

## Performing Empathy: What the Arts Can Offer Conflict Resolution

By Dorit Cypis, Susan Oetgen, and Eva Vander Giessen<sup>1</sup>

*Only someone who is ready for everything, who doesn't exclude any experience, even the most incomprehensible, will live the relationship with another person as something alive and will himself sound the depths of his own being.* – Rainer Maria Rilke

### Empathy, Art and Mediation

Differences between people can be incomprehensible, fueling mistrust that can deter us from engagement. Recognizing and negotiating personal and cultural differences is dependent on developing empathy for oneself and between people. Empathy is more than feeling for another; empathy requires us to reach deep within ourselves and recognize our own inner responses so we can then better recognize another person's response. Empathy that moves from within people and between people is core to the success of transformational mediation.

Being open to the responses of others while recognizing our own requires what the cultural philosopher Roland Barthes called being “twice fascinated”, (simultaneously as a participant in an event and as a witness)—to be open to both our immersive psychophysical experience and our mind's cognitive assessment. Sensorial and cognitive awareness are critical to a mediator's effectiveness, yet in the teaching and application of mediation strategies there is often an imbalance of attention given to these capacities. How might our field of conflict resolution expand if we rebalanced our attention between sensorial and cognitive capacities? The authors, who are artists as well as mediators, have found that the arts offer technique and methodology rich in perceptual, sensorial and cognitive strategies that can be creatively adapted to the needs and contexts of mediation.

The arts enhance our human impulse to make meaning through aesthetic processes that allow for relational and communicative acts between people. When meaning is shared, empathy “mediates” – *moves between* – our human differences. To the extent that art can generate empathy, and empathy can bridge the differences between us, art is implicitly “mediative.” Some artists use the relational, mediative qualities of their art practice to stimulate their audience to identify with people they typically do not identify with, or more directly to engage them to co-imagine ways to transform their belief and behavior.

In this article we focus on how art-based modalities can be applied to mediation with three goals:

- 1: Building our capacity to cultivate perceptual and bias awareness
- 2: Catalyzing and deepening our experience of empathy in mediation

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3: Engaging further discussion: What is left unsaid?

### **1. Building Capacity for Perceptual and Bias Awareness.**

“Aesthetics” is defined as “the branch of philosophy that deals with the principles of beauty.” The arts recognize “beauty” as simple and complex, inspiring and confounding. Artists respond to inner life and to the outer world through the filter of aesthetics, which for any single artist is dependent on multiple factors of perspective—history, context, intention, form, content and function. The aesthetic approach is a way to study and express subtle permutations of inner and outer life, explore the ability of art to evoke contradiction and uncertainty, and set the stage for vision, intimacy and dialogue.

In order to develop and hone an aesthetic sensibility, artists are trained to observe and recognize sensory and cognitive experience, including awareness of cultural context, internalized assumption, belief and bias that inevitably shift meaning. What can perceptual and bias awareness training add to a mediator’s practice?

#### **A. Environment**

*On the penthouse floor of the MGM building, Century City, Los Angeles, at the end of a typical workday, I entered a large conference room of a well-known law office. A colleague had invited me to make a presentation on what the arts have to offer lawyers and mediators. As an artist with a history of working with spatial variables I know well how the immediate environment shapes our perceptions and relations with one another. I was invited to communicate these skills.*

*I arrived early to familiarize myself with the room’s architecture, furniture, lighting and multi-media capacities and noticed that the room’s technological aspects could easily turn the oversized conference table and occupants seated around into theatrical characters.*

*At the push of any of various wall buttons I could make spotlights beam and dim or floodlights bathe and shadow areas of the room. I could draw curtains open or closed across a large glass wall facing the outer office lobby, to make the room private or reveal it to passersby, lower floor-to-ceiling window scrims to shield the room from the sun or raise them to expose the incredible landscape of Los Angeles 20 floors below. I could open wall cupboard doors to reveal projection screens that hummed electronically as they descended to the floor and rose back to the ceiling. I could turn video flat screens on and off, and swivel the leather seats surrounding the conference table in any direction.*

*Sixty invited mediators and lawyers arrived. They sat sedately facing one another around the conference table waiting to “conference” in the usual way. For the first twenty minutes I “played” the room to orchestrate its shifting potential and to alert the participants to their shifting experiences. They were mesmerized by the infinite variations of a room they previously had taken for granted over hundreds of conference hours with hundreds of clients. For twenty minutes they were released from their norm and invited to experience sensation, together. This aesthetic lesson revealed how we are framed and conditioned by*

*the environment we are in, made distant and made intimate to one another. Recognizing our experience of where we are and how our relations with others are affected means something, and especially to a mediator. -- Dorit Cypis*

## **B. Sight**

We often take for granted the experience of seeing, assuming that what we see is a self-evident truth. Artists are trained to recognize that seeing is about who is seeing as much as what is seen, that the act of seeing is like a mirror reflecting the seer back to herself. In fact, seeing is a complex phenomenon that is simultaneously physical, perceptual and experiential, revealing our deeply held cultural beliefs and personal experiences.

