

Why Don't I Understand Art?

Origin And Current State Of Artistic Education

¿Por qué no entiendo nada de arte?
Origen y estado actual de la educación artística

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Education is linked to the museum institution, when public interest begins to become a reality. From the timid first attempts to bring culture closer to the world, through an embryonic stage, with the creation of the first departments of education in museums, art education reaches the age of majority in our days, when it has the ability to generate self-criticism. However, there are many barriers that this discipline finds on the path to maturity and professionalism, in the hands of professionals, institutions and users, is the future of artistic education.

La educación se vincula a la institución museo cuando el interés por los públicos comienza a ser una realidad. Desde los tímidos primeros intentos por acercar la cultura a todo el mundo, pasando por una etapa embrionaria con la creación de los primeros departamentos de educación en los museos, la educación artística alcanza la mayoría de edad en nuestros días, cuando tiene la capacidad de generar autocrítica. Sin embargo, son muchas las barreras que esta disciplina encuentra en el camino hacia su madurez y profesionalización. En manos de profesionales, instituciones y usuarios, se encuentra el futuro de la educación artística.

Key words

Mediation, museum, history, art,
education, culture

Palabras clave

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Mediation has hardly begun to write its history. Despite this, there are innumerable attempts to understand a discipline that is historically associated to the analysis of museum public and shall be one of the areas which generate more debate in museography dedicated to learning processes.

The history of mediation is as old as the museum institution itself. But, what are the origins of this relationship? In the first museums that were formed through the great private collections, the *Wunderkammer*¹, we can state that this relationship -understood as a dialogue between two parties with a common purpose - it was practically non-existent. At the end of the 18th Century, the museums rose as sites of knowledge, spaces that held works which define a time and that are thus given to exciting dialogue. However, this is a totally contemporary point of view, at that time they were still understood to be strange places, limited to a few privileged people, whose existence was foreign to most of the population, who often did not even know the museum itself existed.

It must be considered that the first collections stemmed from an exercise of accumulation, often close to the *horror vacui* observed in some of the engravings of the time. There is an important relationship between power and collectionism. The final intention of these first exhibits was more to show off the wealth accumulated by a patron or collector, an exercise of prestige to impress society, that had nothing to do with the work of research and diffusion that little by little the museums incorporated.

Everything evolves; so did the museums. When the collections consolidated their work on as conservators, a new interest arises for the public view. A view which had been indifferent in previous times,

but that begins to be important -specially- from the opening of the first great museum of the 19th Century, the Louvre. It is in the era that we can call post-Louvre when the people in charge of the institution begin to notice that in view of the possession of such a vast amount and quality of artistic material, new possibilities had to be traced to communicate the collection. The doors of the museum could not continue closed to the general public.

This is a brief, very brief, history of the beginning of the mediation. Brief because it is a declaration of intentions, and brief because it is also a point of departure which helps us trace the present and better understand how the educational departments of the museums work.

We have returned to the 19th Century seeking the origins of the relationship between the museum and the public. Now we are ready to jump forward in time and advance to the 20th Century. Until that time, the situation of the museums and their interest for connecting with the public was kept on a low flame. Museums become consolidated as a public institution which offers services, attending to the needs of culture and communicating contents and purpose. In this growth, special attention is paid to the new museum perspectives, among which we highlight the educational facet.

Below we will focus on the case of Spain, when in the mid 1970s, following the currents of the so called pedagogical renovation, a great number of teachers - we can almost speak exclusively of women in this profession - interested in the new liberating methodologies decided that the museum also, as a self-defined site of knowledge and divulgation, was susceptible of becoming a place for reflection and learning for their students.

It must be considered that the later phase of the Franco dictatorship favoured some movements that defended teaching freedom from the educational system itself, and these convinced many teachers.

1. Castán, Alberto. *Las «Cámaras de Maravilla», pervivencia estética y museográfica del concepto*. (Chambers of Wonder, Aesthetic Survival and Museography of the Concept) <<https://ifcdpz.es/recursos/publicaciones/35/21/16castansagaste.pdf>>

These were teachers that had survived the hard times of the dictatorship in which they suffered the sadly known ideological purges² the regime imposed on divergent and progressist professors.

Thinking of the museum as a space for learning meant a breath of fresh air for many teachers who came to the museum halls with the aim to experiment something new. Despite still lacking a structured system capable of giving them clues about how they could approach the world of the museums with their students, they were certain that the relationship between the students and the museum was going to be very positive for their growth. They were right.

