

This contribution explores art and cultural mediation, tracing its evolution across cultural contexts and theoretical frameworks. It examines three approaches to mediation – French, German, and English – highlighting their focus on dialogue, education, and audience development, respectively. The educational turn in the arts, emerging since the early 2000s mainly in Western Europe and North America, serves as a catalyst for experimental mediation practices, integrating education into artistic expression and curatorial approaches. Through the Belgian case studies of ‘bodies of knowledge’ and ‘Bosacademie’, this text illustrates how these artistic projects use mediation strategies to analyse knowledge production, engage diverse audiences, and challenge power dynamics within cultural spaces. Ultimately, it describes ‘art mediation as public practice’ that fosters dialogue, inclusivity, and empowerment, and values lived and embodied knowledge alongside expert and scientific knowledge, thereby deepening our understanding of art’s role in society.

ART MEDIATION AS PUBLIC PRACTICE

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MEDIA ARTS & DESIGN EDUCATION+

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Introduction

It is early March and a wintry chill pervades the air. Despite efforts to stave off the cold with heating elements within the tent, the icy wind manages to penetrate the octagonal structure. Inside, benches and chairs are arranged in a circle. Soft cushions are strategically placed at the centre, gradually drawing all attendees to their seats. This setup fosters an intimate gathering space where distinctions between roles – whether as a ‘body of knowledge’, a supporter, a facilitator, or a listener – dissolve. Hierarchical boundaries traditionally found in educational settings are minimized in favour of a more open and horizontal learning atmosphere. Upon entering this communal space, one immediately senses this shift towards an environment where everyone learns, searches, and doubts. Each person in this space becomes a co-creator of knowledge, contributing to a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences. When a person – the ‘body of knowledge’ at that moment – shares a personal narrative and momentarily loses their train of thought, another person – the supporter – steps in to offer support by prompting questions, allowing the narrative to seamlessly continue. The ‘body of knowledge’ takes us on a journey into a world where mushrooms serve as conduits for a hidden network of relationships, nourishing the ecosystem that sustains trees, plants, and ultimately life itself. The love for the mushroom proves contagious, evident in the smiles on the faces of the public. As the story unfolds, it catalyzes reflection on how the more-than-human can enrich and broaden our understanding of the world. (figure 1)

In early 2023, Siebren Nachtergaele, one of the authors of this chapter, immersed himself in the artistic practice called ‘bodies of knowledge’ initiated by Belgian artist Sarah Vanhee. His observation of the opening scene on 9 March 2023

highlights its potential to challenge dominant notions of knowledge production through careful mediation. Questions that arise include: What about the authority of natural elements, like water or forests? How can we include non-normative bodies and minds? How can we disrupt entrenched knowledge hierarchies? Through a thorough analysis of two distinct artistic practices, this chapter unveils three mediation strategies through which a cultural practice organizes itself to interrogate art mediation as public practice. As articulated by museologist François Mairesse (2023), mediation serves a multifaceted role, aiming to enhance ‘the sharing of artworks and knowledge, provide concrete solutions to socioeconomic and sociocultural inequalities in accessing culture and, by extension, encourage public participation’ (p. 297).

Before we can understand the significance of the two artistic practices and the related mediation strategies, it is useful to step back and briefly examine how mediation in the artistic and cultural domain is understood and given meaning over time and space. Art and cultural mediation encompass a myriad of theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations, each offering unique insights into its practice and purpose. Specifically, from the French notion of *médiation culturelle de l’art*, which emphasizes dialogue and societal engagement, to the German concept of *Kulturvermittlung*, which underscores the educational aspect of mediation, and finally, the English variant of *art mediation*, which emphasizes learning and audience development. However, these diverse perspectives are stretched by what is called the educational turn in the arts. This development leads to alternative spaces of and for critical cultural practices that we will explore.