*The Seeing Triangle (Figure 1)* unpacks three key modalities of sight that can build the mediator's capacity to better understand nuances of a conflict by assisting her to recognize her own tendencies and biases and those of the parties she is working with.



*Figure 1: The Seeing Triangle developed by Dorit Cypis to teach artists perceptual awareness*

Three key modalities of sight:

- 1. Formal Sight**—mass, shape, volume, opacity, color, texture
- 2. Perceptual Sight**—judgment, beliefs, assumptions, comparison
- 3. Experiential Sight** – emotion, sensation, pain, pleasure.

For example: A person sees a chair and dislikes it immediately (“*I hate that blue chair, it’s ugly*”). The observation that the chair is blue is an example of formal sight. The emotional reaction is an example of experiential sight. And the judgment that the chair is ugly

represents perceptual sight. Each aspect of sight is influenced by culture and simultaneously by subjective experience of conscious or repressed memory, emotion, and sensation, *e.g.*, “*that blue chair, reminds me of a chair I fell off at age 5.*” If these influences are not recognized and acknowledged, they can shift how this person sees all blue chairs. Is she seeing the chair before her, or is past experience occluding this chair through bias?

Substitute person or place or situation for the chair and you can see how bias can shut down engagement. Recognizing the complexity of “how” we see informs us more subtly of our tendencies, bias and prejudice and opens paths of empathic understanding between us.

## **2. Catalyzing the Experience of Empathy**

The arts engage the mind and body interdependently, speaking both to our thinking mind and to our body’s ability to experience sensorially and emotionally. We hold emotion, memory, pain and joy, thought, dream and desire in our body/mind. We are each a repository of history through our lived experience. Aesthetic expression – form, mass, movement, sound, visuality or language – can stimulate us to revisit the repository of our history and go beyond it towards the history of others. The arts invite us to feel, think, and imagine from the self outwards. Aesthetics is a way to build empathy for ourselves and for others. Think of a film or a performance or an image you recently saw that stimulated you in this way.

In this light, aesthetics can be seen as a strategy to move people to see something about themselves and the world that they didn’t see before, catalyzing and deepening an experience of empathy. Specific arts practices are available as resources for mediators to explore, adapt and apply as catalysts of empathy within more traditional mediation practice.

### **Case Study 1: Susan Oetgen on *Fieldwork***

*Fieldwork*, a program offered by The Field, a NYC-based non-profit, is dedicated to the creative and professional development of performing artists ([www.thefield.org](http://www.thefield.org)). Each session features the presentation of works-in-progress “showings,” followed by a “feedback circle” in which the artist presenting work receives feedback from other artists present. Participants offer one another incisive and stimulating critique by restricting their feedback to direct observations rather than directorial suggestions. In doing so, they support the integrity and intentionality of each other’s creative agency. In *Fieldwork* the practice of observing and speaking about what an artwork simply *is*, rather than what one thinks *it should be*, engages another artist’s aesthetics directly and helps us see something new about the world and about ourselves. It is a practice that is inherently mediative.

According to Diane Vivona, a *Fieldwork* facilitator and former Executive Director of The Field, “...*Fieldwork* is like a guideline to living. It is all about communication and listening to people and being very specific about things...” *Fieldwork* is first and foremost a creative process, but an implicit, secondary outcome is that workshop participants relate to each other with empathy as a result of the trust that is built up in the process.

The Fieldwork methodology could be adapted for basic mediation training as a follow-up to role-play, or for advanced mediators who wish to meet together in a practice group. Giving incisive but non-directorial feedback after a role-play training session could help mediators uncover their own unconscious habits of perception and bias, and practice using language that aims for directness and honesty while supporting the integrity, intentionality and agency of others. Receiving honest, keen, non-directorial feedback about performance in a role-play training session – and not responding to it in the moment – could help mediators attend to their own sensorial and cognitive experience of vulnerability and stay present to the discomfort that vulnerability elicits.

### **Case Study 2: Dorit Cypis on *Psycho-Portraits***

*Psycho-Portraits* is a creative process I developed that bridges live performance, cinema and photography to show how we unconsciously internalize cultural images that stand in for our forgotten or repressed experience, and how images can re-voke liminal aspects of our identity. Over the past three decades I have used this process to create performative artworks for exhibition, and as a teaching tool for artists, psychotherapists, and educators across the United States and Europe. *Psycho-Portraits* also exists as photographs that have been widely exhibited.

In this process a participant is invited to my studio and brings with her autobiographic and public domain images that are compelling to her (whether through attraction or repulsion). The images are technically transformed for slide projection. Three projectors are placed side by side to project three cinema size images at once so that they overlap onto the same cinema screen. The light of the overlapping projections obscures the individual images. I guide the participant to explore the relationship between the images by moving bodily between the projectors and the screen, acting as a masking device to fluidly block light of the projectors, concealing parts of some images while revealing parts of others. On the screen the previously static and passive images come to life and (lava-lamp like) become active and fluid. The participant is now an actor enmeshed in a psychophysical relationship with her/his images, stimulated to recognize an internalized past experience, something newly remembered and felt, something hidden brought to light.

