

Listening to passivity: politicised emotions in cultural mediation

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Biography

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Cultural mediation¹ in France is often represented by images of the public in action, especially on the websites of contemporary art organisations or in their activity reports. It is as if, to be successful, cultural mediation needs to visibly engage the bodies of visitors. The type of participation at stake in these images is based on an implicit binary between the *active* and the *passive*. To participate is to be active. Being passive, on the other hand, is devalued. This dualism can be questioned through feminist tools, as passivity has historically been coded as feminine.² I argue in this article that the privilege of doing nothing in art spaces is granted to certain people: regular museum visitors. On the other hand, passivity is negatively connoted for others: visitors who are categorised as non-specialists and perceived as requiring cultural mediation services.

¹ By "cultural mediation", I mean all activities carried out by cultural mediators with audiences within a contemporary art organisation, such as visits of exhibitions and workshops. In English, cultural mediation is called gallery education, museum education or learning.

² The association between women and passivity goes back to Aristotle and Hippocrates, around 450-300 B.C. Cf. BEAUVOIR Simone de, *The second sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. London: Vintage, pp. 43-45.

The first part of this article analyses how cultural institutions can be led to position themselves as emancipatory structures towards certain audiences that supposedly need their intervention. To counter this idea, an approach that could be called egalitarian asserts that spectators are always free to develop their own ways of interpreting artworks. I demonstrate that this perspective, which considers that audiences are always active, can make invisible the power dynamics that structure the relationships between institutions, artists, cultural mediators, and audiences.

In the second part, I draw on texts by feminist authors who not only offer a critical analysis of the moral undertones attached to positions deemed passive but also conceive of agency in a contextual way. I demonstrate that rather than seeking to change individuals perceived as passive, it is a matter of structurally understanding what leads to such categorisation and transforming the pedagogical and institutional context accordingly.

In the last part, I analyse my own practice as a cultural mediator at Frac Lorraine in 2017-2018. I concretely investigate how, in the here and now of cultural mediation, privileged individuals are empowered to participate. The institution, the mediators, but also the participants who embody a dominant social perspective guide the discussions in front of the artworks. Understanding what I call politicised emotions helps uncover these specific orientations. In a context where institutions continue to fail to appreciate their processes of marginalisation, I argue for the need to allow audiences to opt out while recognising that this is more easily granted to those already advantaged in the group. I also argue for revaluing the notion of listening that considers each individual's attentional capacities and wills.

0. Methodological stance

The research presented in this article is the result of practice-based research.³ It is worth presenting its methodological contours. I am conducting this research as a mediator in a public cultural institution. I am a "researcher-practitioner" in the sense that I conduct research through my practice with the aim of improving it.⁴ Such research begins with a feeling of dissonance: representations of the public (for instance, images used to communicate about the institution) do not match the actual interactions developed with visitors. The modes of address that I craft toward audiences occur within a wider context (which carries these biased representations against them), which necessarily also addresses them. Therefore, my research focuses on both this institutional context and my own pedagogical approaches within it. Whether I like it or not, by working for an institution, I am the bearer of potential institutional violence that my practice will modulate, temper and/or reinforce.

Theoretical reflections analysing this institutional context are always indexed to educational practice. It is a specificity of educational practice-based research to always put the educational practice at the centre. Mediators carry theories about education or how art functions that they internalise and which influence their interactions with the public. These ideas are transformed by and for practice. For example, mediators favour concepts tested in their interactions with audiences that can support future practice.

As practitioner-researchers, mediators analyse this back-and-forth between theory and practice. This is done self-reflexively, as it involves questioning personal

³ CANDY Linda and Ernest EDMONDS, "Practice-based research in the creative arts: foundations and futures from the front line", *Leonardo*, no 51 (1): 63–69, 2018.

⁴ PRINGLE Emily, "Developing the practitioner-researcher within the art museum", *Tate Papers*, n°29, Printemps 2018.

conceptions and prejudices.⁵ In this respect, my approach is enriched by an auto-ethnographic reflection that aims to make visible the socially situated perspective of a valid white cisgender worker and to question how this positioning functions in concert and/or in opposition with the excluding mechanisms of the institution.⁶

Practice-based research in cultural mediation has very specific means and scope. The means of research are linked to practice; it is difficult, for example, to answer a question that did not emerge from practice and cannot be tested within it.⁷ The modes of research are also intrinsic to practice. It is a question of conducting research using means that make sense within practice. For example, it is common practice in cultural mediation research to use questionnaires addressed to participants in mediation activities.⁸ If it is not part of my practice to use such questionnaires systematically, they will be of limited interest. It will be more useful for me to develop ways of paying attention that are intrinsic to my practice. Such practice-based tools can then be improved over time.

