

Essays

**EIGHT POINTS TOWARDS
A PERFORMATIVE
UNDERSTANDING OF THE
PRACTICE OF MEDIATION**

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**FREEING ART TO
CREATIVELY RETHINK
SOCIETY**

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1 – MEDIATION IS WHERE ART'S
CONDITION OF POSSIBILITY LIES

First of all, we will use the term “mediation” to refer to the agents and structures involved in the making, thinking, and distribution of art. We might then say that mediation is the convention through which art is sustained, with its shared thoughts and rules, that allows art agents to socialize and attribute value and meaning to art practices. By the same token however, mediation is also where art finds the seeds of disruption: conventions are what actually also allow art to create rupture and perpetrate displacement.

Therefore, art's condition of possibility lies in mediation in a double sense: firstly, mediation is a conventional system in which art can be acknowledged and appreciated as such; secondly, to the extent that art's *raison d'être* has been enmeshed in the production of difference from at least the beginning of Modernity. Therefore whatever appears to be conventionalized through mediation in the art world is what art will also strive to challenge first.

2 – MEDIATION USUALLY APPEARS
CONCEALED IN ART APPEARANCE
—IMMEDIACY IS THE OUTCOME OF
A CAREFULLY CRAFTED PIROUETTE
MADE BY ITS VERY MEDIATORS

It was the Greenbergian sense of art's autonomy that fully enclosed art in a sense of *immediacy*, having as outcome an understanding of art as a practice that apparently would exist in absence of mediation. “Aesthetic judgments are given and contained in the *immediate* experience of art,” stated Clement Greenberg.¹ Consecutive to this thought actually emerged the museal typology of the white cube with which art has been staged for years totally outside any other determination unless for its own sake as a kind of epiphany. The white cube magical effect definitely relies on the possibility to erase any trace of mediation.

Therefore, whereas the sense of immediacy in which the greater part of modern and contemporary art experience dwells doesn't really refer to any lack of mediation, immediacy demands a great effort from art mediators, which are required to perform a specific set of mediations while disappearing from the audience's scope at the same time.

3 – MEDIATION POTENTIAL DOESN'T INCREASE MERELY WHEN IMMEDIACY IS UNVEILED

With sociological and institutional art analysis and even Post-minimal and Conceptual practices, a *hyper-mediated* appearance of the art world arose during the 1960s and 70s.² Former modern immediacy seemed to be replaced then by a new imaginary space in which art was enmeshed in thick chains of mediation that had remained concealed up until that moment, haunting it entirely and plunging it into a heteronomous realm. For instance, Pollock's works started to be seen as mere puppets without any kind of agency of their own and with a success that would have been totally captured by political and economical interest.

Postmodern years have portrayed the absolute victory of mediators over art. The time has come to admit, however, that this imaginary has more in common with the modern art episteme than appears at first sight. Indeed, hypermediacy is just the reverse of immediacy and both are totally complementary: whereas an art-without-mediation had appeared to be purely antagonistic in itself to art's permanent ability to shock while remaining impassive to other contextual forces or determinations attributed to it, the moment that mediations started to be depicted around it, art's disruptive power was entirely discarded. Regardless of whether art's autonomy was utopian, mediation in art appeared to be fully dystopian. The episteme is therefore exactly the same: art's ability to challenge whatever is instituted has nothing to do with the work of mediators and vice versa.

4 – MEDIATION BRINGS DIFFERENCES IN PRODUCTION BEATING AT ITS VERY HEART

Modernism—and also Postmodernism in a more unconscious way—assumed that difference could only be produced totally outside social bounds and inherited cultural patterns. Modernism pointed this out as being feasible and Postmodernism merely reacted with skepticism. A performative understanding of mediation should allow us to surpass this paralyzing predicament, however, when realizing that difference cannot really be the outcome of the projection of any radical or mythical otherness but is instead produced through the encounter of contingent differences that happen to stand at the convergence of actual, differing and even instituted cultural patterns.

Mediation should thus be construed as an *art of the contact zone*. Mary Louise Pratt famously defined contact zone as a “social space where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths.”³ Modernity thought that difference came from a mythical outside and mediators merely undertook the duty of bringing difference back to instituted culture in the most discreet way possible. The contact zone idea instead indicates that difference stems completely from a multiplicity of practices and conventions of different provenance that come together in a sustainable crash.

5 – MEDIATION NEEDS TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED AS A CONTINGENT AND IMMANENT PRACTICE

There is no infallible, fully reliable or absolute mediator of the experience of art: not language, sight alone, interpretation, or institutional milieu. Similarly, there is no transcendental mediator that exists outside the plane of practice: from performativity, a mediator should be understood as the *double agent* able to relate the multiplicity of positions which it is able to reach rather than as the *third agent* of Hegelian dialectics that promises the ability to surpass the antagonism presented by outer stances.

