

# Zuzana Slušná

## Reframing Access: The Turn Toward Participation and Art-Mediation

### Abstract

The study examines the transformation of institutional strategies for engaging audiences with art in the context of contemporary Slovak and Central European cultural policy. Active support for participation and audience building covers a comprehensive set of strategies and practices that transform passive viewers into active co-creators of the meaning of a work of art. In a broader context, we are talking about an “educational shift” that builds on the principle of “from viewer to participant”. The goal of this trend is not to improve the accessibility of information to the audience, but to comprehensively transform organizational structures in institutions so that they can create conditions that facilitate engagement, interaction, and co-creation. The study analyses how the Slovak National Gallery (SNG) has redefined its approach to accessibility and public engagement through contextual, constructivist, and participatory pedagogical frameworks. The analysis is based on publicly available SNG Annual Reports (Slovenská národná galéria, n.d.a). Drawing on examples such as the interactive exhibition Take P(art) / Prečo (ume)nie? event, the Meetup SNG programme (2024 – 2025), the outreach project In the Display Window,

and the digital platform Web umenia, the article demonstrates how mediation practices have evolved from traditional educational functions toward inclusive and dialogical models of audience interaction. These developments are interpreted in relation to European and national cultural policy documents (e.g., Konceptia rozvoja kultúry SR 2030, Creative Europe Programme, UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators), which emphasise participation, accessibility, and the democratisation of culture as key priorities. The paper argues that art mediation in the Slovak context operates not merely as an educational tool but as a socio-cultural practice that bridges artistic production, institutional communication, and civic engagement.

### Key words

Art. Art Mediation. Cultural Participation. Culture. Slovak National Gallery.

### Instead of Introduction

Current cultural policy documents present the setting and creation of conditions to increase and improve the accessibility of culture and art to the widest possible range of visitor groups as one of their key functions.

Art is an integral part of culture and constantly tests and develops human abilities, harmonises the emotional and sensory dimensions of experience, and continuously reconfigures the perception of the world, the social and environmental surroundings, and one’s own identity. Art is participatory in nature and is intended to be encountered as a unique occurrence. As Kopčáková (2018) emphasizes: the process of individual’s engagement with art, which results in an aesthetic experience, has been shown to engender a complex layer of experience through which the actors themselves undergo development. The value of art for society lies in its expressive and experiential qualities, which act as a counterbalance to rationalised and strictly instrumentalised processes.

Following the theses of A. Danto (2021) and V. Zolberg (2007), art is not only an area in which aesthetic qualities are generated and renewed, but also influences soft skills and abilities. Participation in cultural and artistic activities contributes to the development of cognitive and emotional intelligence, stimulates social imagination, and generates cultural and symbolic capital. In cultural policy documents, art is presented as



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a strategic catalyst for creativity and a source of impetus for innovation, with particular emphasis on cultural sustainability and transformative social change.

The aim of the study is to show that there is a continuous dialogue between the cultural processes of the past and the present. An analysis of the activities offered to visitors to the Slovak National Gallery will make it possible to identify whether awareness of this continuity is reflected in current institutional practice, not only through the mediation of aesthetic experience, but also through the presence of socially engaged practices. Thanks to these practices, contemporary forms of visual culture also promote dialogue and social cohesion, encourage civic participation, and contribute to the formation of an inclusive social environment.

### 1 The Shift Towards the Spectator

According to V. Zolberg (2007), contemporary art also communicates through the transformation of audience participation strategies: the audience interacts with art, visitors change from passive observers to active participants as the experience of art (aesthetic experience) activates their cognitive processes. Activating the audience through participatory exhibitions, community projects or digital platforms is part of a new educational strategy. Learning through participation and direct experience with art is part of an educational shift in art and culture. According to L. Zuidervaart, contemporary artistic practice has

moved away from the perception of art as exclusive objects and emphasises the irreplaceable role of art in the development of cognitive skills, understanding and reflection. Cultural literacy, communication skills and critical thinking skills are developed through interaction: “A democratic culture requires the arts not as ornament or diversion but as an essential mode of social communication that shapes our shared understandings and aspirations” (2010, p. 143). Participatory art is present in contemporary art and is associated with an active interest in social events, the needs and aspirations of society and its various groups. Art institutions are therefore also transforming their activities and providing their services to the public. We no longer consider the artistic experience to be an end in itself, but rather a catalyst for the improvement and development of the participants’ abilities, especially their social and communication skills. Participation in artistic activities is beneficial not only for individuals, but also brings positive benefits for communities and society as a whole. Among the most valued benefits are, in addition to supporting creativity and critical thinking, increasing self-confidence, broadening experience, cultivating values and attitudes, and strengthening awareness of the importance of social cohesion and the possibilities for including everyone, including disadvantaged groups, in activities based on mutual participation.

