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# Art in Mediation

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Recollections and  
Reflections from  
a Colloquium

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On 29 May 2015, fourteen persons met and enjoyed the beautiful environment and warm hospitality of Villa Frontenex-Saladin in Geneva.<sup>1</sup> They had been invited by Ambassador Alexandre Fasel, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the Office of the United Nations in Geneva (2013–2016), to consider both potential contributions of art to peace-mediation processes, and possible triggers for art to be elicited from peace mediation. Dagmar Reichert from the Swiss Foundation *artasfoundation* had organised the meeting and both she and Ambassador Fasel shared the belief that these seemingly separate fields had much in common and could strengthen each other through collaboration. The meeting was an experiment and a first attempt of its kind.

One of the basic premises for the organisers was to avoid role stereotypes and the trap of false representation. Nobody should be regarded as a representative of a collective or category when speaking as a person. Therefore, the colloquium did not start with ‘Artists’ vs. ‘Mediators’, but with two mixed working groups where participants told each other about their current activities and difficulties they encountered in their work. As the groups engaged in their stimulating exchanges, participants tried to formulate principles and guidelines implicit in their respective practices. When excerpts of these conversations were reported later to the other group, a consensus emerged swiftly that “artists and mediators should really work together”. The second round of groupwork focused on how to begin and to structure such a collaboration in practice. Ideas were consolidated in the final plenary when participants formulated concrete proposals for collaboration between artists and mediators.

The atmosphere of the meeting was amicable and stimulating even though many participants had not known each other before. Alexandre Fasel captured this when he thanked 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.”

To support this growth and the next steps in a collaboration of artists and peace-mediators, the following sections recall some of the thoughts and ideas of this initial encounter.

### Meeting in ‘Blind Spots’?

Old unresolved questions and new options can emerge within established routines when explaining the 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.

For example, what is the role of language in a mediation process? Is it language itself that mediates between conflicting parties? And if so, does language mediate in a different way than mediators? Language certainly has its own integral biases and values. As noted by one participant of the colloquium, the language that is used in negotiation processes usually has “the conflict built into it”. This can be illustrated by 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 the language they use? One mediator described one of the difficulties: “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”.

What is the language of mediation? Communicating in English, French or Spanish seems to be common, whereas information contained in glances, body movements and facial expressions, in the rhythm and tone of voice, while still considered significant, seems more difficult to capture. Yet, these are the very channels of communication familiar to some artists.

In the realm of mediation and in the language of words and sentences, what happens in the transition between spoken and written words, for example the written words of a treaty? Does this transition represent the crucial move in a mediator’s craft?

Is it a move of ‘pinning down’ or one of a series of tangential contacts? It is interesting that the focus here is not on how to conceal unresolved issues in vague formulas, but on how to find words that capture the agreement in a precise and correct way, while allowing breathing space for the valuable potential of an unforeseeable future. How can one convey in the paragraphs of a legal contract the spirit of trust and goodwill (however minimal) that the parties were able to build up during their meetings? One participant pointed to the stylistic differences between the preamble and the operational paragraphs of a contract: a joint effort, perhaps, of poets and lawyers.

What is the significance of the table in mediated negotiations? Most seem to take place around a table, if not at the beginning, then soon after. Apart from its practical function, a table is also an important equalising symbol. It places all participants at the same level even though their position and leverage in the negotiation may be quite different. It is unsurprising that it can be difficult to “bring them to the table” and to convince conflicting parties to meet on an equal basis, on one level of humanity, despite differences in power, activities or intentions. If the table can be seen as an embodiment of the idea of mediation, could a carpet be even more appropriate for this idea – and actually for the practice? Even when coming from other cultures, many representatives of opposing parties are familiar with western lifestyles; hence sitting around a table may not be unusual. But why should positions, viewpoints and distances be fixed when their transformation is at the essence of the process? One participant, familiar with the possibility offered by dance, asked: what does the convention of sitting around a table really allow, and what does it hinder or exclude?

Another theme that arose is confidentiality, which seems to be a basic element in a mediator’s practice. 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? This seemed to ring true, and such a framing would then also be familiar to artists, who mark their *Spielraum* by the edge of the stage or the border of an image and separate it in this way from the norms and roles of everyday life. Could artists ‘lend’ such experimental spaces to others?