The museum and the teachers

So we find ourselves before the scene of incipient interest of a new generation of teachers toward the institution of the museum. This interest will define, to a certain extent, the creation of the profession of mediator in Spain.

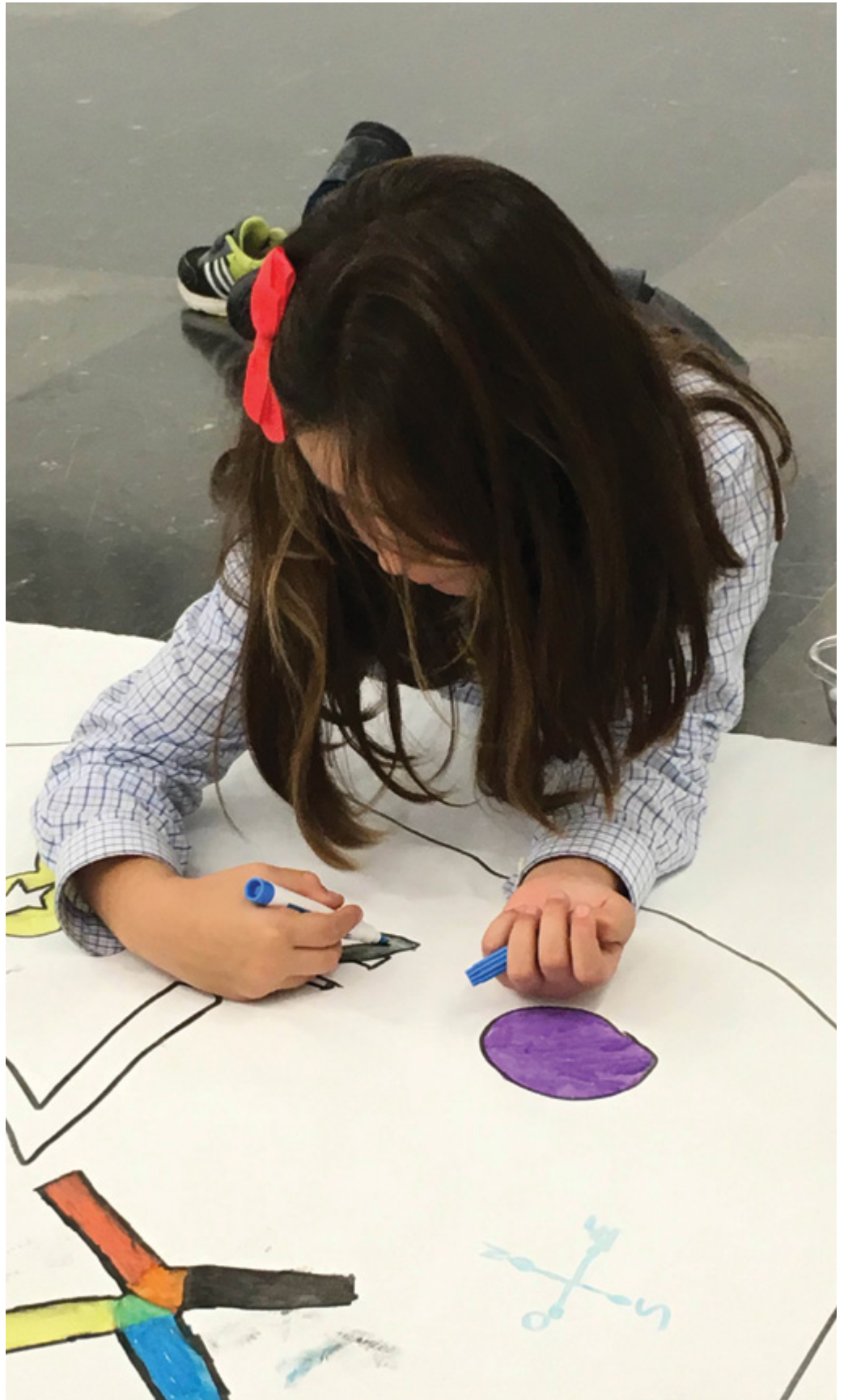
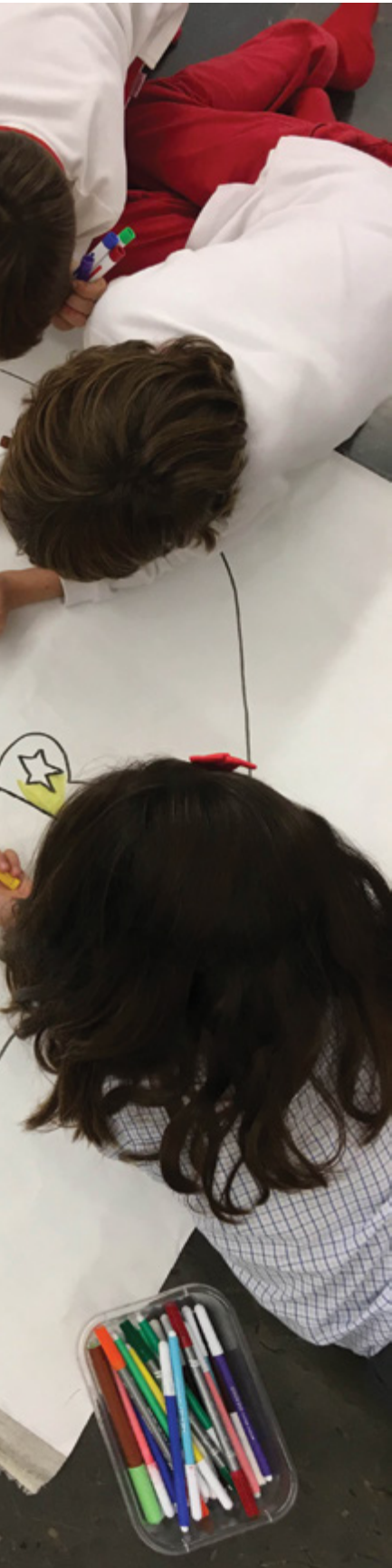
It can be understood that these first visits were precarious experiments of willing teachers who had scant or no artistic training -speaking of art museums, of course- who tried to explain what the museum was, as best as they could but with few resources. In that way on occasions their teaching was limited or presented notable deficiencies. They approached the museum with the tools they knew in their profession, that is, the methodology that worked in the classroom. They looked for contents that could be related to the school syllabus and that could also be attractive to the pupils, much better disposed to the educational experience in a new setting, which was in itself different.

