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Transformation of Museum Communication through Art Mediation: The Case of the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

Current museum studies have attracted research attention to changes in communication between museums and viewers, which is increasingly acquiring a hierarchical character. A notable example of such transformation in Russia was an art mediation project realized under the auspices of the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art. This article is focused on the experience of art mediation excursions at the 4th Biennial, which took place in the fall of 2017 in the city of Yekaterinburg. Mediation is considered as a set of methods that allow the traditional viewer to be transformed into a certain form of involved audience. A new view on the museum audience is presented from the standpoint of current international and Russian museology. It is shown that the institution of Russian contemporary art is currently experiencing a surge of interest. Aims and objectives of the art mediation project carried out during 4th Biennial are analyzed. Visitor practices during art mediation are reconstructed using both quantitative data (self-assessment after excursion) and qualitative data (17 in-depth interviews with mediators) collected during field research at the 4th Biennial. Three ways of visitors' participation in mediation are revealed. The author suggests that the visitor's influence on the experience of the mediator should be considered as the most significant evidence of changes in museum communication.

KEYWORDS

art mediation, museum communication, Ural Industrial Biennial, viewers, involved audience

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Art Mediation and Changes in Visitor-Museum Communication

Art mediation is a new museum practice, which evolved in the last decades of the twentieth century and is now actively developing (Camara et al., 2014; Violett, 2014; Malikova, 2015). The notion “mediation” comes from French museum practice, where a broader concept “*la médiation culturelle*”¹ is used (Caillet, 1995; Liot, 2010; Lafortune, 2012). According to the *Guidelines for Museum Mediators*, mediation is “a process in which the central figure is the visitor according to a constructivist approach, based on the knowledge of the different kinds of visitors, of learning styles, of interpretative communities” (Camara et al., 2014, p. 8). It applies to different types of museums such as historical, ethnological, technical, fine arts, and so on. The term “art mediation” refers to a set of mediation methods applied in visual arts².

This article explores art mediation as a phenomenon illustrating transformations in museum communication. Such transformations are aimed at changing the relationship between the viewer and the institution with the purpose of reducing the distance between them. Specialists in the field of museology are seeking answers to various questions, such as whether art mediation is capable of shortening this distance or what methods of interaction this form can offer to the viewer.

In general, there is a perceivable lack of research on art mediation since this practice has appeared only recently. At the same time, questions related to mediation as a museum practice are widely discussed in the professional museum community. The most comprehensive research on this issue was conducted in 2012–2014 by Ines Camara and her team and was supported by the European Commission. This study pursued a practical purpose – to design “the theoretical basis of the training course, which had a common part and another based on the national context” (Camara et al., 2014, p. 11). The research identified and compared museum mediation practices in seven European countries.

In other publications, mediation is explored as a new form of museum education. F. De Backer et al. generalized existing approaches to art mediation, relying on classical works on museum pedagogy (De Backer et al., 2014). M. Villa described the experience of the Bogota Art Mediation Lab and concluded that the main challenge for mediators is to connect art with emotions, claims, and memories of visitors, regardless of their educational backgrounds (Villa, 2015). M. Györgyfova emphasized that talking about visitors’ perceptions is an important element in museum education (Györgyfova, 2016). Art mediation is also described as a way to create a museum community. For example, C. Vasconcellos and M. da Silva analyzed the case of a museum in San-Paulo and represented art mediation as a tool to reduce the symbolic and real distances between the museum and its immediate neighborhood (Vasconcellos & da Silva, 2018).

¹ That concept describes non-hierarchical communication between any cultural institutions and their audience.

² However, it should be noted that the expression “art mediation” is often used to describe the capacity of art to act as an intermediary between the author and the viewer or the teacher and the student. Seen in this way, an art object is a tool used to convey ideas. In this article, we are going to use the term “art mediation” to denote a set of methods that allow a museum to involve visitors into communication, rather than an attribute of art itself.