⁵ Initial theories may be challenged by practice or resist self-reflection and remain powerfully rooted. Miranda Fricker speaks, for example, of “theory-laden perceptions”. Cf. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*, Clarendon Press, 2007, p. 66.

⁶ ETTORRE Elizabeth, *Autoethnography as feminist method: sensitising the feminist 'I'*, London, England ; New York, New York: Routledge, 2017.

⁷ During my doctoral research, for example, I was interested in the notion of distraction. Having never paid specific attention to this notion in my practice, I lacked material to analyse. Not being linked to a cultural institution at that time, I had to postpone this research to a future time. However, I wrote a theoretical text on the subject: "Queer distraction: pedagogies for a distracted reception of art" (forthcoming).

⁸ These questionnaires are criticised. In particular, the multiple-choice questions severely restrict the answers that can be given. Their interpretation has also been questioned. For example, in the UK context, David Stevenson analyses that when a person answers, “not for people like me”, to explain non-attendance at a cultural venue, this is interpreted as a “psychological barrier” and not as a failure of the institution to be of interest. Cf. STEVENSON David, *Understanding the problem of cultural non-participation: discursive structures, articulatory practice and cultural domination*, PhD thesis, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, 2016, p. 94. I consider that filling in a questionnaire is a form of labour that is not part of the tacit agreement between mediators and audiences and is, therefore, a research tool external to the practice. Cf. PRINGLE, Emily, "Revisiting evaluation", *Art Education Research* 4 (2): 1-9, 2010; SMALL, Mario L and Jenna M COOK, "Using interviews to understand why: challenges and strategies in the study of motivated action", *Sociological Methods & Research*, March 2021.

The scope of my research is restricted to my own practice. Another mediator, for example, one who is differently situated socially, will have a different analysis of a similar institutional context and other pedagogical solutions to offer.⁹ However, explaining the specificities of my context and social positioning, my research may echo (in accordance with and/or in opposition to) the realities of other mediators or institutional workers and be useful to their research or practice.

1. Audiences instrumentalised in giving an emancipatory image of the institution

⁹ Educational practices are not only related to the social positioning of practitioners. They may be related to personal strategies. Some people are not comfortable with confrontation, others like to use humour, etc.



Figure 1: Image used by the Frac Lorraine on social media (Facebook, Instagram) to advertise their activities with children © 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine, Metz.



Figure 2: Image on Lafayette Anticipations' website announcing a meeting on the documentation of mediation actions in contemporary art. The caption reads: Visit of Hella Jongerius' exhibition with a leisure centre © Lafayette Anticipations - Galeries Lafayette Fondation.

The microsillons collective (Olivier Desvoignes and Marianne Guarino-Huet) collected images representing cultural mediation activities from 32 contemporary art institutions in Switzerland and Liechtenstein between 2006 and 2012. They found a difference between the views of exhibitions, without visitors, framed symmetrically, and the images representing cultural mediation, often taken at an angle to show a high number of participants.¹⁰ In these images, cultural mediation transgresses institutional norms by introducing groups, dirt or noise but also brings life that the institution lacks.¹¹ Microsillons conclude that these images aim to convince people that art museums are democratic places.¹² However, by circumscribing these democratic missions to cultural mediation in a controlled way, microsillons demonstrates that museums reproduce an "institutional status quo" that allows them to remain primarily elitist except in dedicated spaces.¹³ Mediation is an (apparently celebrated) *other* within the institution.¹⁴ This echoes the work of David Stevenson, according to whom cultural institutions invent the figure of the "non-participant", an individual who is thought to not visit public cultural organisations and whom the latter have the task of conquering and educating. According to Stevenson, this figure allows cultural organisations to apply for public funds, their mission being to involve individuals in a cultural life from which they would be supposedly isolated. This opposition between regular visitors (not represented in institutional communication) and visitors believed to be non-regulars (associated with mediation) is to the latter's detriment.

