalton 2001: 112) «Richard Gordon has identified feminized work as those tasks and restructured jobs that have traditionally been carried out by mothers in the patriarchal household: cleaning, catering, nursing, entertainment (...).»



Picture from a publication presenting the gallery education activities of the Atelier des Musées from Neuchâtel, 2007.

modernism<sup>16</sup>. The same tendency emerged in the material we studied. In consulting the start page of websites<sup>17</sup> of the 32 surveyed institutions, the users of the museum are only visible on seven of them. Of these seven exceptions, the represented visitors are participating in a gallery education event (clearly described as such) in four cases and are the clients of the bookshop in another one. Only two institutions show some visitors in the exhibition spaces without their presence being related specifically to gallery education activities. Beyond that, it is interesting to note that these two exceptions concern institutions with a particular status<sup>18</sup>.

The great majority of the institutions – be it on their websites or their «hybrid»<sup>19</sup> documents – favor representations of their exhibitions without a single visitor. In addition, several institutions place a particular accent on the architecture of their building and their exhibition spaces themselves.

By contrast, in the documents specifically presenting gallery education activities, the tendency is to represent numerous persons. This can be observed in almost all<sup>20</sup> of the documents we collected, where many individuals, but also groups and crowds are represented. This discrepancy between views of empty spaces in the general communication of the institutions and the numerous persons that figure in the representations of gallery education

constitutes a central element of our analysis.

One important characteristic of the manner in which the users are represented is the emphasis placed on bringing movement to the space. Whether it might be walking, playing, dancing, the movements present the institution as a space to activate rather than a static place.

It must also be noted that – even if numerous institutions realize projects outside their walls – the published images do not present these projects – apart from a few random exceptions, and only show situations taking place inside the institutional spaces. Thus, the idea of activating those spaces seems to prevail over the idea of exporting the activities to other places.

In addition, the gallery educators are represented almost exclusively<sup>21</sup> in situations of direct relation to a group of visitors or participants. The reflexive part of their work and the connected activities (research, conception, evaluation, exchange with peers) are never represented – even though these are considered as essential in the field<sup>22</sup> – and the emphasis is most often placed on the direct interaction with the public.

## B) INJECTING EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

If the museum is traditionally presented as a space filled with inactive objects, timeless and isolated from the «real world», the space of gallery education is most often described as an inhabited and lively space. At the same time, beyond a simple opposition of empty space/inhabited space, the actions portrayed by the represented persons bear witness to the desire to convey a specific view of the institution.

In the general documentation of the institutions (notably the mission statements) the adjectives currently used for presenting art objects and the experience that they convey underline an exceptional dimension: *remarkable, of quality, ambitious, important, of international renown, innovative, inspiring*. Another type of keyword comes to the foreground as soon as one examines the texts that present gallery education, where the emphasis is placed on the idea of proximity: *conviviality, encounter, familiar, personal experience*.

In a space that is dedicated to the presentation of cultural productions distinguished as exceptional, the simple fact of sleeping, eating or cleaning becomes something extraordinary as well. One therefore finds numerous images in which everyday gestures are performed inside the framework of gallery education activities.

It is possible to make the assumption that the use of this type of image was intended to surprise – in terms

<sup>16</sup> As Brian O'Doherty also comments. (O'Doherty 1976)

<sup>17</sup> Viewed in June 2013.

<sup>18</sup> The *Haus für elektronische Künste* (House for electronic arts) in Switzerland benefits from a specific perception, reflected notably in a particular financing, see the project site mapping <<http://bak.admin.ch/themen/04112/04139/index.html?lang=fr>>, and the *Museum Rehmann*, has a particular tenor in its communication, on its sculpture park, of the idea of an exhibition opened to the outside.

<sup>19</sup> This means: the general documents including representations of gallery education activities, which were collected by the research team.

<sup>20</sup> The *Kunstmuseum of Lucerne* is an exception, at least in its most recent documents. In the material published for this institution on gallery education between 2004-2009, the images placed emphasis on groups of persons with a high percentage of children. Since 2011, a rupture appeared and for this year and the following, not a single participant or mediator was represented.

<sup>21</sup> One image in 2129 collected presents a mediator sitting in an office.