However, these anonymous educators, in their great majority, took a fundamental step towards making a need known. We can affirm that it is a profession that grows out of an actual demand in the mid 1970s. At first sight it can seem an impulse, sufficiently attractive for a profession to develop in a satisfactory manner, with professionals and having the recognition of their workers. But the evolution of the work of the art educator has not been so simple.

Currently it is still complex, in some cases even to marginality, for many education professionals in museums and other cultural institutions. Something that unfortunately happens more often than it should, is that the very art centre looks down on

2. de Pablo, Carlos. *La depuración de la educación española durante el franquismo (1936-1975). Institucionalización de una represión.* (Depuration of Spanish Education during the Franco regime (1936-1975)) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20140714210745/http://www.forodeeducacion.com/numero9/013.pdf>>





the educators. They are regarded as dispensable, whose function is never equal to that of the rest of the museum professionals. This, for starts, serves to illustrate a precariousness that has changed little from its origin to the present.

The words of Fernando Hernández -key figure in the development of art education from the visual culture-, reinforce this idea in comparison with other possible scenarios and more favourable to a communion between education and culture. "In this I profoundly envy the anglosaxon people: when they discuss a project, they all sit down together - the director, the commissary, the artist, the educator, etc - as equals."³

Therefore, summarising the history, there is an actual demand on the part of school children and teachers. From the 1980s, the activities that developed in these incipient educational projects centred almost exclusively in the transmission of the contents of the museum collection as a primary source for study -I would dare to say that in some contemporary museums this is still the normal practice-. The art object was considered as a cultural product susceptible to formal and historical analysis.

If we pay attention to this fact we can understand it as a logical process that, the first educators who worked in museum were the teachers. Of their own volition, some of them decided to devote half of their working day to this task. Others, fascinated by the possibilities of this incipient profession, dove into a new world, contributing, defining and generating contents from their own praxis, even to the point of abandoning regular teaching. Others entered these fragile jobs with the aim of developing within the institution and climbing toward positions of greater responsibility in the museum such as that of curator.

The job gap in art education

Although they were just a few, it is true that through internships, voluntary work and other professionals which were "affordable" to the museum, the first departments of education and cultural action, DEAC, began to flourish in Spanish museums. In this first decade of their existence, new formats with the goal of bringing public to the collections were experimented; unfortunately we do not count with much documentation of this process of training educators.

