



# art in mediation

Recollections and Reflections  
from a Colloquium

artas**foundation**



«I have come to the personal conclusion  
that while all artists are not chess players,  
all chess players are artists.»

Marcel Duchamp

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in Regions of Conflict

Schweizer Stiftung für Kunst  
in Konfliktregionen

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*In June 2015, just after the colloquium «Art in Mediation», I came across a work by the American artist Brigham Baker, an installation with which he graduated from the Zurich University of the Arts: three closed glass boxes set up in a room, each divided into an upper and lower half, the two halves being connected by a blue, partly-worn sheet of paper. Fixed within each of the two halves was a special loudspeaker, sending most of its sound to the spaces inside the glass. From the outside I could hear only a hum. On a card I read: «Hive, 2015. Dyed newspapers, glass, excitors.» So the hum seemed to be the busy noise of insects. What struck me was the blue paper that lay between the spaces at the top and bottom. Why was it there? Why was it so frayed? What had been the process that had marked it with these traces and holes? Maybe it was because my mind was still busy with our colloquium, I immediately interpreted this work as having to do with peace-mediation.*

*Later I found what the artist had written about his work: «When beekeepers need to merge two separate beehives into one, a common technique is to place the two bee boxes on top of each other with only one single sheet of newspaper in between them. This barrier allows the two beehives to become familiar to each other's sound and smell, and over time, the bees will chew their way through the newspaper. The result is one single, combined hive. Without the newspaper, the two hives would likely attack each other.*

*For my work, international newspapers were dyed with blue food colouring diluted in «Bee Tea», a mixture of herbs... They were given to various beekeepers in Switzerland ... and were later collected again. Along with the holes are traces of nectar, pollen, and wax on the surface. They are placed in glass boxes, made to scale with*

*the bee boxes... The sounds are recordings from the separate beehives that were combined in the project».*

*Was the blue paper in the position of a mediator, trying to unite two parties that otherwise would fight? Or if not a person, being so worn, was the blue paper like the trace of a process of negotiation and convergence, a document of coming to an agreement? Or, rather than the mediation between two conflicting parties that we had talked about in our colloquium, was the blue paper our colloquium itself, the meeting not of opponents, but of two colonies, artists and peace-mediators, that were foreign to each other, even though both were of the same species? And the traces on the blue paper: were they a kind of recollection and reflection of their meeting?*

*And was the humming in the closed boxes like the secret exchanges of a diplomatic process, or like past conversations of a colloquium on art in mediation...?*

## **Art in Mediation**

Peace-mediation is a professional field in which mediators and their team assist in negotiations between conflicting parties in order to transform the conflict and find peaceful solutions. Their work may consist of facilitating the communication between the conflicting parties in order to enhance mutual understanding, but it may also include the role of structuring the dialogue process, bringing in special know-how, or providing substantive proposals or suggestions.

artasfoundation raises the question whether artistic ways of relating to the world – through art or artists – could contribute to such a search for peaceful conflict resolution and support the work of peace-mediators. A meeting between a group of artists and of mediators constituted a step in the exploration of this question.

*A colloquium* On the 29th of May 2015, fourteen persons met in the beautiful premises and warm hospitality of Villa Frontenex-Saladin in Geneva. Ambassador Alexandre Fasel, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the Office of the United Nations at Geneva, had invited them for an exchange on possible contributions of art to processes of peace-mediation, and on possible impulses for art from this field. With Dagmar Reichert from the Swiss foundation artasfoundation, who had organised the meeting, he shared the assumption that both these seemingly very separate fields had much in common and could strengthen each other through cooperation. The invitation was a trial run, a first attempt of this kind.

Several people were willing to join the experiment and found the time to participate: Jean-Daniel Biéler, Cynthia Cohen, Enrico



Formica, Antje Herrberg, Michelle LeBaron, Eran Schaerf, Dorothea Schürch, Marcel Schwald, Matthias Siegfried, and Alain Sigg. Sébastien Brack and Nicole Fasel-Rossier joined the group in the evening, Andrea Aeby and Andrea Saemann took the role of special rapporteurs (See page 20 for institutional backgrounds).