In Russia, the emergence of interest in art mediation is related to the project “Manifesta 10: the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in St. Petersburg” in 2014 (Manifesta, 2014). Sepake Angiama, the Head of Education for Manifesta 10, proposed the following understanding of mediation, which was later adopted by other Russian projects: “In the context of contemporary art, the role of the mediator is to ensure a dialogue in a pluralistic situation of interaction between the viewer and art. We teach our mediators to stimulate dialogue and create conditions that learn visitors to articulate their perceptions through observation, discussion and creativity” (Angiama, 2014).

In 2015, the Ural Branch of the National Centre for Contemporary Arts (NCCA) launched an educational program “Mediation in the Field of Art” (NCCA, 2015), whose graduates then worked at the 3rd Ural Industrial Biennial (the project was repeated as the 4th and 5th Biennial). Another example is a training course for art mediators carried out by the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015, and dedicated to the opening of a new museum building and a new exhibition (Garage, 2015). In 2016, PERMM Museum of Contemporary Art presented its own art mediation course in Perm (PERMM, 2016). In 2017, in Nizhny Novgorod, the NCCA branch started the School of Art Mediation (NCCA, 2017). In summer of 2019 in Yekaterinburg, the Contemporary Art Gallery introduced an internship program for mediators (Uralgallery, 2019). In their programs, the above-mentioned institutions described art mediation as a practice of involving visitors into the dialogue about art.

The experience of large Russian cities shows that in recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in mediation on the part of institutions of contemporary art. However, Russia still has a long way to go in this respect, and this topic is largely underexplored in academic research. A pioneering work in this respect is Daria Malikova’s Master thesis on methods of interaction with the audience of art museums. D. Malikova defines art mediation as a method of educational work, she also describes its place in the system of educational activities of art museums, highlights the key characteristics of this method by comparing them with traditional practices of museum education (Malikova, 2015). The general principles of mediation as an element of museum pedagogy are investigated by Izmailova and Kolokoltseva (2016). N. Striga uses her own mediation experience to reflect upon the principles of mediator training and to describe the techniques of working with art objects at an exhibition (Striga & Pronin, 2017).

However, art mediation as a phenomenon is not just a new museum education practice. It plays a crucial role in the transformation of museum communication. The questions that are interesting to consider in this respect are as follows: Who are the agents of the transformation that museum communication is now undergoing? And what specific changes does this transformation encompass?

Russian museums need to accomplish an important task of improving the new formats of communication with their audiences (Dukel’skij, 2010). Traditional museum communication formats are hierarchical while the new formats, on the contrary, should be horizontal. The basic principle of art mediation is to make the viewers’ voices be heard. Therefore, it is necessary to depart from the traditional hierarchy in museum communication, to change the museum’s attitude towards the audience, and to transform the audience behavior patterns.

In her theoretical review of visitor studies, A. Maksimova has outlined three concepts of museums in the twentieth century: a museum of the “temple of arts” type, a museum for experts, and a museum engaging visitors in its work (Maksimova, 2014, p. 161). These three types of museums correspond to three types of visitors: “observer”; “expert”, and “partner”. The first and the second types are traditional: the museum exhibits its objects for the public to see while the public, in its turn, is divided into professionals, who understand museum infrastructure and can influence museum practices thanks to their expert position, and non-professionals, who can watch and get impressions. Thus, traditional museum communication involves, on the one hand, experts, who determine the themes, objects, and ways of exhibiting, and, on the other hand, viewers, who can choose from the range of options that experts offer. There is, however, a new understanding of museum communication, which enables the viewer not only to watch and comment on what they see, but also to get involved in the work of the museum, solve the same tasks as professionals – determine the theme and concept of the exhibition, supervise it, communicate with artists, and interpret their ideas. It is a new type of visitor – the “partner”. In general, this new vision of the viewer underpins the interest in studying audience experience and, as a result, leads to transformations of museum practices (Pekarik, Doering, & Karns, 1999; Simon, 2010; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Maksimova, 2014; Nikitin, 2018).