The term “educational turn” has become established to describe a situation where the activities of cultural

and artistic entities extend into the public sphere. This is also reflected in changes in the competences of institutions, where the process of learning through art is just as important as the presentation of art and exhibition practices. The combination of these approaches creates a framework for inclusive and educational strategies in arts marketing that promote active audience engagement, increase cultural literacy and, at the same time, strengthen the social relevance of arts institutions in the contemporary environment. Active work with audiences involves analysing their needs, communicating with them through all available communication channels, and adapting programme structure and dramaturgy to emphasise a participatory approach. This approach thus builds on the idea of democratisation – namely, that it is not just a matter of providing access to “cultural artefacts”, but of creating active relationships, and involving the audience as a subject, not just as a passive recipient. We see the educational shift and pro-inclusive approach as a continuation of the “democratisation of culture” and also of “democracy in culture”. In cultural policy, the democratisation of culture is linked to expanding access to cultural arts so that social status and income level are not barriers to participation in culture and the arts. Democracy in culture can then be seen as a search for opportunities for active reception, where passive observation is replaced by direct active participation of visitors in the creation and existence of a work of art. Making art accessible and new strategies of art marketing

represent a bridge that allows actors to shift their focus from ensuring accessibility to enabling participation in the existence of art by changing the role of the audience itself: from a passive recipient to an active co-creator. Aesthetic theory and philosophy of art view this new discursive line as “the turn to the spectator”. Reflections on a work of art no longer emphasise exclusively ontological and essential qualities, but rather its anchoring in the social, perceptual and institutional dimensions. Art as a complex area of human practice communicates not only its immanent qualities such as artistic value, form and aesthetic intensity, but also its overlaps with public policy, which is why strategies for making it accessible include production, reception and interpretation processes. Actors working in the field of gallery education use a variety of methodological approaches.

Among others, the theoretical works of P. Šobáňová (2012) and K. Kobliarz Chmelinová (2017) build on the constructivist paradigm. The basis of educational activity is the establishment of a dialogue between the viewer and the work of art, which, however, is established within a specific institutional framework and cultural environment. In addition to adopting specific methodologies, it is also important for the institutions themselves to adapt their infrastructure so that the educational and participatory activities carried out meet their set objectives. Therefore, Kobliarz Chmelinová (2017) considers the basis of the process itself to be the establishment of conditions in which dialogue takes

place, which in turn establishes the conditions for an analytical approach. Both Šobáňová (2012) and Kobliarz Chmelinová (2017) point out that strategies for making art accessible influence the overall framework of how galleries and museums function. Current methodologies suggest presenting artefacts as open to analysis and interpretation so that visitors actively seek to understand the historical, social, cultural and conceptual contexts and connections. In addition to explanation and clarification, educational strategies also include other strategic approaches, such as contextualising the work, interactivity, and the use of digital elements to enhance the reception of art. Educational programmes that place the visitor at the centre respond sensitively to their needs and previous experiences, as these influence their overall understanding. Knowing how visitors perceive, interpret and experience the world around them is important when preparing an exhibition as an educational medium. Educational activities fulfil their potential when they are systematically planned, have clearly defined and formulated goals, and their content ties in with broader educational frameworks (Národný inštitút vzdelávania a mládeže, n.d.).

## 2 Beyond Access: Art Mediation as a Strategy for Cultural Participation

The sociological and aesthetic shift towards the viewer builds on theoretical concepts that emphasise that the meaning of a work of art does not arise autonomously in the work itself, but from the interaction between the object, the institution and the recipient.