When I practice as a mediator, especially when in a high emotion session, I think back to what I learned from this rich process: how our inner lives are complex and contain the richness of our lived and learned histories; how we collect images, often unconsciously, that stand in for and reflect back to us something about our identities, hopes, dreams, loss and desire; how creating a safe creative space within which to gently unravel what we hold within, allows for deep self-reflection, empathy and possibility. Images carry stories.

*Try asking the parties in a mediation to each bring to a session an image close to their hearts. In silence, have the parties exchange their pictures and look at them for two minutes witnessing how they see the image. Have them return the images to the owners and ask each party to share what her/his image is about while the other/s listen. That is performing empathy.*



Moving across the projection beams Malka reveals an image of herself as child now embedded in the classic photograph, *The Living Dead of Buchenwald*, by Margaret Bourke White, 1945



Moving across the projection beams Robert reveals within his shadow an image of the opera singer Jesse Norman, now embedded within an image of himself as a child.

### Case Study 3—Eva Vander Giessen on *Playback Theatre*

*Playback Theatre* ([www.playbacknet.org](http://www.playbacknet.org)), founded in 1975 by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, is empathy embodied. In *Playback* participants/tellers share an important story from their life, which an ensemble of actors then spontaneously and sensually brings to life through words, movement, color, gesture and music. The story is mirrored back to the teller evoking an empathic emotional response from the teller towards herself often deeper than previously experienced, as well as evoking empathy towards the teller from the audience. *Playback* takes place in school classrooms, church basements, hospital hallways, conference rooms, and police stations to elicit the stories behind loss and hurt, stories that are often the underbelly of conflict.



True Story Theater in Boston in 2013, photo by Jason Jedrusiak

*Playback* builds a bridge between people, accessing the richness of their emotional and sensorial experiences and giving dignity to their internal struggles. *Playback* builds empathy for the shared grief, longing, fear and hope between people, an essential tool in humanizing people in conflict.

Many mediators use techniques to draw out the telling of personal stories, as in Narrative Mediation, which looks for patterns of repetition in a party's spoken story and guides a shift of the story to one of non-victimhood and possibility. Building on Narrative Mediation, *Playback* models sensorial evocation of a conflict narrative that places conflict within a context of humanizing relationships. *Playback* adds a rich understanding of a conflict story that goes beyond the spoken word to touch us sensually – “as a living, fomenting ingredient within the conflict rather than a simple account of the conflict,” (Linda M. Park-Fuller, PhD, *Beyond Role Play: Playback Theatre and Conflict Transformation*, Centre for Playback Theatre. 2005). Witnessing a story “played back” with all the artistic components of metaphor, sound and movement deepens the teller's understanding of his/her story and reveals to other participants their own perceptions in visceral “ah-ha” moments.

Mediators looking to catalyze or deepen empathy within a mediation context can invite a *Playback* ensemble to playback/reflect stories of the parties involved, and guide parties to recognize their own responses. Examples of the use of *Playback* include narratives between descendants of Nazi soldiers and Holocaust survivors, between Boston citizens who have been incarcerated, within families dealing with the tensions of inheritance and legacy, and among university stakeholders creating a healthy environment for diversity.

### 3. Engage Further Discussion: What is left Unsaid?

In closing, we return to a question rather than to answers. How might our field expand if we employed tools from arts-based practices rich in perceptual, sensorial and cognitive strategies, which can guide mediators to be “twice fascinated?” Drawing from our case studies, and the mentors and peers who have inspired our use of empathy, we offer the following guiding principles to cultivate perceptual and bias awareness and deepen an experience of empathy in conflict transformation:

- Listen for connecting threads (active listening and “narrative listening”)
- Recognize that mind and body are inherently connected
- Allow sensorial experience to inform cognitive reflection
- Recognize that internalized experience forms patterns of belief and bias
- Recognize that experiencing empathy for another person requires first experiencing empathy for the hidden part of oneself.
- Balance attention between form and content
- Have patience and understand that recognition takes time

Finally, we offer one question: *What is one risk you could take in your practice to creatively cultivate awareness and deepen empathy?*

#### **References:**

Barthes, Roland, “Leaving the Movie Theater”, Roland Barthes, in Philip Lopate, ed., *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Doubleday 1994.

#### **Some examples of using art to deepen empathy:**

The Borderland Foundation (see <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0016.207>)

The American Slavery Project (<http://www.americanslaveryproject.org/#!page2/cjg9>)

Ping Chong & Company ( [www.pingchong.org/undesirable-elements](http://www.pingchong.org/undesirable-elements))

Exit12 dance company ([www.exit12danceco.com/about.html](http://www.exit12danceco.com/about.html))

Los Angeles Poverty Department ([www.lapovertydept.org/about-lapd/index.php](http://www.lapovertydept.org/about-lapd/index.php))