The view of the visitor as an equal partner contributes to the general shift in museum communication, which can be observed in Russian art institutions. Likewise, the visitors of the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art³ are not just viewers, art mediation is used as one of the museum communication strategies based on participation, it “draws attention to the moment of mutual exchange, coordination, which is so important in the new museology” (Malikova, 2018, p. 182).

As an example of this shift from the “viewer” to “involved audience”, let us look at the case of the art mediation project at the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art, which took place in the fall of 2017 in the city of Yekaterinburg. To describe the transformation of communication that happens during an excursion conducted by a mediator, I analyzed seventeen in-depth interviews with art mediators⁴. Interviews were conducted during two weeks in November 2017⁵, which were closing the 4th Biennial event. By this time all the respondents had accumulated a diverse experience

³ The Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art is a large regional art project held in Yekaterinburg and other Ural cities. The project seeks to integrate the region into the context of the international art scene. The Biennial takes place at former industrial and non-exhibition sites, and thus the concept of industry is explored both as a heritage and as an actual practice. Curators, artists, sociologists, and cultural theorists from around the world define the Urals in all kinds of ways. The first Biennial took place in 2010. In September 2019, the 5th Biennial “Immortality” opened in Yekaterinburg (Ural Biennial, 2019)

⁴ Interviewing was a part of the project “Study of the Audience of Contemporary Art Sites in Major Russian Cities”, realized in 7 large regional Russian cities by the Ural branch of the NCCA in cooperation with Yekaterinburg Academy of Contemporary Art and research company “Socium” in 2017–2018. The project included observation in institutions of contemporary art, surveys of visitors at exhibitions, in-depth interview with curators, art-directors, and artists. The project was supported by the Vladimir Potanin Foundation. For more detail see: www.artauditoria.ru.

⁵ Interviews are anonymized, a literary correction, which smooths out the features of oral speech is applied to the quotations used in the article. 17 out of 18 mediators worked at the 4th Biennial are interviewed.

in art mediation. Therefore, the survey was aimed at catching actual mediation practices, which could shed light on whether the main idea mediation, i.e. establishing a dialogue about art, could be realized, and whether the monological nature of the classical museum communication could be overcome.

In order to investigate mediators' experience, the interview guide covered three main blocks. The first was motivation to become an art mediator. Questions in this block included:

- Why did you decide to take part in the mediation program?
- What did you find attractive?
- What were your expectations?

The second block was aimed at assessing attitudes towards contemporary art before and after mediation work, and included such questions as:

- What contemporary art exhibitions had you visited before participating in the mediation program?
- What is contemporary art for you now?

The third block of questions was focused on the participant's mediation experience, including:

- Which excursions and visitors impressed you the most?
- Please, tell about the best and worst excursions in your opinion.
- Can you describe the types of Biennial visitors?
- Did you meet cases of aversion to contemporary art?
- How was your work group?
- Which mediation methods did you use during excursions? What was the result of your work?

Although the conducted in-depth interviews had their own features due to the specifics of the qualitative method, they were all linked by a common topic that could facilitate the analysis of the obtained data. Initially, all answers describing mediation work were identified using Open and Axial coding according to the grounded theory (Strauss, Corbin, 1998). Further, at the stage of Selective coding, a particular attention was paid to the topic of communication between the art mediator and the visitor. Based on our respondents' descriptions of their mediation experience, I identified three types of visitor participation and the main agent (or agents) of the transformation.

Art Mediation at the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial: Goal, Participants, and Practices

At the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial, one of the ways to involve the audience in the discussion about art was an excursion with an art mediator. The topic of the Biennial – “New Literacy” – is interpreted as “a tool to eliminate illiteracy, whether it is the actual verbal illiteracy or ignorance in any professional sphere (for example, the sphere of contemporary art or industrial production)” (Ural Biennial, 2017). In this context, art mediation was a necessary tool for ensuring the new literacy of the audience.