Different approaches to art and cultural mediation in time and place

The concept of mediation, derived from the Latin *mediatio*, has over the centuries become a pivotal mechanism for fostering reconciliation, dialogue, and understanding within diverse contexts. Museologist François Mairesse (2023) articulates that mediation as a general concept ‘is based on seeking a peaceful resolution to conflict or restoring broken bonds between users and institutions. It describes an in-between space that acts as an intermediary between two opposing sides using

non-conventional approaches' (p. 297). In the realm of art and culture, mediation serves as a conduit to bridge the gap between creators, artworks, and audiences, facilitating meaningful interactions and interpretations. In this context, it is described as 'the process of gaining and negotiating knowledge about the arts and social or scientific phenomena through exchange, re-action, and creative response' (Mörsch, 2015, p. 14).

Mediation found resonance within the cultural domain, particularly in France, in the second half of the 20th century, with the emergence of the concept of *médiation culturelle de l'art*. The term first appeared in the 1960s in France but saw significant diffusion and growth in the 1980s, when it was incorporated into museums, libraries, and 'maisons de la culture'. *Médiation culturelle de l'art* starts from a critical approach to art as an individual activity and experience, and a corresponding instructive-didactic pedagogical model mirrored in the concept of *éducation culturelle*. This approach, inspired by a Bourdieusque cultural critique, is based on the idea that art stems from individualistic expressions, and is therefore juxtaposed against 'the collective', making it less easily accessible to a wider audience without the required prior cultural knowledge (Bordeaux & Caillet, 2013). In contrast to *éducation culturelle*, *médiation culturelle de l'art* is 'understood less as knowledge transmission and more as the act of forming relationships of mutual exchange among publics, works, artists, and institutions' (Caune, 1999, as cited in Mörsch, 2015, p. 18). The new term emphasizes the practice of engaging in conversation and dialogue about art and culture and its relationship with society, rather than traditional forms of art education based on the transmission of knowledge about art.

60 In the German-speaking field and discourse, art and cultural mediation, known as *Kulturvermittlung*, starts from an educational or learning perspective but connects this with artistic and social processes. As artist and cultural studies scholar Carmen Mörsch describes, 'this educational aspect of mediation is interlaced with artistic and social processes in addition to didactic methods employed to realize educational goals' (2015, p. 15). Art and cultural mediation is understood here as an informed dialogue and negotiation around art and culture, incorporating various forms and languages, both discursive and expressive. According to Mörsch, the concept *Kulturvermittlung* is 'generally applied to situations in which people receive information

about the arts [...], enter into an exchange about that information, react to it – whether orally or through other forms of expression' (2015, p. 16).

In the English-speaking field and discourse, *art mediation*, as a variant of art and cultural mediation, has gained traction only in recent years. The 2019 Whitney Biennial in New York, for instance, mediates as a socially engaged art forum that critically interrogates and challenges entrenched white power structures with the art and media landscape, fostering a multiplicity of perspectives, voices, and practices (Valentine, 2019). At the Manifesta biennial for contemporary art, also known as the European Nomadic Biennial, in 2021, a publication entitled *El Moutawassit: cultural mediation as a meeting point* (Klichuk, Ziou-Ziou & Monbaron, 2021) was launched, accompanied by several workshops and seminars. *Art (and cultural) mediation* should be interpreted against the backdrop of the much more common English term *art education*, which not only explicitly states it is all about 'education', but is also primarily used in formal educational settings. Compared to this notion of art education, *art (and cultural) mediation* marks a conceptual shift from 'education' to 'learning', understood more broadly to include non-intentional forms of learning, more action-oriented and (social-) constructivist forms of learning, and the awareness that learning about, in, and through the arts can take place in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Since the 1990s, English-speaking countries have seen the growing importance of terms such as 'audience development' and 'outreach' activities in large art institutions (such as museums with an educational department), where new and experimental educational projects and programmes are being developed, as well as the walls of the organization being broken down and links established with the communities surrounding the institution (community outreach). *Art mediation* can therefore be understood as a term embedded in a broader evolution of concepts, indicating the quest of artists, art institutions, and art educators to engage in dialogue art, context, and audiences in different ways.

The educational turn in the arts

Inspired by the reflections of Sabine De Villes (2013, p. 6), former president of the organization Culture & Democracy in Brussels, we identify three main strands in the described historical and

Western discourses on art and cultural mediation: (1) connecting the audience with artistic work (with a focus on proximity and participation); (2) deepening the experience, perception, and interpretation (towards a shared process of interpretation); and (3) critical reflection and discussion on art and culture in society.