However, this directs our attention to another of the pending areas in the profession. Historically, few resources have been devoted to research in the field of education in museums. This fixed fact has not prevented that from the end of the 1990s, mediation has experimented a notable advance, which favours the possibility of expansion of new ideas and consideration about this discipline. The first efforts made towards defining the profession of mediator remain blurred. The job gap around the professionalisation of art education is still open. The struggle to defend common objectives continues being a current matter.

Another one of the main problems of art education, is the precarious labour condition of its workers. Unfortunately it is still one of the most important items in any meeting or congress on the matter.⁴

Regarding this matter, it is adequate to refer to the opinion expressed by María Acaso -one of the most relevant figures for the renovation of art education on a national level- about one of the questions posed to her during an interview for the platform Art Educators Talk on the relationship existing between art and education.

"The modernistic legacy, which perpetuates the idea of art as an object and of the artist as a genius has created a social image in which education and art are areas of knowledge, different and very distant from each other. While one area is socially recognised and praised, the educational area, and the educators, are socially discredited and linked to notions such as child-related, services, and poorly understood expression and creativity"⁵

The insecurity which the profession suffers responds to several factors and it varies depending on the time we analyse. When the DEAC began to be established in the museums, all was yet to be defined and the steps taken, although firm, were slow. From the year 2010 privatisation comes to the scene and caused havoc in the professionalisation of the mediation. The proliferation of big service companies which include didactic workshops in their offer, just as they tender maintenance service has come to break a market which was already precarious. They offer projects at very low prices and salaries bordering on the negligible which guarantees that most of the proposals of this type are not notable for their quality. This is why this type of offer will

3. HERNÁNDEZ, F. *El giro educativo en el Estado español*. (Change in Education in Spain) Round table headed by Carles Guerra with participation of Imanol Aguirre, Fernando Hernández, Carla Padró, Claudio Zulián and Sitesize (Elvira Pujol and Joan Vila-Puig). MACBA, 16 September 2010

4. Vozmediano, Elena. *Obra y servicio. El empleo cultural*. (Work and Service. Cultural employment) 2015. <http://www.elcultural.com/blogs/y-tu-que-lo-veas/2015/03/obra-y-servicio-el-empleo-cultural/>

5. Acaso, María. *María Acaso - La mediación es todo (Mediation is everything)*. 2015. <https://arteducatorstalk.net/es/?interview=maria-acaso>

never be equal to those that an educational project born from the core of the museum, in contact with the other professionals of the institution, under an exhaustive analysis and the intention of permanence and adaptability to the needs of each centre.

Little progress is made by outsourcing ideas and maintaining this eternal sensation of internship that the professionals of art education usually have. In relation to this, I recommend reading the two articles Elena Vozmediano published in *El Cultural* "Obra y Servicio. El empleo cultural, parts I and II"⁶

Museography Vs. Didactics

We have come far in the definition of the profile of the professional artistic educator, which has helped to raise awareness within the institutions on the importance of mediating between the public and the contents. However, it seems to be insufficient. When analysing the facts of DEAC, we continue to observe that its situation is always more precarious than the rest of the departments of the museum. This sad inheritance remains, which contrasts with the recommendations of the main manuals of museology that urge including the people in charge of the educational program of the centre in the process of designing the exhibition. It seems a paradox that the people in charge of the exhibitions do not follow these recommendations, despite all. From a simply statistical stance, the educators are probably the museum workers that spend more time in contact with the public. Whether school children -that visit the centres, a minimum of two groups of some 25 people per day- or the general public -who vary in number depending on the type of institution we are referring to.

Focusing on the Spanish case, we can say that each step that has been taken from the 1960s to date -2017- has served to define the profession of art educator. However, the main demands continue being the same. This panorama brings forth a simple question that has a difficult answer: What has happened for us to have reached this situation, and worse yet, have it last?

This question has a complex answer. Even thus, we can affirm this is due to a number of conditionings which must be considered. The lack of professionalisation and scientific character of the sector means that the work of the mediator has grown in precarious conditions. There is not a collective labour agreement that recognises a

number of tasks and represents some minimum labour rights. Currently, professional mediators are obliged to adhere to a single labour agreement⁷ that exists with a number of contents that adjust to some practices. In any case, closer to leisure time than to the research and reflection which entails the work of the mediator, as can be gathered from the words of Pablo Martínez - in charge of the educational area of the CA2M -, "If the subcontracted companies do not dialogue with the management and the curating team and there is no broad intellectual project that considers education globally, further than the specific activities they can develop, I think these can not be understood fully as educational activities but rather as leisure activities to be developed in a play centre or a mall. They are not more than simulation of education"⁸

On the other hand, the lack of cohesion among the professionals of education in museums has done nothing to improve the situation. This factor has been accelerated by the outsourcing of educational services. And it is precisely the lack of opportunities that exist which generate a lack of trust and union. In a system with these characteristics, competitiveness is voracious.