<sup>22</sup> See for example the programs of the events *Kunstvermittlung in Transformation* in Lucerne <<http://kit.kunstforschung.luzern.ch/2011/12/tagung-kunstvermittlung-in-transformation-am-9-und-10-märz-in-luzern/>>, last viewed in June 2013, or *Transmettre! Plus que de simples recettes (Transmit ! More than simple patent recipes* in Basel <<http://www.prohelvetia.ch/Symposium-sur-la-mediation-cul.2183.0.html?&L=3>>, dernière visite en juin 2013.



Picture from the Website of the Paul Klee Center, 2012.

of the idea one has of the museum and the way one is expected to behave there – and therefore to interest the reader. One can also think of these representations as attempting to activate a process of recognition: If one imagines the museum as a location where one can practice everyday activities, it becomes easier to come in.

Gallery education thereby brings the art space closer to the domestic space, in a movement that can, again, be thought about in relation to the feminization of the field.

### C) CHANGING THE OBJECT OF CELEBRATION

In the general communication of the institutions, the celebration of art lies at the center of the discourse. In the material we collected, the most current of these types of representations are photographs of the works themselves, which can be seen as a kind of celebration. The numerous images of institutional buildings place the emphasis on the «box» necessary for the conservation of these «jewels». These images are often accompanied by commentaries insisting on the great value, the high quality and the rarity of such works.

In the communication specific to gallery education – if the work of art possibly remains in the center – the object of celebration can sometimes change. An example of this is the representation of birthday parties at the museum, as offered by some gallery services (five public or private institutions, in our sample). In the image above, no element indicates that the party is taking place in the museum (the architecture might as well be that of a community center for example) as if what has to be celebrated, from now on, were the children themselves.

### D) TRANSGRESSING THE RULES OF CONSERVATION

Swiss contemporary museums of art do not seem to specifically represent their mission of conservation. In the collected material (including the documents presenting the institutions in a general manner) – and on the websites of the institutions – only one image explicitly concerns conservation, in showing some art storage.

Moreover, this image comes from a book documenting a gallery education activity, where some groups of participants were invited to work with the collection of the museum<sup>23</sup>.

The works of art generally appear exclusively as objects of admiration, objects that are not submitted to material contingencies.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the images produced by the institutions usually present the pieces in clean and secured spaces, appropriate for presenting and conserving art works.

If the museum's mission of conservation appears only in the interspaces of the documents presenting its general activities, it is clearly thwarted in several images coming from our «gallery education» sample. Several images in our sample, with dirty hands as central motif, illustrate this well. These images are not exclusively taken in the studio, but sometimes in patrimonial spaces.

Other images evoke the possible proximity of the spectators and the art. These representations, for example, make clear that it is possible to play close to the works, even to touch them.

It is noticeable that color plays a primary role; not just in these representations but also in a number of images showing the visitors participating in the studios, what has been produced there, or even the walls where paper sheets are attached for painting. The chromatic variety proposed by these images contrasts with the white which stays the dominant shade in exhibition representations.

Another current motif of representation of mediation is that of a group working on the floor (with or without protection) within the space of exhibition itself. The groups involved in activities within the spaces constitute a potential threat to conservation and generate a number of disturbances, including noise. Pazzini, in his description of the omnipresence of death in the museum, writes:

*«The museum is an institution that produces order. With order, the silence appears almost simultaneously.» (Pazzini 2003 : 44)*

Silence is often a rule – written or not – that is to be respected in the institutions of art. The representations of gallery education, here, again, comes in to disrupt this state of affairs, often using images in which persons are visibly laughing, screaming or making music in exhibition spaces.

### REPRESENTING AN «OTHER» INSTITUTION: A ROLE FOR GALLERY EDUCATION?

By promoting a lively space, by presenting in a positive way some infringements on the usual rules of museums and in replacing the art with the visitor as the center

<sup>23</sup> The project *Blicke Sammeln* (Collecting Gazes) of the Artmuseum in Thun.

<sup>24</sup> On this question, see: *Viewing Matters: Upstairs*, by Hans Haacke, a project in which the artist has exhibited paintings in an exhibition space of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen of Rotterdam, reproducing the manner in which they were stacked in storage.



Workshop within the framework of the Amalia Pica exhibition. Chronic listeners. Production of a megaphone. Picture from the website of the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2012.

of the ritual of celebration, one might think that these representations of gallery education depict a space of transgression – or at least of difference – within the institution.