Art mediation means that a visitor would move from the position of a viewer to that of an involved person. Similar to Manifesta 10, mediation is defined as the “strategy work with the audience, based on involvement and complicity, transforming the exhibition into

a space for discussion” (Malikova, 2018, p. 182). In contrast to the role of a traditional museum guide, who is expected to follow the script of an excursion, an art mediator is more flexible as he or she is oriented towards meeting the individual needs of the visitors and can adjust the tour to their specific interests. His or her task is to encourage the visitors to discuss what they see and to co-create the meaning of the work. At first glance, in such museum communication the viewer should be the main agent of the transformation since mediation is aimed at changing the patterns of perceiving art at an exhibition. According to the results of visitors’ self-assessment after the mediator excursion, the vast majority were interested in hearing the opinions of other members of the group and wanted to participate in the discussion themselves (Malikova, 2018, p. 207). As for the types of their activity, the results were as follows: 89 percent “listened to the mediator”; 62 percent “answered the mediator’s questions”; 54 percent “discussed something with their companions”; 52 percent “if offered, interacted with the art objects”; 51 percent took photos and made selfies; 50 percent got separated from the group and independently examined objects; 32 percent asked questions; 31 percent read annotations to the exhibits; 23 percent found themselves to be deep in thought⁶ (Malikova, 2018, p. 210). These data demonstrate the success of the mediation project as it is obvious that many visitors engaged in different kinds of activities outside the roles prescribed by traditional museum communication patterns, which is a sign of the deep transformation in the viewer’s experience. However, before we make any conclusions, we need to deal with the problem of re-observation: how would these viewers behave in a different situation? Would they want to have a discussion if the format of their excursions did not include that possibility? Moreover, the visitors’ self-assessment results did not always coincide with the mediators’ observations, who reported that only one third of all the groups they worked with were active and engaged in communication, which would be different from the traditional museum communication.

In all likelihood, participants have a strong impact on art mediation, but we should not forget that there are art mediators too, not only viewers. The leader of the biennial mediation project clarifies the goals that mediators focus on:

They help viewers to see what is important in the idea of the curator or the author, but the curator’s opinion or the author’s position does not become the ultimate truth. They act as an impetus for further visitors’ reasoning and interpretation, which has an equal right to exist. The mediator is not a storyteller, but a facilitator of the conversation: they involve visitors in an exchange of opinions on works of art [...] encourage participants to express their judgment based on their own life experience and knowledge” (Malikova, 2018, p. 183).

Therefore, to analyze new museum communication patterns it is important to understand who were both the visitors and the mediators at the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial.

Among the 4th Industrial Biennial visitors, the majority had rarely or almost never attended events related to contemporary art (Burlutskaya, 2018, p. 121). According

⁶ 205 self-assessment multiple-answer multiple choice questionnaires were analyzed.

to the results of the visitors input narrative analysis (a set of requests and attitudes, which determine the perception and evaluation of the experience gained at an art exhibition), 55 percent of the visitors expected to receive new emotions and expand their horizons; 17 percent were interested in the artistic content of the exhibition; 13 percent came for entertainment and distraction; and 13 percent did not select any of the options offered to them in the motivation survey⁷ (Malikova, 2018, pp. 184–189). The analysis of additional data has shown that self-development, reflection on social transformations, and discussions on values are socially expected reasons for interest in contemporary art. However, the real reason for visitors' participation in the Biennial was mainly "mere curiosity" (Malikova, 2018, p. 189).

As for the art mediators, they were not professionals in the field of art or museum work. For the most part, they were part students majoring in the humanities, there were also economists, editors, a professor, a museologist, a stylist, and a bartender. All those who became art mediators at first were viewers of contemporary art. The main reasons why they decided to work as art mediators were that they perceived it as a personal challenge associated with the acquisition of new experience and internship in the field close to their major. Some young people were also thinking about making a career in culture:

"I can say that the work as a mediator will update and expand my expertise, my knowledge" (female, 22 years old).