The support to the development of the DEAC on the part of the museums, except on numbered occasions has been rather scarce. Limited resources have been destined to the development of this profession from the institution itself. This means educators overwhelmed by their daily praxis, with no time to devote to research. Along the years, different interesting proposals have developed within pedagogical renovation, which despite the difficulties encountered, bet on generating new ways of seeing. Many of these projects took place in the last decades of the 20th Century, but unfortunately were forgotten. They were not compiled, analysed nor processed as it would have happened in any other discipline if the museum would consider it scientific, as is conservation. Fernando Hernández underscores: "to produce action is not the same as to produce relation"⁹

The museums depend on local and state institutions. These demand meeting a number of

6. Vozmediano, Elena. *Obra y servicio. El empleo cultural. (Work and Service. Cultural Employment)* 2015. <http://www.elcultural.com/blogs/y-tu-que-lo-veas/2015/03/obra-y-servicio-el-empleo-cultural/>

7. Convenio colectivo del sector ocio educativo y animación sociocultural. 2015. (Labour agreement of the Educational Leisure and Socio-cultural Animation sector) <<https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2015/07/15/pdfs/BOE-A-2015-7946.pdf>>

8. Vozmediano, Elena. *Obra y servicio. El empleo cultural. (Work and Service. Cultural Employment)* 2015. <http://www.elcultural.com/blogs/y-tu-que-lo-veas/2015/03/obra-y-servicio-el-empleo-cultural/>

9. Hernández, F. *El giro educativo en el Estado español. (Change in Education in Spain)* Round table headed by Carles Guerra with participation of Imanol Aguirre, Fernando Hernández, Carla Padró, Claudio Zullán and Sitesize (Elvira Pujol and Joan Vila-Puig). MACBA, 16 September 2010

quantitative minimums, public attendance, impact on media and social networks... however there are few occasions in which the data evaluated respond to qualitative indicators.

The tyranny of quantity hogs the spot lights, leaving qualitative values in the dark. These are more difficult to evaluate, more subtle, but they also can contribute richer contents for the consolidation of the profession. This direct dependence on numbers is systematically manifest in different sources. It is at least curious that when it comes to evaluating, the only data that is requested is quantitative, while nothing is mentioned of development of the didactic activity itself in qualitative levels.

Unfortunately, such very brief analysis understands the consideration of the public as a given amount, a percentage, and not as an experience that can be evaluated in a qualitative way. Many indicators that could enrich and consolidate the museum educational projects are left out of the spectrum. Although no definite conclusion has been reached with this review of the perspective of artistic education, it is convenient to finish with a reflection.

Education is the supporting axis that goes through all these significant disciplines. Everything can be learned. It is possible to learn everything. If there is a discipline which is capable of generating permanent changes in our society in the long run, it is education. If we extend this in respect to a profession capable of changing education, in the area we are dealing with, museums, we can understand the importance in its development. Looking back, we can conclude that the fragility of museum education has been constant, but, had it not been so, what would museums offer us today?

I remember the first time I visited an exhibition. I wonder how many children remember this unique moment when they become teenagers. How many of them will be able to remember what they felt, what they thought, and if someone accompanied them in this process. All these moments are fundamental in a child's process of socialisation and learning, because it is true that art is also a tool that builds the community and that invites us to consider a number of abstract contents.

If the institutions bet on generating quality instead of quantity, supporting education as one of the fundamental pillars of the structure of a museum is recommendable. Today, if we support firm educational projects, consolidated in the centres through processes of transparency, and with the same conditions given to their fellow professionals in the museums, the changes will be visible in a few years.

In betting for education today, we are working for culture tomorrow.





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Isabel Puig terminó su formación académica en 2012 y desde entonces ha trabajado de manera ininterrumpida en múltiples proyectos siempre vinculados al arte, la educación y la gestión cultural. Encuentra gran motivación en trabajar en torno a aquello que aún no existe, como muestra de ello, su labor en la fundación de la asociación valenciana de educadores de museos AVALEM o la creación de la empresa de gestión cultural y proyectos educativos Mediant.