¹⁰ DESVOIGNES Olivier, GUARINO-HUET Marianne, "A lively museum? The "other" contemporary art institution produced in representations of art education" in MÖRSCH, Carmen (dir.), *Representing art education. On the representation of pedagogical work in the art field*, Vienne : Zaglossus, 2017, pp. 150-151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 156, 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

For microsillons, cultural mediation audiences make the museum come alive; it can also be understood that the museum makes them active. This idea is particularly present in an image often used by museums: a participant raising his or her hand. This educational trope is used in the French context by public institutions (Figure 1)¹⁵ and private organisations (Figure 2)¹⁶. Of the 23 Frac (Fonds régional d'art contemporain) in France, 22 have such an image on their social media (Facebook or Instagram).¹⁷ In Figures 1 and 2, I note the presence of people I perceive as from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, which is not insignificant considering that these images aim to convince that the organisation plays a social role.¹⁸ Stevenson has shown that the figure of the supposed non-participant is associated with social markers that arbitrarily and discriminatingly designate certain groups as needing cultural mediation services.¹⁹

The educational scenes in these images display a pedagogy based on right and wrong answers mediated by a teacher figure who allows participants to express themselves. Such pedagogy reinforces a divide between those who know and those who do not, which can lead to the latter feeling excluded. In these photographs, raising one's hand or appearing to listen intently is presented as an indication that participants

¹⁵ Frac Lorraine, *Ce weekend pour les kids*, <<https://www.facebook.com/fraclorraine/photos/3509110415800121>>. Accessed August 2022.

¹⁶ Lafayette Anticipations, *Documenter l'art contemporain : de la création à la réception*, <<https://www.lafayetteanticipations.com/fr/manifestation/documenter-lart-contemporain-de-la-creation-la-reception>>. Accessed in August 2022.

¹⁷ Data collected on the 1st of November, 2021.

¹⁸ In French, "racisé" could be used instead of "from minoritised ethnic backgrounds". The term was first used by Colette Guillaumin; it entered the dictionary in 2019 to mean "person who experiences racism" (Robert dictionary). My aim is to analyse how contemporary art institutions racialise audiences in a way that leads to a marginalisation of audiences from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. To conduct this analysis, I am also categorising individuals according to race, class, and gender. That is what I want to make clear by writing that I perceive the represented participants as from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Two racialising gazes are at play, an institutional one and mine as a researcher-practitioner, analysing and thus repeating the racialising gaze of the institution. Cf. GUILLAUMIN Colette, *L'idéologie raciste: genèse et langage actuel*, Paris: Mouton, 1972; MAZOUZ, Sarah, *Race*, Paris: Anamosa, 2020.

¹⁹ STEVENSON, *Op. cit.*, p. 205.

are truly involved. The question is to understand how a visibly mobilised body can thus serve as evidence of participation.

The art historian Claire Bishop has criticised how some art practices, which she describes as participatory, have been conceptualised as emancipatory because they make the audience physically active. She argues that such a belief associates the body with the working class, as opposed to the intellect attached to a higher social status.²⁰ To think that a work of art would need to physically engage visitors thus implicitly relies on discriminatory conceptual distinctions. For Bishop, making viewers active is part of a larger discourse carried by modernity.²¹ She quotes Boris Groys saying that modernity is "directed against contemplation, against the position of spectator, against the passivity of the masses paralysed by the spectacle of modern life".²² Participating in creating a work of art, in participatory art practices described by Bishop, is then seen as a means of emancipating oneself from alienating ideologies (e.g. consumerism).²³ In contrast to the individuality of traditional art reception, participatory art practices are seen here as aiming to create a collective political engagement.²⁴

²⁰ BISHOP Claire, *Artificial hells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*, Londres: Verso, 2012, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

²² GROYS Boris, "Comrades of time", *e-flux Journal*, n. 11, December 2009.

²³ BISHOP, *Op. cit.*, p. 275.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275. The "audience involvement spectrum" is another example of how participatory art practices are seen to better engage audiences by making them active. It measures audience involvement as a progression from spectating to co-creation. Cf. BROWN Alan S., NOVAK Jennifer L., "Getting in on the act: how arts groups are creating opportunities for active participation", Focus - The James Irvine Foundation, Wolfbrown, October 2011, p. 16.