It was important for the organisers to avoid role stereotypes and the trap of false representation (being seen as a representative of a collective or category while speaking as a person). Therefore the colloquium did not start with «the artists» vs. «the mediators», but with two freely mixed working groups for telling each other about one's current activities and the difficulties one meets therein. As the groups began their engaged and stimulating exchanges, the participants also tried to formulate implicit principles and guide-lines of their respective practices. When excerpts of these conversations were reported later to the other group, there was quick agreement on the fact that «artists and mediators should really work together». Then a second round of small-group work focused on the question of how to practically begin and structure such a collaboration. Collecting these thoughts and ideas in a final plenum, the participants of the colloquium formulated some proposals for concrete artist-mediator collaborations.

Even though many participants had not known each other before, the atmosphere of the meeting was very amicable and stimulating. Alexandre Fasel captured it when he formulated his thanks to the participants: «I would like to express my warm thanks for your valuable contributions to the colloquium. It is my feeling that the quality and fluidity of contacts between the participants, as well as the interest you expressed towards one another and

towards each other's experience, went beyond the usual sharing. The discussions were nourished by your human qualities and high-level of expertise. As a person coming from the mediation side, what particularly struck me was the level of curiosity and the quality of listening on behalf of the artists, their sharp insights and the degree of precision with which they described what they were doing. It is my impression that, as a result of the discussions, we are beginning to depict what the ground for collaboration between art and mediation might look like – that it grasped «something» that could grow.»

In order to support such growth and the next steps in a collaboration of artists and peace-mediators, this booklet recollects some of the thoughts and ideas of this initial encounter. It was produced with significant help from Andrea Aeby and Andrea Saemann, but the responsibility for selecting and ordering all the notes and quotations remains with the author.

## Recollections of the exchange between of artists and mediators

Dagmar Reichert

Meeting in blind spots?

Explaining practices and challenges of one's work to interested outsiders – in this case, people active in the field of peace-mediation explaining their work to artists – old questions and new options may emerge within established routines.

What, for example, is the role of language in a mediation process? Is it language itself that is mediating between conflicting parties? And if so, is language mediating in a different way than mediators do? Language certainly has its built-in biases and values. And – as someone in the colloquium remarked – the language that is used in negotiation processes usually has the conflict built into it (for example, the familiar dilemma of how to challenge discrimination by racial or religious distinction without using and reinforcing these very categories). Do mediators have to be less biased than language? But, as one mediator described one of the difficulties of this work: «In reality it is often pretty clear from the outset what can count as a result of the talks, and what the result should be».

So back to language: What is the language of mediation? Communicating in English, French or Spanish seems to be common, whereas the information contained in glances, body movements and facial expressions, in the rhythm and tone of voice, while still considered significant, seems to be difficult to capture (These are communication channels some artists are familiar with.).

Still in the realm of mediation in the language of words and sentences: what happens in the transition between spoken and written words, the written words of a treaty? Is this transition the crucial move in a mediator's craft? Is it a move of pinning down







or one of a series of tangential contacts? Interesting here is, not how to conceal unresolved issues in vague formulas, but how to find words that capture the agreement in a precise and correct way, while leaving a breathing space for the valuable potential of an unforeseeable future. And how to convey in the paragraphs of a legal contract the spirit of trust and good will (however minimal) that the parties were able to build up in their meetings? Here, someone in the colloquium pointed to the stylistic differences between a contract's preamble and its operational paragraphs; a joint effort, perhaps, of poets and lawyers.

What is the significance of the table in mediated negotiations? Most of them seem to take place, if not at the beginning, then as soon as possible, around a table. For practical reasons, but also as a common level of height, a table may function as an important symbol. No wonder it is often so difficult to «bring them to the table», to convince conflicting parties to meet on an equal basis, on one level of humanity in spite of all the differences in power, deeds or intentions. But if the table can be seen as an embodiment of the idea of mediation, would the carpet not be even more appropriate for this idea – and actually for the praxis? Even when coming from other cultures, many representatives of opposing parties will be familiar with western lifestyles, and so sitting around a table may not be unusual for them. But why fix positions, viewpoints and distances when their transformation is what it is all about? One of the participants in the colloquium was very familiar with the potential of dance and asked: what does the convention of sitting around a table really allow, and what does it hinder or exclude?