At the same time some mediators also questioned their own convention of confidentiality, saying that if talks were more public it would be difficult to hide a political agenda, the agenda of a negotiating party or of other parties who might be involved. The stated aim of a mediation process is to present it as a neutral process, but in many cases the reality is that there is a political agenda behind supporting a mediation process and sending mediators to it.

### Reasons to Cooperate

Some of the blind spots in the practices and customs of the profession of peace-mediators may become visible in conversation with artists and – although this was not further elaborated on – equally, one would hope that such exchanges could enable people from the art world to realise the limiting conventions and alternatives in their own practice. 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 professionalisation, 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 another participant said, they need not necessarily come from artists. There are mediators who just practise 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. Therefore, it would not be particularly special if artists only contributed a “licence to be creative”. What was really needed were special art-related competencies to expand the existing methodological repertoire.

One participant listed several situations that demanded such a broadening of the repertoire for peace-making: a critical challenge in a mediation process is often whether the mediator manages to “unlock the egos”. This means bringing people from a mode of fighting and distrust to one of openness in which they can see others as potential partners, and being able to unlock fixed views and positions towards possible transformation. These turning points can become possible by what

happens outside the negotiation room. One of the many anecdotes where mediators recollected successful confidence-building measures concerns an occasion when adversaries at the dinner table, after some drinking, ended up singing songs they remembered from their communist youth camps. Leaving a highly pressured sphere, 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 and commenting on a photograph from a series provided. Such an innovative approach could be supported by the skills of a visual artist, working with pictures, able to provide images that counter (media) stereotypes, and invite reactions and leave space for a variety of interpretations.

### Moments of Art

Some challenges for peace-mediation in armed conflicts may stem from the difficulty of being able to resolve deep conflicts by using the mediator's established repertoire of methodological tools. As one participant explained, these involve legal argument and a very specific rationality, emphasising that there is a lot at stake in these negotiations and 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, making it difficult to find an opening. The speaker underlined that mediation processes are highly ritualised and often about power, and therefore saw a significant difference from artistic practice, as artists could freely define new rules and change these rules as part of their work process. Another participant who shared this view 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 concept of “moments of art” could be useful as it describes situations where new experiences or impressions can dissolve established concepts and re-form them. Even if artists may be more used to allowing such situations to occur, this concept might

overcome the rigid 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 a short presentation to the colloquium, the author described some of the characteristics of this other type of rationality, a so-called ‘aesthetic rationality’:

The notion of aesthetic rationality comes from the philosophy of art and describes a special way of relating to the world and 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 rid of, but as engines 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”. Proceeding through an aesthetic rationality could perhaps 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. One of the working groups proposed a list of hypotheses as to where and how artists, or their art, might usefully be introduced.

Some of these points were taken up and further explained in the plenary discussion:

- Art for atmosphere: the presence of artworks or a live art performance could create an atmosphere in a conference room. Forms of art that are particularly respected in the cultures of the negotiating parties, such as culturally-specific forms in poetry, music or 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 on the process. Artists would not be present during the actual negotiations but might contribute questions or observations from their professional perspective and that of an interested outsider. 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. At the end of the day during the mediation team meeting, artists could mirror the negotiation process from the perspective of an engaged outsider. One participant cited an example of the potential of creating distance and detachment by mirroring: 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: trusted artists could be invited to present a work or to perform at certain moments during negotiations. Timing would be important, and mediators should not attach a specific a priori intention to the artistic intervention. They would treat it instead as a punctuation that could permit a shift and a fresh 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. Their mere presence could have a liberating effect on the dynamics, and participants in the room might allow themselves more freedom in expression. Alternatively, artists could offer an impression of the conversation through their art. Such a response could be spontaneous and improvised (music, dance), or created outside the room and brought back in later. But their contribution should 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. Artists could thereby reinforce members of civil society who might take part, and support their arguments through presentations by using other media or formats, such as storytelling or video presentations.
- "The artist is present": a trial run was mooted as a possibility, whereby an artist is invited into a mediation-support team or a negotiation process. The principal aim would be for both artists and mediators to determine what a meaningful contribution of an artist could be. An actual artistic intervention would not be necessary, but neither would it be necessarily excluded.



All participants of the colloquium considered this last option as a useful and concrete first step. The artists present 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. It was also important for them that in order to make a meaningful contribution, this collaboration – whether in a mirroring function, as witnesses or conversation partners – should be a continuous process, planned as such, and not merely a one-time visit. Now the next step is to take action and make concrete plans.

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