Cultural mediation differs from participatory art practices because it does not engage audiences in artwork creation.²⁵ Nevertheless, the images of cultural mediation analysed above (Figures 1 & 2) repeat the hierarchies described by Bishop.

Bishop's solution is to abandon any distinction between an active and a passive position. This distinction inevitably leads, she argues, to a division between those who are capable and those who are not.²⁶ Bishop thus nuances the hold that artists, artworks or institutions might have on audiences by alleging a critical capacity of viewers in all situations. Drawing on the ideas of philosopher Jacques Rancière, she argues that even a viewer who appears to be passively consuming a work of art can be critically involved in it.

In *The emancipated spectator*, Rancière argues for recognising the equality of all in interpreting artworks. He underlines the importance of expressing divergent interpretations, what he calls a "dissensus".²⁷ Transposed to the cultural mediation field, Rancière proposes an anti-educational gesture: only by presuming to be equal can a scene of equality (and dissensus) emerge. Equality is created because it is assumed to be present.

I argue that Bishop and Rancière do not reject the active-passive dualism but retain only the active term. They describe involved and willing spectators. Bishop and Rancière thus continue to defend a heroic narrative of art and its potential. As a cultural mediator, I have often participated in such scenes of dissensus. But other encounters have been less clearly free of power relations, and it is likely that many moments I

²⁵ The term "co-creation practices" is also used in the French context. Cf. POULIN Céline, PRESTON Marie (eds.), *Co-creation*, Paris: Éditions Empire, 2019.

²⁶ BISHOP, *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁷ RANCIERE Jacques, *The emancipated spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London; New York: Verso, 2009, p. 96.

perceive as moments of equality have not been experienced as such by others. Believing this can lead mediators to ignore the inequalities involved. It is not enough to declare a dualism unsuitable; the work must be done to undo it. The expectation that unites passivity, the body and “a state of minority” is strong and ignoring it might only lead to its persistence.²⁸

2. A coded passivity

To continue exploring the notion of passivity, it is useful to situate it in a broader, specifically feminist, philosophical context.

In her writings, Simone de Beauvoir understands passivity as conceptually attached to women and immorality since the 16th century in French legal texts.²⁹ In *We are not born submissive: how patriarchy shapes women's lives*, an essay on Beauvoir's philosophy, Manon Garcia analyses the concept of submission.³⁰ The two concepts are linked, as passivity leads women to submit to men in Beauvoir's texts. La Boétie and Rousseau theorised that human beings are naturally free. From this perspective, choosing to submit is a moral fault because it is tantamount to renouncing one's human nature.³¹ Thus, because women submit to men, they are immoral beings. Beauvoir describes how women's submissive destiny (the social construction they inherit that gives them a path in life) is inscribed in their bodies, primarily through

²⁸ Rancière defines emancipation as the “emergence of a state of minority”. Cf. RANCIERE, *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

²⁹ BEAUVOIR, *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

³⁰ GARCIA Manon, *We are not born submissive: how patriarchy shapes women's lives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

motherhood.³² Their body does not shape destiny; it is only the bearer of a socially constituted and then naturalised destiny.³³ In this context, women's submission is inherited, not a choice, but a given. To be free, women must go against what is imposed on them. They cannot pretend this condition does not exist; they must position themselves according to it and make a cost-benefit analysis (as Garcia puts it). Freedom will thus cost more to some than others.³⁴

Although Beauvoir's approach permits understanding how passivity and submission have been coded as feminine and immoral, the emancipation she describes is also carried by an active force. For example, Beauvoir's text allows for a difference to be made between women who are liberating themselves from their condition and those whose situation impedes their emancipation, even if this difference is not morally evaluated. In this sense, any active voice seems destined to replay the active-passive dualism in which the passive position is devalued, as Bishop indicated.

However, considering the capacity to act in the world as historically and culturally specific, as Beauvoir does, means that the parameters that recognise an action as free cannot be fixed in advance but must emerge through contextual analysis.³⁵ According to Saba Mahmood, Western feminists use a simplified conception of agency that prevents them from understanding how people operate in other cultural contexts.³⁶ A whole set of concepts, such as freedom, action, passivity,

³² BEAUVOIR, *Op. cit.*, pp. 56-58.

³³ GARCIA, *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

³⁴ BEAUVOIR, *Op. cit.*, p. 439.