"This time I don't want to be a volunteer anymore, I want to rise to a higher level in this hierarchy, and mediation seems to be the next one" (male, 21 years old)

"For me, it has been a very important step in order to decide where to move on in the profession" (female, 25 years old).

"I remember that a lot of mediators from the previous Biennial got a job somewhere, in the same sphere of art, when the Biennial ended. I do not know how much this attracts me, but I consider it as an option. To do some networking, to accumulate a cultural capital" (male, 24 years old).

Art mediation is a personal challenge for older persons and young people:

"I've decided to take a chance, talked to Daria [director of the mediation project], understood that this is what I need. Therefore, the reason why I've become one of the mediators is that I wanted to learn how to understand modern art" (female, 60 years old).

"I've been working at a high school for a long time, but somehow it seems to have taken all the pleasure out of it [...] And I've had a spontaneous but quite successful

⁷ The question was "Why do you visit contemporary art exhibitions?" The questionnaire was designed to measure the respondents' degree of agreement. 808 visitors were surveyed.

experience of working as a curator [...] Yes, and I thought I was wasting my talents here” (female, 55 years old).

“I wanted some new impressions, and, perhaps, I was caught up in this mid-life crisis, when you have no idea what you need to do in life” (female, 40 years old)

“It was a challenge because I have never thought about such activity for myself” (female, 30 years old).

“[I wanted] to change the direction. It is the direction in which you choose to move that determines who you are at the moment [...] that is, there were questions that you would not resolve without forcibly getting yourself out of the current situation. Questions related to the future profession, what you study, your role in life” (female, 19 years old).

Nonetheless, apart from the above-mentioned motives, all respondents observed that they felt close to contemporary art. There is also one more reason: some respondents pointed out that participation in the Biennial on a deeper level was very important for them as such:

“I have an interest in contemporary art, I cannot miss such an event as the Biennial. It’s great that I’ve managed to be a mediator” (female, 22 years old)

“If you want to be in the thick of things, especially to be engaged in contemporary art, then you should try to be a part of some significant events” (female, 23 years old).

“For me, it’s a pleasure. Actually, I like talking about art.” (male, 22 years old)

“I love art, and I really wanted to be in the project. Two more reasons – it has given me a chance to explore the exhibition, and it is very interesting for me to see how people interact with art” (female, 21 years old).

“I wanted to correct the mistakes I made at the 3rd Biennial, secondly, last time I was ecstatic and this time I wanted to see it all again, but more soberly” (female, 30 years old).

Mediators were selected by open competition, announced by the NCCA Ural branch. The first stage of the competition included writing a motivation letter, at the second stage, there was an interview. Afterwards, the selected candidates were trained, they observed how the exhibition was created, communicated with artists, passed the exam, and became the mediators at the Biennial. They conducted excursions daily with large and small groups of visitors (accidentally assembled visitors or organized groups of schoolchildren, students, families, friends, etc.).

Describing the experience of a viewer, mediators recall both typical and unique stories. All respondents faced a situation when the group was ready to listen and watch, but not to speak. This is the expected reaction of a traditional viewer and the mediators were trained to transform it. The shift from the traditional viewer to the involved participant was a personal story each time. However, putting these stories together, three main scenarios of art mediation can be identified.

One of the most common indications of visitor involvement in mediation was the case when one of the group members became an expert for the rest of the participants:

“Here is today’s tour [...] I like the moment with the plant, when an employee of this plant told us about all these devices, how they work” (female, 60 years old).

“There were just about eight people, a micro-group. Some of them were already 50 years old, some were about 30 years old (2 or 3 women). It was interesting, because those who were in their fifties, they [...] took the position that it [the exhibition] was not clear to them, but at the same time, they explained their position. And those who were in their thirties [...], one of them was very well informed in the cultural context. When she said ‘Oh, I know that’, I asked her to tell something about it, and everyone listened to her. It was perfect. Those who listened to her did not know this information and she provided it” (female, 26 years old).