Similar to Foucault's description of heterotopias, gallery education could be seen as an *other space*, a *counter site*.

«There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.» (Foucault 1984 : 46-49).

Within representations of gallery education as we have seen, the discourses of the institution – as for Foucault the actual locations within counter sites – are at the same time represented, contested and inverted. Often at the margins of the museums, gallery education and its representation could be perceived as a space from which could emerge a critique that could lead to a transformation of the institution itself.<sup>25</sup> Working permanently within the institution can certainly enhance the development of what Beatrice von Bismarck calls a «game within the game», the extension of the strategies of artistic institutional critique and the questioning of the specific functions of the institution, in the optic of an interventionist change (Von Bismarck 2013).

At the same time, it must be noted that these representations of gallery education are not only tolerated

but also validated and promoted<sup>26</sup> by the institutions. If gallery education and its representation could be seen as an «other» within the institution, it is only as a tolerated, framed and even sustained «other». An internal «other» in some way, as a cultural worker cannot be «against» the institution, since *she/he is institution* (See: Fraser 2005).

In addition one might ask about the freedom the gallery educators enjoy in terms of representing their activities and the role that the directors of institutions play in the process of documentation and selection of the images. One might also ask oneself why the institutions produce these alternative representations, parallel to their general documentation. In what way are these specific representations necessary for the institutions to address a variety of publics and justify their social role and, thereby, their public financing?<sup>27</sup>

One anecdote, reported by a gallery educator during the encounter organized for the research group in Bienne<sup>28</sup>, bears witness to a complex relationship – between differentiation and adhesion – that the gallery educators often maintain with the institutions they work for: When choosing one image for representing the gallery education service of the museum, she hesitated to use a photograph showing a girl touching a sculpture and smiling. The image gives the impression of a great connivance and proximity of the young public with a work of art and would support the impression she wanted to convey of the department of gallery education. At the same time, feeling that she has to be answerable for the general institutional discourse, presenting this image could invite bad behavior by giving the impression that the works might generally be touched. This dilemma illustrates the ambivalent position occupied by gallery education: it is supposed to provide an image of difference, even of transgression, while at the same time, being a voice of the institution.

In addition, if the documents on art education that we have collected present a viable and beneficial alternative vision of contemporary art institutions, they do so in avoiding at the same time any representations that could contain a dimension of direct criticism towards the institution or one that contradicts the image of gallery education as an intrinsically positive, welcoming and benevolent activity.

In this way, the representation of gallery education seems to appear as a means for presenting an «other face» of the institution; in embodying notably those

<sup>25</sup> Dalton (2001: 151) shows the potential of education – feminized and often relegated to the margins – as a space for transformation «It is partly from positions of structural weakness that feminists have found ways to be effective. Teaching, with its emphasis on feminine qualities of care and its socially unglamorous image, has traditionally been one of the areas where women have been allowed to carve out a space for themselves, and the teaching of art has always had its significant female and feminist art educators. (...) it is from these margins and spaces between the disciplines that fertile ideas come.»

<sup>26</sup> Mediators present at our encounter in Bienne have confirmed that in the majority of cases the direction of the institution had the last word in the choice of images published in order to represent the activities of gallery education.

<sup>27</sup> In order to show to which point the pedagogical activities can be important for receiving recognition and support, we can note, for example, that in the ordonnance du Département fédéral de l'intérieur (ordinance of the Federal Interior Department) a regime of encouraging museums (2012-2015), in five criteria for a contribution the following figured : «the importance of the collections for teaching, research and the public» and «the attractiveness of gallery education activities».

<sup>28</sup> See the general introduction to the present edition.

«human» qualities that are deficient in its general communication. In this framework, accepting or promoting other functions or other usages than those which are traditionally assigned to it could be interpreted as a means for an institution of art to reproduce habits beyond the «exception» made for «gallery education» – while appearing to solve the historic conflict evoked by Bennet between a factual elitism and the theoretical democratic mission of the museum.<sup>29</sup> It can therefore benefit from the image that circulate through gallery education representations, (from here arises the capital importance of the representation of these activities) of an open, dynamic and democratic institution, an image useful for its legitimation on a political level.

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<sup>29</sup> See note 1.

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