The artistic experience thus becomes a dynamic process that is conditioned by the cultural context, the viewer’s perceptual skills, and the mechanisms that influence the distribution and circulation of meaning. Educational approaches build on behavioural psychology theory, in which visitors and participants are guided towards active learning (“learning by doing”). Reducing distance also involves innovative elements in the exhibition itself, i.e. the application of approaches that increase interactivity, such as touch screens, manipulable exhibits, the use of mobile applications or digital platforms. In current methodologies, they are used to enhance cognitive processes because they allow visitors to “engage” more actively in the process of constructing meaning. The principle, which we can call “from spectator to participant”, is currently used by a wide range of actors and entities. Its application presupposes that the organisations themselves must proactively create the conditions for its application, which includes innovative architectural solutions for exteriors and interiors, but also new forms of communication, including art marketing.

The processes of developing visitor numbers and mediating art involve complex strategies for transforming passive viewers into active co-creators of the meaning of a work of art. As a new trend in visitor policy, it emphasises the principles of openness, active and conscious participation, and lifelong education (cultivation of aesthetic experience) through art. Institutions such as museums, galleries and cultural centres therefore use marketing as a promotional tool and a means of building participatory dialogue

between the artist, the work and the audience. H. Pravdová et al. (2023) critically note that many entities use simpler solutions: strategies for presenting content are focused on experience and entertainment, not on deeper understanding. Deepening the aesthetic experience as a new form of experience is more than just opening doors: it requires profound changes in the functioning of cultural institutions themselves. The active participation of visitors and audiences, whether through participatory activities, community projects or the use of new communication technologies, represents active forms of learning based on deepening understanding. J. Radošinská et al. (2024) emphasise that the dominant forms of artistic and media communication correspond to changing modes of cultural production and consumption. Learning through participation and creation also strengthens the social and cultural competences that form the basis of so-called soft skills.

Removing barriers between the “world of art” (Danto, 2021) and visitors involves the systematic and methodical removal of obstacles to participation, including audience segmentation in identifying new visitor groups, and also covers improving conditions for inclusive activities. In institutional practice, it often overlaps with marketing strategies, which, however, subsequently go beyond the promotion of the programme offerings of institutions and organisations. In addition to analysing audience needs, innovative marketing strategies also include tailoring communication to these needs, building relationships with

the audience, and promoting sustained participation and loyalty. K. Fichnová and L. Spálová (2023) state that the promotion of cultural institutions not only serves to attract new audience groups, but also strengthens the position of visitors as active contributors and content creators: it reconceptualises the role and function of visitors, who are transformed from passive recipients into actively involved co-producers of new content and meanings.

Audience development as a cultural policy tool involves actively attracting visitors, which promotes inclusiveness, accessibility and democratisation of the arts. Integrated marketing strategies enable cultural entities not only to increase attendance but also to respect and actively reinforce broader public policy goals: participation in culture and the arts also reinforces the principles of participatory democracy. In current cultural policies, actively facilitating audience participation is a complex process of deepening mutual interactions, thereby forming an active community in which the audience co-creates cultural values.

## 3 Art Mediation as Dialogue and Participation

Art mediation encompasses a set of practices and strategies aimed at creating and strengthening interactions between art, the network of art institutions, and the audience. It involves mutual dialogue based on understanding and presupposes deeper connections associated with direct and conscious participation in co-creation, thus going beyond

the framework of the conventional institutional presentation of art. It is formed at the intersections and crossroads of constructivist educational theory, new curatorial practices, and socially conceived art. The methodologies and procedures aim to activate cognitive, emotional and social abilities. New goals and functions are layered onto the aesthetic experience, through which a profound experience is generated, leading to a critical examination of the world. We view art-mediation in contemporary museum and gallery practice as a dynamic interface, as an “application” that transforms art into an accessible, relevant and socially anchored experience that expands the subject’s cognitive field.

Art mediation includes participatory formats that enable direct participation in the creative process (workshops, community projects, art residencies with the public, and collaborative exhibitions). It also covers educational and mediation programmes aimed at developing critical thinking and in-depth understanding (interpretations, discussions, interactive tours or interactive digital platforms enabling this experience). Building on the principles of democratisation of art manifests itself in the application of an inclusive approach, i.e. respecting and taking into account the social, cultural and linguistic diversity of the audience. The accessibility and meaningfulness of cultural experiences for different groups of the population also continues with efforts to cooperate more deeply and support the participation of those who are excluded from traditional forms of experiencing art or who belong to

various disadvantaged communities. Art mediation, the democratisation of culture and the accessibility of art are principles of cultural policy that overlap: democratisation creates a value framework (culture as a public good, participation, inclusion), while accessibility represents a technical and operational mechanism through which institutional practice enforces the value framework in the environment of civil society institutions.