Since the beginning of the millennium, mainly in Western Europe and North America, there has been the emergence of the 'educational turn in the arts' (Késenne, 2021) within the context of exhibitions and museums. This trend further stretches the concept of mediation by facilitating unconventional and experimental art mediation practices. Conceptually, the impact of the educational turn in the arts on art mediation can be seen in two ways. First, education can be viewed and utilized as a form of artistic expression, where the act of creation is intertwined with educational endeavours. Second, education can serve as a curatorial approach to respond to shifts in how artworks are perceived, transitioning from objects of mere information to entities with educational significance (Gheorghe & Sternfeld, 2017). Researchers and curators Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson state in *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010) that the central shift in the educational turn is that artists, curators, and educators are expanding the artistic to co-opt forms of educational practice, creating spaces of and for critical cultural practices.

But what does the term 'critical' mean here, and how do these contemporary art mediation practices understand their positioning in the relation between culture and democracy? We will answer this question by starting from the practice, examining two Belgian examples of art mediation practices at the intersection of art and education: 'bodies of knowledge' and 'Bosacademie'. In these practices, mediators employ engaged pedagogies and politics to analyse the conditions of knowledge production through artistic means and interact with diverse audiences within a pluriversal cultural context. This approach challenges dominant modes of knowledge production and sharing, leading to the development of engaged art mediation strategies and roles. Subsequent sections of this chapter dissect both practices based on data collected by three of the authors of this contribution (De Middel et al., 2024; Nachtergaele et al., 2024a).

Two Belgian case studies: 'bodies of knowledge' and 'Bosacademie' as inspiring art mediation practices

'Bodies of knowledge' (BOK) (www.bodiesofknowledge.be) is a long-term artistic practice initiated by the Belgian artist Sarah Vanhee in response to her own experiences with schools, which often clashed with her enduring passion for learning. Conceptually, BOK embodies the essence of a 'semi-nomadic classroom', characterized by its transient nature and dedication to fostering learning experiences. It is semi-nomadic because it stays in a city for a few weeks or months before moving again, and it is classroom-like as learning and knowledge-sharing are central to its practice. The exchange is both the artistic practice and the means to connect people with culture. The original conception for the exchange is the BOK tent, which can be set up in various locations where 'bodies of knowledge' can share knowledge. Alternative formats developed include 'BOK on foot' and 'BOK-phone'. During public learning days, everyone is invited to the tent to come and listen to different 'bodies of knowledge' from a particular city, carefully selected by a diverse group of volunteers – hereafter referred to as antennae – who participated in the prior two-week workshop to uncover the city's invisible knowledge. BOK's unique approach to mediation starts from the fact that they do not speak of an 'audience' but of listeners and storytellers, of people who participate, people who happen to drop by, and people who co-organize like the antennae. It is about all the people present in the tent during public learning days listening to underrepresented knowledge. People can be connected to BOK in various ways and engage at different levels, taking on different roles that can also shift during the process. Mediation is a vital part of their artistic practice, which a BOK team member describes as 'creating a connection with people and pursuing a goal together, a goal with respect and integrity for both parties'. In this case, the mediation process does not start after the artwork is completed. On the contrary, the artistic process and the mediation process run concurrently, prioritizing human connection, dialogue, and active listening, while also remaining adaptable to the specificities of each city and its (changing) environments and contexts.



Het Bos is a unique cultural organization because it is both a youth centre and an artistic workspace. This organization reveals itself as an artistic incubator where art, social engagement, and encounters are central, taking into account urban realities and connecting to the layered social and cultural networks of the city of Antwerp in Belgium. One of their projects is 'Bosacademie', centring on an annual open call, aiming to serve as a portal for emerging artistic talent to access essential resources and support. Bosacademie primarily provides physical space for young art residents. Residents are literally given a key and a workspace. While young artists often have a workspace at school when they are (still) studying, Bosacademie offers their first experiences with a studio or workspace outside the academic context. It focuses on the artistic learning trajectory of young artists from varied backgrounds. It is designed to offer them extensive opportunities when they seek production, logistical, technical, and/or financial support to develop and present their work. A key objective of Bosacademie is to diversify and inject audiences with young creators from the city, from a multitude of backgrounds. This is a gesture to incubate the broader cultural sector with a multivocality of young artists and creatives. By opening its doors to a wide range of artistic disciplines and practices, Bosacademie ensures inclusiveness and diversity in its selection process. (figure 2)