“Someone is very eager to speak, someone is not, and if you are trying to stimulate them, it does work. Usually, yes, they usually want to speak. It’s true. They are proud that they know” (female, 21 years old, about the viewers with some experience of perception of contemporary art).

A rarer case is the involvement of all the group members in the discussion about the exhibition. According to the respondents’ experience, there is one objective impediment to such mediation, it is the group size. Other significant limitations are subjective: they are primarily the mood of the group and the skills of the mediator.

Participants’ knowledge in the field of arts, at first glance, facilitates the dialogue about the exposition. Indeed, for one mediator the professionalism of the audience is crucial for this exchange of knowledge and impressions to take place:

“Excursions for professionals, people engaged in intellectual activities, suit me best of all. Usually, these are small groups. When you speak to them, they really need it, they understand, listen attentively, solve some of their professional tasks through my speech. I can give them maximum information [...] And these people take it, and give me some knowledge in return” (female, 19 years old).

However, for another mediator the opposite is true:

“A tough room is the room full of art critics. They are well prepared. But they are keen on showing you that you are not needed here” (female, 47 years old).

Moreover, art mediation is designed primarily for the traditional audience and not for professionals who, by virtue of their expert position, are used to talking about art. Therefore, more significant examples of the changing museum communication are the situations in which discussion and exchange of impressions appear in an “ordinary” group. For example, one of the mediators was impressed by the tour he conducted for employees of a technological company, who came to the Biennial because they were specifically interested in its theme and content:

“I can’t express it in words, because these were the feelings when I heard and saw this feedback from almost everyone. And in the course of our discussions, absolutely, completely new ideas were born, that, for example, had never occurred to me before. And that’s why I still love mediation: you always expand your idea, your way of looking at objects and art, because people, they are so awesome and they always bring something new, something of their own” (female, 21 years old).

Another respondent was surprised by the reaction of teenagers:

“I did not expect that it would be comfortable for me to work with schoolchildren. I am absolutely delighted by them. Most of them are really open to art, that is, they are ready to give their own interpretations rather than reproduce conventional ones” (female, 22 years old).

The narratives of the art mediators about their experiences reflect the shift in their perception of the exhibition. One of the respondents considers that this transformation constitutes the core of art mediation:

“This is a special approach [...]; the mediator has a special approach to work which enriches not only the incoming group but also the mediators themselves. It just teaches us to look at works in a new, different way” (female, 22 years old).

If the awareness of the art mediator changes, the excursion should also change since the mediator is one of its significant elements. Taking it as a starting point that the mediator’s perception is influenced by the audience, we can distinguish the third way of visitor participation in mediation. This can be illustrated by the following observations of our respondent:

“For example, I’ve never been to some room. And then the viewer goes there on their own. And we have a most interesting conversation there, which makes me think: ‘Oh, why did we always pass by this room?’. And I set out with the next group and go to this room. I start a dialogue based on the previous conversation. It worked not because of me, but because someone was personally interested in it. Yes, indeed [...] it is such a growing and genuine experience” (female, 32 years old).

This indirect influence on other members of the audience through the experience of an art mediator is the third way visitors can get involved into museum communication. In many interviews, respondents reflect on the fact that visitors have provided them with a new perspective on the exhibition. This inner transformation in the mediators' thinking and feelings entails a change in the content and route of their excursions. From this point of view, the mediator is the prime agent of the transformation in museum communication as he or she initiates this transformation in relation to the audience.

The Biennial mediation project is one of the first steps towards a new museum communication. The advantages of this project involve a positive feedback from the audience, as well as relevant examples for further research confirming that museum practices are indeed undergoing transformations. According to the visitors' feedback and the art mediators' opinions, the audience was occasionally involved in a dialogue about art.