Art mediation is currently a specific service with a relatively long tradition based on the educational function of art, but adapted to the needs of contemporary society. Its practices and strategies are based not only on new paradigms of viewing art and education. The experience of art is a culturally acquirable (teachable) competence. In practice, for cultural and artistic institutions, it is only an activity that complements and enriches their basic functions: galleries and museums were not primarily established as centres of education. The most frequently used educational activities include school educational programmes, guided tours, lectures and discussions, interviews with creators or specific professions, and they build on innovative pedagogical methods and approaches (recently, especially discursively conceived activities). The aim is to present an equal openness of positions, views and interpretative frameworks for actively participating visitors. Participants in educational activities have the opportunity to present their own opinions and views and gain a firm understanding of the social, political and historical contexts of the art with which they are directly

interacting. They use lively dialogical interactions between people and their surroundings, which subsequently lead to the acquisition and updating of information.

Openness and inclusiveness are principles present in the functioning of the institutions themselves, as well as in the architectural design of the Slovak National Gallery (SNG). After extensive reconstruction (2016 – 2022), which represents the most extensive renovation in the cultural infrastructure of the Slovak Republic, its iconic elements have also been restored and preserved, including the Bridge, which the architect V. Dedeček used in 1977 to connect the two wings of the Military Barracks.

In the spirit of an open and inclusive approach, the SNG has linked its activities not only to its founding functions, but also to the needs of the city (Bratislava), which it perceives as



**Figure 1: SNG After Reconstruction (2023).** Photo: Matej Hakár

Source: Archinfo (2023)

its residential seat, and to which it also has “civic” obligations. Therefore, not only the entire ground floor is open to the public, but also the Summer Pavilion, the Travertine Garden, Karol Vaculík Square and a system of city arcades. The spatial configuration enhances openness with themes such as permeability, transparency and accessibility, inviting visitors to become intensely involved in the life of the gallery. The formation of a community that has transformed the functioning of the SNG can be considered a successful achievement of the set goals. The architecture of the SNG therefore functions not only as a container for collections, but also as a community centre: in its environment, visitors interact with art in a lively way.

Cultural activities extend into the public sphere, and public actors use the synergistic effect of cultural activities to revive civic engagement (initiating activities among residents, increasing

their willingness to participate in the public and civic life of the locality) and to ensure an adequate and fulfilling life for all population groups. Culture extends beyond the boundaries of the classical concept of art, with popular culture occupying an increasingly broad field, including leisure activities related to artistic and creative interests. Culture adapts to new conditions, and we are currently seeing a shift in focus towards new groups of cultural actors who combine expressions associated with artistic value, expressive value and the principle of creativity with a tendency towards the democratisation of culture. Today, there are more flexible models of culture and art than the hierarchical division into so-called high and popular forms. On the contrary, a model of interrelated circles that emanate from the so-called core, respecting creative dialogue even between areas that at first glance have no connection with each other. Art and culture prepare us and teach us to see and work outside established patterns and boundaries, which is perhaps why the inclination towards creative activities is important for our contemporaries.

Art mediation is based on the principle of dialogue and the exchange of creative energy between actors who interact with each other. The Slovak National Gallery perceives visitors as its partners and uses methodological approaches that emphasise that in today’s world, with meanings constructed through discourse and negotiation. The MeetUp SNG initiative (until 2025) has created a platform for teenagers participating in artistic activities that develop critical thinking. The activities not only develop mutual



**Figure 2: Programme Take P(art), Slovak National Gallery (2022 – 2023).** Photo: Juraj Starovecký

Source: Slovenská národná galéria (n.d.b)

cooperation, but also promote social interactions and bonds specific to communities. Other institutions such as Kunsthalle Bratislava and Galéria Mesta Bratislava also work with discursive formats. Examples include various performative tours, curatorial interpretations, and, in particular, participatory interventions in exhibitions and displays. An example of participatory intervention is the project *Take P(art) / Prečo (ume)nie?* event (2023), which was an interactive and educational “introduction” to the activities of the renovated SNG. The title is based on a play on words around the meaning of the term art in the Slovak language, with the word form in brackets also being a negation (nie). The project asked visitors questions that are important for both theorists and visitors. It allowed visitors to symbolically enter the works and the world of art by offering them the opportunity to leave a mark or physically manipulate the works.