³⁵ MAHMOOD Saba, *Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

and resistance, are used to examine agency.³⁷ Their meanings cannot be known *a priori* but must be shaped by encounters with those concerned.³⁸ Mahmood points out in particular that the capacity to act is often thought of at the level of supposedly autonomous individuals to the detriment of its relational dimension.³⁹

The approach advocated by Mahmood can be adapted to cultural mediation in two ways. Firstly, the critical gaze must be turned towards the mediator and the concepts he or she uses to recognise and facilitate audience participation. Secondly, any analysis of agency must be contextual. This approach brings a methodological change in how participation is usually approached. Instead of considering that participants demonstrate a personal capacity to participate, it is to consider that their participation has been made possible by a specific context.⁴⁰

The philosopher Sara Ahmed transposes this idea to the notion of space, analysing how an environment limits what can be done and said in it. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed analyses how spaces are oriented to privilege certain bodies over others. For example, most spaces can be described as heterosexual in that a romantic gesture exchanged between two persons of the same sex will be noticed as outside the norm.⁴¹ Many European venues also favour white people as

³⁷ Vivian May states something similar when she writes: “Western feminist conceptions of agency, though offering “an essential antidote to previous hegemonic accounts obliterating subjectivities and experiences of subordinated groups,” can, nevertheless, “significantly impoverish the analysis of power” by denying agency in subjectivities/lives that are simplistically read as compliant with the status quo (because not resistant in recognizable ways)”. Cf. MAY Vivian, *Pursuing intersectionality, unsettling dominant imaginaries*, Londres : Routledge, 2015, p. 220.

³⁸ MAHMOOD, *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

³⁹ MAHMOOD, *Op. cit.*, pp. 7 ; 13.

⁴⁰ This approach is reflected in the “barriers to cultural participation” notion. Stevenson argues that barriers to participation are most likely to exist in an unequally structured society: lack of time or money, for instance, impacts how individuals consume culture. However, he argues that the way cultural policies conceptualise cultural participation tends to put the responsibility of the structural problem on individuals who are stigmatised for not participating adequately. Cf. STEVENSON, *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁴¹ AHMED, Sara, *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*, Durham : Duke University Press, 2006, p. 9.

they are generally in the majority.⁴² They are also surrounded by objects, even other bodies, that amplify their actions and abilities.⁴³ Ahmed concludes that "the world itself is more 'involved' in some bodies than in others".⁴⁴ When bodies are validated by the space they are in, they feel comfortable, and then they can act. First-time visitors to a contemporary art institution are not in a familiar space, they are not comfortable, and if they do not participate, it may be because the space is not oriented in a way that would allow them to do so.

Ahmed's description of comfort may be useful in considering the position of cultural mediators. She writes: "To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins".⁴⁵ People who are relaxed in familiar spaces think their reality is the same as everyone else's. Comfort can have the effect of reducing a person's critical capacity.

The orientation of a space can influence the course of the educational moment in ways that cannot be countered by an individual alone. Because Ahmed associates familiarity with a lack of insight, she implies that people who feel uncomfortable and disempowered by a space may better understand it. This leads to a re-evaluation of passivity: silent participants may have an understanding of the institutional space that the cultural mediator does not possess.

3. Mediation spaces focused on the agentivity of privileged people

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

In this last part, I will analyse examples from my own practice as a cultural mediator at Frac Lorraine. As discussed in the previous section, I will investigate how institutional spaces privilege certain bodies over others. I will question how mediators are witnesses and facilitators of these empowerments and how they can learn to better decipher them to potentially counter them.

When I began to reflect on specific moments in which passivity had played a key role in my practice, I first remembered moments when visitors refused to participate. Refusing to participate does not equate to passivity; on the contrary, it can be voluntary. I will demonstrate how analysing these refusals can lead to considering how the opportunity to refuse to participate is given to some rather than others in specific situations.

Megan Boler argues that there are many ways and reasons to reject education. For example, it can be a form of resistance if the curriculum is racist and/or sexist. Rejection can also be motivated by a desire to remain in a comfort zone.⁴⁶ Both types of rejection are supported by what can be called, after Boler, politicised emotions.⁴⁷ The first example I will analyse occurred in 2017 at the Frac Lorraine. During the first part (20 minutes) of a workshop that accompanied an exhibition, the participants had to decide how to collectively accomplish a simple task that had to be done in the last 10 seconds of the collective reflection. I often suggested, for example, that they create the shape of a tree on the wall from sticky papers available. The second part (20 minutes) consisted of a discussion on the unfolding of the first part of the workshop. At the beginning of one of the workshops, a white teenager stepped aside from the group of about 20 people, making it clear that he would not participate in the activity.