However, some limitations concerned with this project should be mentioned, which does not allow us to talk about its complete success. Firstly, any dialogue is only possible when the mediator and the audience speak "the same" language; however, the mediators in this research claimed to experience occasional rejection on the part of visitors. These situations made the mediators lose their emotional balance. Thus, the respondents spoke of the feelings of desolation, bewilderment, grief or fear. Similar emotional risks were described in professional works of French museum mediators (Peyrin, 2010). In the future, a mechanism should be developed that could help to determine a suitable audience for every mediator, thus facilitating optimal allocation of workload. Since the transition to a new museum communication is being carried out by the personal efforts of mediators, their personal comfort becomes as significant as their professional training.

Secondly, for viewers to enjoy the maximum freedom of judgment, the mediator should take a detached position towards the institution (Malikova, 2015). For the 4th Biennial, most of the mediators were recruited from regular visitors. As a result, they found occasional negative assessments concerning the Biennial itself or contemporary art as a whole rather disappointing. Although the process of moderator training did include the component of critical thinking development, not all mediators were capable of interpreting art industry critically.

Thirdly, the absence of a sustainable environment that could maintain the developed skills of non-hierarchical museum communication among the audience impedes the formation of its long-term patterns. It is highly likely that the audience having gained the experience of mediation and dialogue during the Biennial would not be able to apply it in other cultural institutions.

From the standpoint of the development of cultural industries, investments in the training of mediators seem to be prospective. Skills developed in the field of museum communication can be applied in various cultural projects. It should be noted, however, that art mediation is a relatively new practice not only in Russia, but also in the international context (Camara et al., 2014; Violet, 2014; Malikova, 2015; Villa, 2015; Györgyfova, 2016; Vasconcellos & da Silva, 2018). Therefore, the initiative of

the Ural branch of the NCCA can be considered as one of the first steps towards the development of art mediation both in Russia and abroad.

From Classical to New Museum Communication: Who is the Agent of Transformation?

Art mediation at the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art was aimed at involving visitors into an exchange of knowledge and impressions. These goals are related to the new view on visitor-museum communication. In art mediation, many methods are used to change the model of museum communication from hierarchical to horizontal. The mediator uses their professional knowledge to start a discussion, prepare a transition from one object to another rather than to teach or enlighten the visitors.

The case of the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial shows that viewers sometimes make a transition from observers to involved participants during art mediation. This transition strongly depends on the combination of several factors, the main factors being the group size, the mediator's skills, and the mood of the visitors. Exhibition organizers can influence the intensity of the transformation in audience experience by improving the mediators' skills and limiting the group size.

All of the above does not mean, however, that in museums, which support traditional communication patterns, a situation when one visitor becomes an expert in front of other viewers or when an interesting discussion takes place within a small group of people is impossible. Undoubtedly, the mediator facilitates and legitimates such cases. However, the visitor's influence on the experience of the mediator is the most significant evidence of the changes in the patterns of museum communication: not only are new voices heard in the exhibition space, but they also influence the way the new visitors see this space.

From this point of view, the mediator is a key agent of the transformation of museum communication. Firstly, they rethink the experiences and attitudes towards the exhibition. Secondly, they adjust the route of their excursions according to the visitors' interests. In addition, in the case examined, the mediators themselves illustrated the shift from the position of a viewer to that of an involved person since they all began their acquaintance with contemporary art as viewers. Furthermore, an art mediator occupies a transitional position between the new and traditional museum communication patterns, playing the two roles. From the perspective of the involved viewer, the mediator is a partner in museum communication; from the perspective of the traditional viewer, the mediator is an expert.

The art mediation project at the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial demonstrates that museums and other institutions of contemporary art are ready to rely on the experience of the audience and involve visitors in the production of meanings within the exhibition space. Although a significant part of the audience come with a request for a traditional excursion, they are ready to interpret art objects. For the audience and the institution, this movement towards each other is the beginning of the transition to new museum communication.

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