BOK and Bosacademie both engage with aspects of art mediation as 'public practice' by questioning and reversing power

relations and structures, making cultural themes public, and creating space for multivocality, dissensus, and co-creation. Based on ethnographic research on both case studies, mechanisms are uncovered to enable a multiplier effect in the field of art and cultural education. Instead of describing their activities, our focus is on understanding how they work and determining which roles to adopt. Below, we discuss three mediation strategies identified in both artistic practices, each implemented differently.

Strategies of mediation in BOK and Bosacademie Making connections with formal and informal networks in the urban fabric

These art mediation practices connect with the multilayered and plural urban fabric. Mediation in deep urban networks implies that mediation practices not only establish connections with visible, formal actors, but also consider previously invisible and informal actors, helping to understand absent relationships and connections (Nachtergaele et al., 2024b).

BOK establishes connections with the urban fabric in various ways and at different stages of the process. For the preparation of workshops and public learning days, collaboration with a local cultural organization was essential to connect with networks in the local neighbourhood and to anchor the project within the local communities, providing valuable insights into local dynamics and social and cultural networks. During the workshops, the antennae also establish connections with local actors and key figures in the neighbourhood and the broader city through their own networks. They seek citizens who can share vulnerable life experiences recognized as embodied knowledge. Initially, antennae invited 'bodies of knowledge' through informal channels or social and cultural organizations that have a neighbourhood or meeting function. Personal connections with informal and formal actors in the urban fabric proved important for accessing these networks. During the public learning days, everyone from the neighbourhood or city is welcome to listen.

Bosacademie deploys mediation strategies to connect young artists and creatives with other actors. They start from questions such as: Which actors are you in contact with? Who is part of your network? In what places do you come and work? Who inspires and advises you? Often, young people have

fig.3
mediation as broker
Lieve De Middel



already built relationships and networks during their education and initial experiences in the field. Being aware of one's own network and encouraging them to call on each other's network is a mediation strategy. The mediators themselves also rely on their own network and try to connect residents with their network in the art education field. This creates a multiplier effect, uncovering a multivoiced and layered network.

In this mediation strategy, the art mediator fulfils the role of a broker. A *broker* brings different perspectives and cultural actors into dialogue. This may involve exchange with and building interrelations between professional cultural actors and informal cultural circuits in the urban fabric, as well as uncovering connections between actors and citizens, participants or visitors, and within the organization itself. (figure 3)

66 Setting the scene for sharing and supporting vulnerable positions in society

Both mediation practices create a setting for sharing and supporting vulnerable positions in society.

In BOK, scenography plays a significant role. BOK creates a fiction of a 'nomadic classroom' as a performative site. For this purpose, they developed a tent in an octagonal shape (with eight sides). Inside the tent, chairs, benches, and cushions are arranged in a circle. The shape of the BOK tent and the arrangement of the chairs, benches, and cushions work in a democratizing manner and create a certain intimacy. During public learning

fig.4
mediation as facilitator
Lieve De Middel



days, the tent is closed to create an intimate spatial setting. During the sharing of life experiences and knowledge, the body language of the antennae also plays a significant role: when the 'body of knowledge' hesitates or struggles to express itself clearly, the antenna comes closer and makes eye contact, for instance. When there are no public sessions, the tent is opened to local residents. For example, the tent is placed in a public park in a particular city, allowing them to claim this space as a public space for sharing overlooked stories in the city.