⁴⁶ BOLER Megan, *Feeling power: emotions and education*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

A teenage girl, also white, went to talk to him several times, each time reporting what he had said to the rest of the group. In the second part of the workshop, she shared her distress at the teenager's perceived anti-social attitude. In this group, and in all the groups I have done this workshop with, many participants did not speak. But the silent postures were not perceived by the female teenager as anti-social. I will never know why the teenager refused to participate. Nevertheless, refusal appeared to him as a viable position; he probably felt the possibility of having his action read as dissident (and not pathological, for instance). The female teenager validated his position when she tried to convince him to join the group. She showed that she felt he had made a choice (it was not that he could not participate). By expressing her dismay, she demonstrated that the teenager's participation mattered, at least to her. Gendered emotions drove the teenagers' actions. While I suspended some of my authority as a cultural mediator by letting the participants decide how to conduct the workshop, the female teenager inherited the responsibility of holding the group together and encouraging participation. This task, which usually falls to the educators, was implicitly transferred to her. Politicised emotions can be analysed for the social meanings they contain. Learning to read them allows mediators to understand how a space empowers certain bodies in certain ways.

Another example, which also occurred at the Frac Lorraine, confirms the place given to certain refusals rather than others. In 2018, I conducted workshops with a group of students. One of the workshops dealt with an artwork by Annette Messenger; sexist proverbs embroidered on pieces of fabric.⁴⁸ One student remained silent throughout the workshop. In an essay written as part of his course, he wrote that he

⁴⁸ Annette Messenger, *Ma collection de proverbes* [My collection of proverbs], 1974. 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine Collection.

had decided to remain silent because, as a man, he wanted to let the women in the group speak.⁴⁹ As the male teenager mentioned above, the student had the opportunity, through his essay, to make his passivity understood as a choice, here as a sign of solidarity (and not of rebellion, like the teenager). The last workshop was on a work of art by Marcia Kure, a collage that questions, among other things, the identity of black women throughout history.⁵⁰ The same student decided not to remain silent as a white man for this last session.

In contrast, the women and teenage girls I perceived as black during other workshops I conducted for two years on Kure's artwork seemed to have fewer options for participation. Twice, women I perceived as black who were silent during a session stayed at the end to give me ideas that had not been shared in the discussion. The few times I saw a change was when the number of participants I perceived as white decreased. The situation would probably have been different if I had not been white. Participants I perceived as white sometimes turned to participants I perceived as from minoritised ethnic backgrounds as if they expected them to speak. Many authors highlighted how white people expect people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds to educate them while receiving their words with disbelief, violence or guilt.⁵¹

Curator Yesomi Umolu explains that although museums “have always been exclusionary, and for the privileged”, they see themselves as “spaces of care in service

⁴⁹ Boler analyses how self-disclosure (here, affirming being a male with privilege) can work to reassert oneself. She writes: “When we reconfigure the conversation to foreground the experiences of marginalized groups, those who have traditionally been at the center develop creative ways to reassert their centrality”. However, I aim not to accuse the young man who was well intended and trying to effect change through his actions. Individual behaviours are analysed for what they reveal of structural inequities. Cf. BOLER, *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Marcia Kure, *Ethnographica IV*, 2014. 49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine Collection. Images of the series are visible online: <<https://collection.fraclorraine.org/collection/print/873?lang=fr>>. Accessed in August 2022.

⁵¹ EDDO-LODGE Reni, *Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, pp. 6–10; HOOKS bell, *Teaching to Transgress*. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 1994, p. 44.

of civic society”.⁵² She argues that this is reinforced, as I demonstrated in the first part of the article, by the fact that public participation has been “reified” in the 21st century and by the “fiction of the emancipatory power of the cultural/art object”.⁵³ She writes that an important step now is to “acknowledge the limits of [museums’] knowing and caretaking”.⁵⁴ For Umolu, seeking to draw groups perceived as excluded into institutions unaware of their marginalising dynamics only compounds the violence.