Another theme is secrecy: it seems to be a basic element of the practice of mediators. Does it delineate a special, experimental

space in which negotiating parties can say and try things out before they become «real» in the eyes and ears of their constituencies or opponents? True enough, it seems, and this framing is also not foreign to artists, given the edge of the stage or border of the image that is required for their art. In the discussion with them, some mediators questioned their own convention of secrecy: they said that if a public could hear and watch their talks it would be more difficult to hide a political agenda, the agenda of a negotiating party or of other parties who might be involved. The experimental space of art and combines both qualities, being distanced from everyday life liabilities through a frame, and being public. Could artists lend this space to others?

Reasons to cooperate

Some blind spots in the routines of the guild of peace-mediators may become visible in the conversation with artists and – this was not elaborated here – one would equally hope that such exchanges could enable people from the art world to see limiting conventions and alternatives in their own practices. But did the colloquium bring up other reasons for a possible integration of artists in mediation processes?

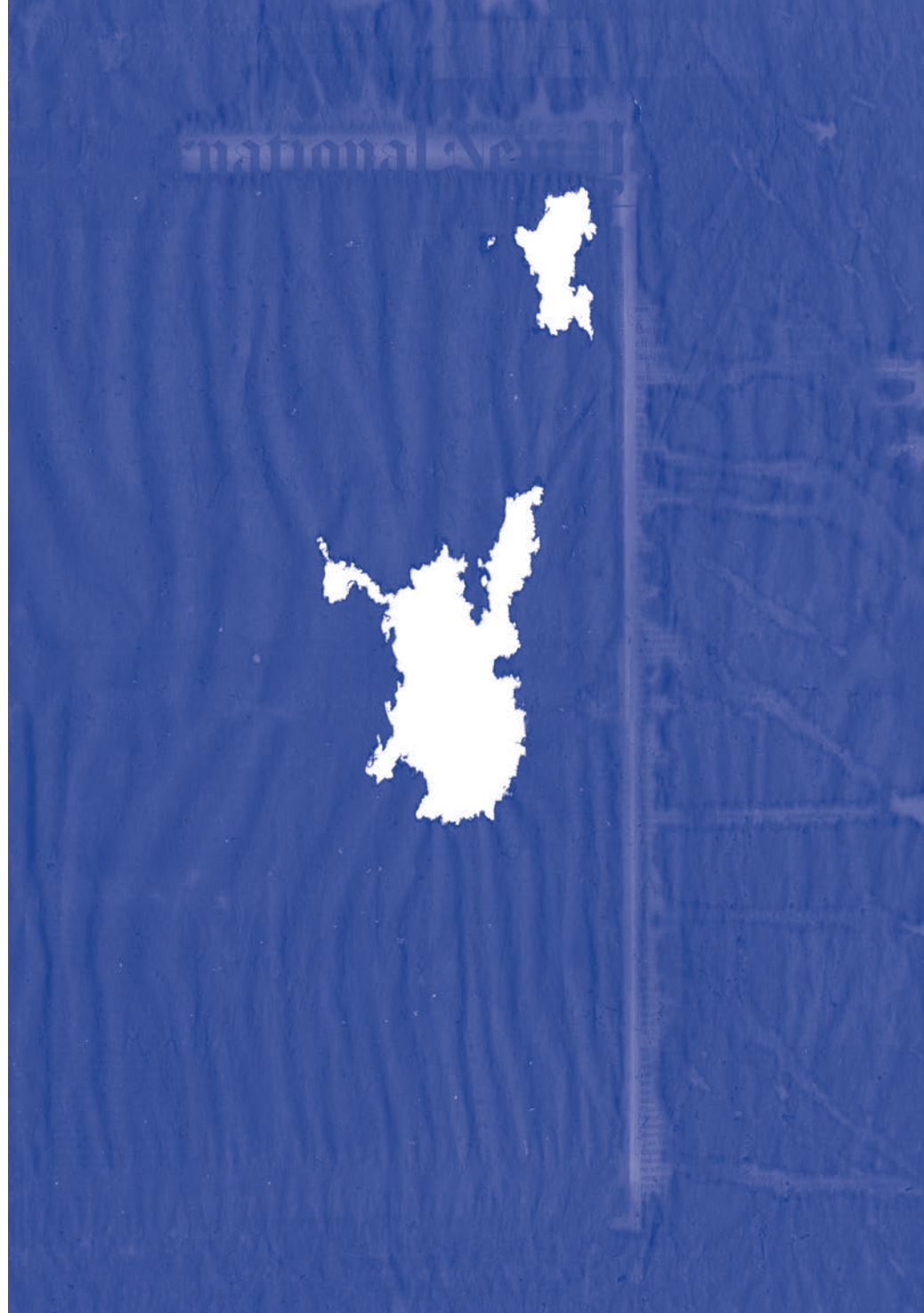
«We might be victims of our own success», one of the mediators said; «with increasing professionalization certain methods have become established, expectations have been formed, and our ways of proceeding feel often quite narrow». Here, art-based approaches can create new openings, but, as someone else said, they need not necessarily come from artists. There are mediators who just practice learned skills, but there are others who can rely on experience to follow their inspiration and who work in a way that could be called artistic. So if a license to creativity would be all that artists could bring in, it would not be so special. What