Bosacademie uses an open call that provides new opportunities for young artists. Residents from Bosacademie indicate that the open call to participate is very accessible: one does not have to submit an overly large dossier, no letter of recommendation is required, and images and design sketches are also welcome in the application. The only condition is that the project includes a public moment as a final piece or presentation of work in progress, and that the project is in line with the vision of Het Bos. Young artists seize the residency as an opportunity to experiment and test out concepts they never started before. They work together for the first time as an artist duo, set up workshops for the first time, or take time to write. In Bosacademie, the collaborative process of searching and exploring is cultivated and seen as nourishing for the creative and research processes of the young residents. Coaching the residents translates less into a content-oriented sounding board (given the diverse artistic practices of the residents) but rather into referring and



connecting them with other (formal and informal) actors who can offer specific expertise. Bosacademie operates from a generosity towards the work of the resident and poses the following questions: What do you need to create your work? What space do you need for this? Who can support you in this? Mediation here does not presuppose explaining 'what to do', but rather entails collaboratively searching, exploring, and making connections with other actors. It involves (co-)learning to navigate and move within the cultural field. Bosacademie is very aware of its own position as a cultural organization and uses its authority and power position to support young makers in their work.

In this mediation strategy, the art mediator appears as a facilitator. The art mediator as *facilitator* is contextually oriented: creating an open space for new initiatives from audiences or citizens in the city. Above all, the art mediator as facilitator creates and monitors conditions that allow this creative dynamic to be embraced, rather than offering a fixed art programme. (figure 4)

Sharing intentions to horizontalize the process

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By sharing intentions to horizontalize the process, space is created to reverse power relations in artistic practice and beyond. This act of creating space where power dynamics are reversed can be seen as a political act or gesture.

When you enter the BOK tent, the 'welcomer' greets all visitors and listeners, and the 'facilitator' shares the intentions that apply during the session. The intentions of the BOK sessions foster care and interest in the quality of the session while also

drawing attention to the speakers: the 'bodies of knowledge'. One of the intentions reads: '*We're trying to challenge the usual dominant order of speaking out in society.*' Those who share this embodied knowledge often find themselves in vulnerable social positions or experience power imbalances. By creating a setting in which they speak, the power dynamic is reversed. The mediation tasks (welcoming the visitors, facilitating the sessions, and sharing the intentions) are not fixed but are fluid. During each session, the audience members become listeners. All listeners in the BOK tent contribute to a safe atmosphere and space, sharing co-responsibility in the relational practice of knowledge-sharing. Shifting roles during the sessions reinforces shared responsibility for the whole process.

Bosacademie also tries to reverse existing power relations and starts from an attitude of equality among all involved. Mediation here mainly takes the form of conversation, based on mutuality and reciprocity. Mediators also search and explore together with the young creators, giving them freedom. The freedom experienced by the young residents relates to the physical space: a place to make and work, to do what they want in and with the space, and to work at times they choose within their residency period. Freedom also relates to the content of their artistic project: they are at the helm and decide what they make, the theme, and how their vision manifests in the work. This freedom to make artistic choices independently and access the space speaks to residents of a form of trust in their ideas and projects.

In this mediation strategy, the art mediator appears as an *interrupter*. Interrupters engage in a pedagogical approach that does not rely on an assumed superior knowledge of the mediator instructing audiences how to act or be, nor does it reduce art mediation to a mere 'learning regime' (Biesta, 2012) by simply facilitating learning processes. Instead, art mediators as interrupters create room for authentic dialogue and political engagement, where art itself is neither instrumentalized nor required to carry political significance.

Conclusion: art mediation as public practice

The practice of art mediation in the two case studies emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted endeavour that transcends traditional notions of education and audience engagement. Although

these traditional notions have their value and still exist in both discourse and practice, we have shown that the educational turn in the arts can be seen as an important shift in Western Europe and North America towards new ways of integrating artistic and educational practices as spaces of and for critical cultural practices. The historical and geographical exploration of the different understandings of art and cultural mediation illustrates how this thinking has developed in various contexts, showing different nuances depending on these contexts. With this contribution, we did not aim to ‘close’ the process of defining art and cultural mediation, but rather to focus on *how it functions* in the concrete practice of two cases. More specifically, through our description and analysis of the practices, we aimed to answer the question of what the term ‘critical’ means here and how these contemporary art mediation processes understand their positioning in the relation between culture and democracy.