The project was created in curatorial collaboration with O. Horák and followed up on his publication *Why Art?* (2022). Event in Slovak National Gallery was updated and adapted, and backed by the international platform MUS Máš umelecké črevo? [Do you have a knack for Art ?] (since 2016).

In addition to studio activities, exhibitions and programmes for schools use hands-on, “learning by doing” principles, with activating elements often found directly in the exhibitions. The new spaces have enabled greater use of digital technologies (the Digital Gallery project and the Web umenia platform). The scope and reach of educational activities have been expanded by podcasts, educational videos and digitised methodologies for teachers. Similar formats are also used by foreign institutions such as Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, shifting the emphasis from presentation to



**Figure 3: The Painting Entitled *What Could Have Been If They Hadn't Destroyed It*, as Part of *In the Display Window Series* (2021). Photo: Juraj Starovecký**  
Source: SITA (2021)

participation and the development of visitor skills. Art mediation functions in practice as a dynamic educational process in which the artistic experience becomes a means of personal improvement but also extends into the public and civic spheres. These aspects are present in the project *In the Display Window* (2021). This was an unconventional exhibition concept by the SNG, in which the public space of the street became part of the interaction between art and passers-by, who were transported into the “world of art” (A. Danto) the moment they stopped. The exhibition of works of art in the window of the former Berlinka café in the Esterházy Palace of the SNG engaged passers-by in an accessible way without the need for them to actively visit the gallery. Spontaneous participation dissolved the physical and symbolic barriers between the museum and the public, and the gallery expanded its sphere of competence into the urban public space.

The initiatives and solutions mentioned above, similar to participatory methodologies in pedagogy, emphasise participation and collaboration, active involvement and shared authorship. Many projects have brought innovative solutions, especially in relation to inclusive approaches (reducing physical barriers, reaching audiences outside the institution). The SNG has hosted various initiatives that have supported the participation of marginalised and excluded groups, which have been dramaturgically conceived as community events. More traditional community-oriented programmes include public discussions and accompanying programmes for exhibitions, such as the series of discussions *Take P(art) / Prečo (ume)nie?* The activities and programmes that the SNG has focused on for various groups of visitors respect the recommendations of current cultural policy documents (e.g. Creative Europe Programme, UNESCO Culture 2030

Indicators and New European Agenda for Culture). Instead of competing for the viewer's attention, however, the SNG has focused on building long-term relationships and forming strong community ties, which it has achieved through participatory activities that reinforce shared experiences. Another principle present in the programme structure and dramaturgy of individual events is audience engagement, particularly through constructivist and discursive pedagogical approaches that draw visitors into a complex interpretative process. As one of the key cultural institutions, the SNG fulfilled other objectives in addition to increasing visitor numbers: making art accessible to a wide range of visitor groups, improving cultural participation and democratising culture.

### Instead of Conclusion

After its reconstruction, the Slovak National Gallery continued its intensive efforts to build its audience. The institutional strategies presented are part of the art and culture of the second half of the 20th century. New methodologies and approaches are redefining the ways in which art is communicated to the public. The analysis and examination of artistic initiatives, as well as the strategies for working with audiences and visitors, is important for a comprehensive understanding of what is happening in the art world in the new millennium. The research project KEGA 009TTU-4/2025 “Eternal Returns: Examining the Influence of Historical Epochs on Modern and Postmodern Art” explores the persistence and transformation of artistic forms across historical periods,

highlighting the dialogical relationship between past and present visual cultures. The analysis of the SNG's educational programmes and activities draws attention to new tendencies and trends in curatorial practice and to the importance of comprehensive educational methodologies (using dialogue and participation). We also consider the digitisation and increasing digital accessibility of content and forms to be an important trend. New methodologies have enabled the SNG to fully transform itself into a public art institution whose activities are open, inclusive and educational. Interactivity, participation and conscious collaboration work synergistically. These principles have also been embraced by a large group of visitors, and it is precisely through the interconnection of the institution's activities and the needs of the public that the SNG has transformed itself into a strong player in the Central European cultural space. The study shows that contemporary art continues to function as a medium of historical consciousness, but its other functions also include interventions in public space and civil society.

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