rather could be needed are special art-related competences to extend the existing methodological repertoire.

One of the colloquium's participants named situations in which such a broadening of the repertoire for peace making is asked for: often a crucial challenge in a mediation process is whether one manages to «unlock the egos». Bringing people from a mode of fighting and distrust to an openness in which they can see others as potential partners, and unlocking fixed views and positions towards possible transformation. Such turning points often become possible through occurrences outside of the negotiation room. The case of adversaries who, at the dinner table and after some drinking, ended up singing songs they both remembered from their Communist youth camps, is just one of many anecdotes about successful confidence building that mediators can recollect. Leaving a sphere in which the pressure is high, and meeting in another realm, a realm in which right or wrong is not at issue, in which one may differ in taste or not... this is the sphere that art could offer – even within a negotiation room. One mediator gave the example of inviting the participants around the table to describe a present stalemate by choosing a photograph from a series that was offered, and to comment on this choice. Here, for example, the visual artist's competence in working with pictures, their way of providing images that counter (media-) stereotypes, but invite reactions and leave space for a variety of interpretations, might support such an innovative method.

Moments of art

Some of the challenges for peace-mediation in armed conflicts may stem from the difficulty of resolving deep conflicts using the repertoire of established methodological tools, which, as one participant of the colloquium explained, would



involve legal argumentation and a very specific rationality. This person pointed to the challenge that there is a lot at stake in such negotiations and that the pressure is often very high. Mediation would be a political process that would follow political demands and might be of another nature than activities in which personal or momentary needs matter instead. In this, the speaker saw a significant difference with the practice of artists, who could freely define new rules and change these rules as part of their work process. Another participant of the colloquium shared this view, but added: «Even under the conditions of high pressure that we face when mediating in an armed conflict, and even when certain rules have to be clearly set and accepted from the outset, there are many rules that have to change and many fixed ideas that have to be transformed. For such transformations we may need moments of art».

The notion of «moments of art» might be a useful one. It describes situations in which new experiences or impressions can dissolve given concepts and re-form them. Even if artists may be more used to letting such situations occur, the notion of «moments of art» might overcome a strict distinction between artists and non-artists. It could describe moments of another type of rationality, which can be found in the work of artists and mediators alike. In the colloquium, the author of the present text made a short presentation in which she described some characteristics of this other type of rationality, a so-called aesthetic one.

The notion of aesthetic rationality comes from the philosophy of art and describes a special way of relating to the world, to one's surroundings. As in the practice of mediators, who want to serve their parties by being «good listeners», it is a way of stepping back from intending something specific, and rather focusing on what

one perceives: noticing – while trying to grasp what it is about – all the irritations and contradictions that make it difficult to capture what is meant; treating these irritations and contradictions not as something to be quickly gotten rid of, but as motors for change, and using one's authority to welcome them; upholding with one's personality a safe space for uncertainty, and trying to «put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words». Maybe this way of proceeding through an aesthetic rationality can explain what is meant by «moments of art».