Through the exploration of ‘bodies of knowledge’ and ‘Bosacademie’, it becomes evident that art mediation is a powerful tool for fostering dialogue, inclusivity, and empowerment within cultural spaces. Art mediation in this sense can thus be described as ‘public practice’. Using strategies such as making connections to urban networks, creating space(s) for vulnerable voices, and sharing intentions to horizontalize processes, art mediators play central roles as brokers, facilitators, and interrupters, with these roles being interchangeable throughout the process. These roles not only enrich the artistic experience but also contribute to a broader cultural democracy by challenging dominant power dynamics and fostering authentic dialogue and political engagement.

In this vein, first, art mediation as public practice primarily provides a forum for underrepresented and suppressed knowledge within urban fabrics. The two cases host and create space for different voices, narratives, and aesthetics. This creates an educational and political space that allows for difference, dialogue, and collaboration, as well as disagreement and dissensus (Çankaya, 2022). In this sense, we can consider the cases as public practices with mediation strategies that recognize and acknowledge multiple perspectives, making diverse narratives about coexistence public.

Second, making space for these different voices also embraces a different kind of knowledge. Art mediation as public practice recognizes that lived and embodied knowledge(s) is as valuable as expert or scientific knowledge. The palette of ‘languages’ for engaging in dialogue about art and culture is broadly conceived here. It includes not only cognitive skills or discursive literacy but also visual and expressive literacy, and embodied experiences and processes of meaning-making. Media theorist Arjen Mulder argues in *From Image to Interaction: Meaning and Agency in the Arts* (2010) that works of art appeal to other forms of meaning-making in addition to linguistic meanings. He calls this ‘presentational meaning-making’, which involves pre-reflective, physically embodied, and emotional elements that are decisive in processes of meaning-making centred on experience and perception, as is the case in many participatory art practices and (artistic and educational) practices of art and culture mediation.

Third, giving space to different voices and recognizing different kinds of knowledge(s) offers the possibility of mediating multiple forms of knowledge and thus understanding processes of inequality and exclusion in society in a different way. For example, the listening experience in the BOK tent can be considered inherently political. Who speaks and who listens, from what position? These are political questions. Listening itself also requires responsibility. As cultural theorist and philosopher Gayatri Spivak says, ‘Who shall speak’ is less crucial than ‘who will listen’ (1990, pp. 59–66). It is not simply an act of reacting or responding that complements a transaction between speaker and listener. It is first and foremost about an ethical stance, about making space for the other to exist and towards knowledge as relationality (Vázquez, 2012).

What we observe at this micro level can also be translated to a meso or macro level, as educational institutions today are tasked with offering individuals the tools and spaces necessary for critical thinking, fostering encounters, and recognizing one another’s differences. Sociologist Rolando Vázquez (2020) proposes introducing three different pedagogies that can guide educators in positioning their practice to break with the dominance of Western epistemology and aesthetics, and to overcome their embedded Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism. Both artistic

practices we examined mobilize non-Eurocentric knowledge and embodied experiences through tools (in this case, strategies) and specific spaces (e.g. the tent), making them ideal to illustrate Vázquez's pedagogies. They express other positionalities by humbling Western knowledge and questioning its dominant position. The *pedagogies of positionality* 'teach us that we are always located somewhere, in relation to others' (Vázquez, 2020, p. 171). Awareness of our positioned realities allows us to 'enter in relation with each-other', to 'listen to each-other and learn each-other' (Vázquez, 2020, p. xix). The *pedagogies of relationality* are intertwined with the pedagogies of positionality. They eschew the logic of representation in favour of building dialogues and opening up to neglected or suppressed narratives. Both artistic practices weave relations capable of listening and hosting. The *pedagogies of re-existence*, in positioned and relational ways, go beyond resistance. Both artistic practices 'affirm and search for pluriversal forms of becoming world-historical reality' (Vázquez, 2020, p. 173) rather than situating their practice into the so-called internationalist oriented (i.e. white and Western dominated) art scene (Knell, 2018, pp. 13–14).

Both exploring the interplay between the strategies and roles identified in the case studies 'bodies of knowledge' and 'Bosacademie' and understanding their positioning in the relation between culture and democracy serve as a catalyst to recognizing how embracing the more-than-human can deepen and expand our understanding of the world.

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