The participants seem to be aware of the limits of their ability to understand, as mentioned by Umolu. The male student suggests he has less experiential knowledge than the female students when he decides to remain silent. The white participants show they know they are not well informed when they turn to participants they perceive as from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. However, they appear to be unaware of the limits of their ability to care as they place the burden of analysis and education on others. Genuine concern for others would involve recognising their potential discomfort, taking responsibility for one's education and recognising oneself as part of the problem and, thus, potentially part of the solution.

When cultural mediators fear that they will not succeed in engaging visitors, they place their own success at the centre of their practice. Conversely, providing the opportunity to participate in an unscripted way (e.g. in silence) can be a way to counteract the potential constraint of the educational scene. This article has aimed to change how participation is viewed by questioning the active-passive binary that structures it. I have shown what has led me to ask these questions in my practice. As I stated at the beginning of this article, research in practice is specific to my

⁵² UMOLU Yesomi, “On the limits of care and knowledge: 15 points museums must understand to dismantle structural injustice”, *Artnet*, 25 June 2020.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

professional and personal contexts. My research is bound to evolve when I encounter new mediation situations. Today, I approach the notion of participation in a broader way, inspired by the work of many researchers and practitioners on the notion of listening.⁵⁵ Kate Lacey, for instance, argues for a politics of listening that does not come out of a politics of voice in which one would pay attention to something said through words and discourse.⁵⁶ For Lacey, it is not only a question of finding one's voice but considering that such voicing is made possible by a space of listening that precedes it. The notion of listening is broadly understood here as a mode of attention that can be focused on words and silences, gestures, and attitudes.⁵⁷

Lacey emphasises the importance of recognising the work necessary for the emergence of a listening space. Listening requires a temporality based on a slow process. It is not enough to declare a place where listening can happen. It is necessary to be present over the long term and to listen patiently until mutual trust is established so that individuals can express themselves if they wish. Cultural mediators must then continue to listen so people can adjust their modes of expression repeatedly. Listening can be approached as a field in which cultural mediators pay attention to the diverse

⁵⁵ In cultural mediation, Janna Graham analyses how speaking voices are given more agentivity than listening practices in contemporary art. She places listening practices at the centre of her educational practice. Cf. GRAHAM, Janna, *Thinking with conditions: from public programming to radical pedagogy in and beyond contemporary art*, PhD thesis, Goldsmiths College University of London, 2017, pp. 117-118.

⁵⁶ Kate Lacey, 'The labour of listening in troubled times', *Ages of receivership: on generous listening*, Bâle : Institute Art Gender Nature HGK FHNW, 2022, <<https://dertank.ch/en/we-explore/podcast-promise-no-promises/>>. Accessed in February 2023.

⁵⁷ Many feminists have analysed the concept of silence. The practice of silencing is central to Fricker's examination in *Epistemic Injustice*. Even though she mostly focuses on "failure of credibility", in which the identity of the speaker makes their words not credible, Fricker also evokes "failure of reciprocity", a "radical communicative dysfunction" in which a hearer cannot even grasp that the speaker is speaking. She writes that for the words of a woman to be judged credible or not, they first must be heard as "more than noise". Cf. FRICKER, *Op. cit.*, pp. 140-41. Huey-li Li also analyses the importance of silence in education from a feminist perspective. Cf. LI, Huey-li, "Rethinking silencing silences", *Democratic dialogue in education: troubling speech, disturbing silence*, New York: P. Lang, 2004.

ways in which participants express themselves, but also to their capacities and willingness to receive. If the words do not resonate with the visitors, other modes of communication and/or sharing space must be found.

4. Conclusion

Even if the capacity of all people to interpret artworks must be affirmed, assuming equality of all moments in cultural mediation may lead to not questioning the mechanisms that empower some people rather than others. Positions perceived as passive can be rehabilitated if it is considered that those who do not participate possess a knowledge of institutional spaces and their mechanisms that escapes the workers in these places. However, this knowledge cannot be expressed as long as denial and guilt take the place that should be given to real listening. I have argued for reinvestment of the body through attention to emotions. Approaching participation as collective and sustained by politicised emotions allows for understanding educational moments as intimately felt and structured by broader power dynamics.

I have analysed forms of cultural mediation that explore modes of being deemed passive. Revaluing listening, for example, as well as welcoming silent presences, allows educators to value modes of relating that are attentive to others or the environment rather than to content. These pedagogies make room for more diverse emotional capacities (that are also socially shaped).

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