Cultivating moments of art

Even if an opportunity for moments of art may already appear in processes of peace-mediation, and even if such moments can be created by mediators themselves, artists could support their cultivation. Thus one of the colloquium's working groups came up with a list of hypotheses as to where and how artists, or their art, might usefully be introduced. Some of these points were later taken up in the discussion of the entire group and further explained:

*Art for atmosphere:* The presence of artworks or a live art performance could create an atmosphere in a meeting room. Forms of art that are particularly respected in the cultures of the negotiating parties (e.g. poetry, calligraphy) would be especially relevant.

*Artists as muses of mediators:* artists could be invited as conversation-partners for mediators when they are preparing or reflecting the process. They would not be present at the actual negotiations, but might add questions or observations from their own professional perspective. They might encourage and consult mediators who want to try new methods and work with wider forms of expression.

*Artists mirroring the process:* artists could be part of the mediation support team and be present in the conference room. In the team



meeting at the end of the day, they could mirror the negotiation process from the perspective of an engaged outsider. An example for the potential of distancing things through their mirroring was given by a conference participant: a political conversation had been recorded and transcribed for a theatre production, and when it was read by some actors, it was heard in a very different way.

*Just art:* artists of trust could be invited to present a work or to perform at certain moments during negotiations. The timing would be important, but mediators would not connect a specific, a-priori intention with the art intervention. They would treat it instead as a punctuation that could permit shifts for a new start. *Artists as witnesses:* with the explicit agreement of the negotiating parties, artists could be invited to witness the talks. They could be free to just be present and remain silent (possibly having an effect as a source of projections), or they could later offer, through art, their impression of the conversation. Such a response could be spontaneous and improvised (music, dance), or created outside and brought back in later (if so, it must not be made public without the mediator's consent).

*Artists as a bridge:* based on the assumption that artists may have a different, possibly closer relationship to «the people», they could serve as a bridge between them and their official representatives in the negotiation room. In this, they could strengthen other members of civil society who may take part, and support their arguments through presentations in other media or formats (storytelling, video... ).

*The artist is present:* this is the possibility of a trial run, the invitation of an artist into a mediation-support team or a negotiation process with the principal aim of finding out – for both sides, artists as well as mediators – what a meaningful contribution of an artist

could be. An actual art intervention would not be necessary, but not excluded either.

It was particularly the last option that the participants of the colloquium, and especially the artists, saw as a useful and concrete first step. They expressed a strong interest in learning more about the practice of mediation, perhaps first as observers of a training workshop for mediators, before having to meet specific expectations. What was also important to them – be it in a mirroring function, as witness or conversation partner – to come up with a meaningful contribution, the collaboration should be planned as a continuous process, not just as a one-time visit. Now the next step is to start planning this concretely.

Participants in the colloquium:

**Jean-Daniel Biéler** Swiss diplomat, ambassador and mediator, Geneva

**Cynthia Cohen** Program-director «Peacebuilding and the Arts», Brandeis University, USA

**Alexandre Fasel** Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the UNOG, Geneva

**Enrico Formica** Senior Political Affairs Officer for Mediation, UNOG, Geneva

**Antje Herrberg** Mediator, CEO of mediatEUr, Brussels, Belgium

**Michelle LeBaron** Professor at Allard School of Law, Vancouver, Canada

**Dagmar Reichert** Executive director of artasfoundation, Switzerland

**Eran Schaerf** Artist (visual arts), professor at the Zurich University of the Arts

**Dorothea Schürch** Artist (music, performance art), professor at the Bern University of the Arts

**Marcel Schwald** Theatre director, performer, dramatic advisor, Basel, Switzerland

**Matthias Siegfried** Mediation advisor, Head of the swisspeace Mediation Program

**Alain Sigg** Consultant, mediator, member of the Swiss Expert Pool for Peace Building

The rapporteurs:

**Andrea Aeby** Counselor at the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UNOG, Geneva

**Andrea Saemann** Artist (performance art) and artistic director, Basel

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Sergio Romano

Nella Turchia sudorientale, in una zona abitata prevalentemente da curdi, vi è una delle più belle città del Medio Oriente. È Maritzi, una metropoli eremica dall'Unesco per la straordinaria varietà della sua architettura religiosa: chiese, monasteri, moschee, sinagoghe, castelli medievali. Oggi la sua popolazione è in grande maggioranza musulmana, ma nel 1995, quando fu teatro degli avvenimenti