A central notion in performativity is *agency*, which involves a relative understanding of power: no agent is capable of being either fully determining or fully determined. On the contrary, every agent maintains a specific power to affect and be affected by other agents all the time, to translate and be translated by other meanings, and to mediate and be mediated by other mediators.

6 – ART IS A TRUE AGENT OF MEDIATION

From a performative point of view, art cannot be understood as a passive agent, an entity merely mediated by mediators such as curators, gallerists, dealers, restorers or various and many others. Art also mediates relations by itself and intercedes in the action of other agents. Even art can no longer be understood as having autonomous and transcendental power, but only a contingent power always enmeshed in longer chains of mediation.

Inspired by the work of ornamentation, anthropologist Alfred Gell cites the mediation intrinsic in art objects that haunt human attention. Ornamentation, according Gell, is an intercessor in the creation of social relations among different beings and in providing channels for further social relations and influences.⁴ In another sense, contemporary artists like Tania Bruguera or Núria Güell even take the conceptual art statement “art as idea as idea” and turn it into a shield that covers the unfurling of social practices that could otherwise be considered illegal. Here, art as idea is what is definitely acknowledged as a mediator—*art as idea as idea, as a tool*, might come even closer.

7 – AUDIENCES, COUNTER-AUDIENCES, EVEN NO AUDIENCES ARE ALSO ART MEDIATORS

Audience is not the final recipient of mediation—as might be the case of mediations that arise from art, education, criticism, cultural marketing or a never-ending chain of others. Both those who visit museums and those who never set foot inside intercede in giving shape to the art system, and, therefore, art practices. As Jacques Rancière famously stated in his *Emancipated Spectator*, the public has to be understood not as a passive receiver but as an active narrator and translator—ergo, a mediator, we might add here.⁵

A certain avant-garde art once fostered the utopian ideal of co-creation in which the space between audiences would melt away. Today it might be more feasible to start thinking about the institutional implications of accepting the audience as an effective art *co-mediator*, in other words, the audience as a number of agents capable of distorting art mediations and even initiating mediations from scratch by themselves.

The meaning of co-mediation could be extended through the words philosopher Marina Garcés once used referring to the Occupy movement in Spain: “Self-organizing ourselves means evicting mediators, throwing them out of the silences that tear us apart and that they foster to monopolize ...[Self-organizing means] to appropriate what’s in-between.”⁶ Here, it’s important to highlight that rejecting instituted mediations would not produce the outcome of a direct access to an *immediate givenness* of the world, but, according to Garcés, what is really challenging now for oneself is to join and take part in the mediations to build up a common world.

8 – MEDIATION HOLDS ON TO MULTIPLICITY AND TENDS TOWARDS INFINITY

In the handbook *La médiation culturelle*, Serge Chaumier and François Mairesse also propose art as an agent of mediation. “The first system of mediation is art itself,” they state, and immediately ask themselves: “Do we have to add, therefore, mediation to mediation?”⁷ Without any doubt, our answer is yes.

A father of modernity the likes of Immanuel Kant identified art as the most reliable mediator that allows Humanity intuitions into the inner truths embedded in things beyond their appearance. For this reason, according to Kant, art should be kept as far as possible from any other mediation that might interfere with the transcendental mediation art bears by itself. However, once we deny art’s having any transcendental sense, its ability to reach a non-apparent experience of the world will no longer depend on the infinite combination of contingent mediations. In addition, a single mediation will never be enough from this insight: difference works in series.

Mediation will thus appear as art’s plane of immanence, as a common ground that expands beyond any division of labor in the art world and art’s own identities and conventions. Trustworthy experimentation processes take place against a background of featureless mediation where what lies at stake is the possibility to figure out new combinations of meanings and practices and the chance to distort and de-territorialize instituted ones. Only later would mediations such as art production need to be instituted anew, only later would another conventional category of mediation need to appear to the world—or perhaps even disappear as immediacy.

- 1 Clement Greenberg, “Complaints of an Art Critic” (1967), in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 265; italics are mine.
- 2 Hypermediacy is a concept I owe to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, also the relation with the concept of immediacy as it is pointed in the following lines. See, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
- 3 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40.
- 4 Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in Gell, *The Art of*

- Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams*, ed. Eric Hirsch (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2006), 172.
- 5 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London/New York: Verso, 2001).
- 6 Marina Garcés quoted in Amador Fernández-Sabater, “Anotaciones sobre mediación” (2012), text presented at the workshop *Making Worlds: Mediating Practices in the Network Society*, held in Medialab-Prado, Madrid, 2012, <http://pensarlamediacion.medialab-prado.es/2011/10/26/hacer-mundos-practicas-de-mediacion-en-la-sociedad-red-presentacion/>; translation is mine.
- 7 Serge Chaumier and François Mairesse, *La médiation culturelle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); translation is mine.