

Unfolding the Medium (Montréal, 22 Mar 2012)

Montréal, Université de Montréal, Mar 22, 2013

Deadline: Feb 3, 2013

Laurence Schmidlin, Les Avanchets

One-Day Symposium

"Unfolding the Medium: Contemporary Perspectives on the Visual Arts"

Université de Montréal

Despite its dismissal by postmodernist critics, the notion of 'medium' has never been discarded from visual arts' discourses and practices. As Alex Potts (2004) shrewdly pointed it, abolishing medium specificity, which characterized Greenbergian modernism, does not mean putting an end to the concept of 'medium' itself. The 1970s art criticism indeed could not help referring to it and naming it. Yet the persistence of the medium seems to be accompanied by a confusion in its uses and functions, be it in the form of denial or abuse, default or habit. How can we analyze and clarify this discursive ambiguity? Is it the symptom of a true obsolescence? Or else – our hypothesis: is it an indication that despite its complex history, 'medium' is still a concept, not only useful but also critical to the artistic field? How can we reflect on the medium in 'the age of the post-medium condition' (Krauss, 1999)?

It is obvious that 'medium' in art history does not function anymore as it used to, i.e. neither as a criterion of differentiation between the fine arts according to materials, techniques and skills (the *metier*), nor as the modernist principle establishing a hierarchy in the artistic field (de Duve, 1994). We must now take into account an enlarged field of the medium, due to the increasingly hybrid artistic practices peculiar to the 20th century. We must also consider the development and theorization of communication means (McLuhan, Ivins); the 'iconic turn' in art history which reevaluates the medium as the image-making's milieu and catalyst (Boehm, Mitchell, Belting); and the rise of intermedial theories (Müller, Moser, Méchoulan). Hence the contemporary stakes of the medium seem to target the relation and the porosity between the mediums in a network of medial practices, including yet exceeding the visual arts. Medium would therefore function less in terms of identity – providing specificity – than as a transforming agent for the image, or as an intention – a factor of dissemination.

This symposium aims to examine the notion of 'medium' in a contemporary perspective, and its relevance for art history and its methodologies, as well as for artistic practices.

Papers may address, but should not be limited to, topics within the following categories:

Terminology

How can we define the medium today? Considering the development of intermedial studies, can

we still use the singular 'medium', and/or without any prefix? If 'medium' is not a criterion for artistic practices anymore, does it nevertheless keep a meaning that would be specific to the field of visual arts? Or else, does the notion of medium itself imply that we take into account a field of practices and discourses exceeding art history? How is medium different, if it is, from media? Can we reflect on the visual arts without referring to the 'medium'?

History/epistemology

How can we analyze the survival of the 'medium' as a term, no matter what it embraces as a concept, after postmodernism? In this respect, did postmodernist criticism, as it put an end to the medium-based categorization of the artistic field, represent a real break into practices and discourses? How does the medium impulse different methodologies today in art history? Which of the artistic production or art theory still fertilizes the medium? Why does the notion of medium persist, as critics advocate the extension of contemporary art beyond medial and disciplinary boundaries?

Institutions

Is it possible to map the medium, according to geographical and linguistic criteria, intellectual traditions and institutional partitions? To what extent do museums shape the questions addressed to the medium, as they are divided into medial departments for conservation reasons? How do they, as well as art centres, influence our perception of contemporary art through the issue of medium? What are the purpose and aspiration of monomedial exhibitions today? How do these exhibitions deal with the task of defining a medium?

The symposium will take place on Friday, March 22, 2013, at the Université de Montréal, and will be supported by its Department of art history and cinematographic studies.

We invite art historians, art critics, curators and artists to send their paper proposals (300 words maximum) in pdf or word (.doc), designed for a 15 to 20-minute oral presentation, in French or in English. We will consider papers presenting achieved results, as well as ongoing research. The proposal must be accompanied by a curriculum vitae. Both documents will be sent jointly to the organizers, Ji-Yoon Han (ji-yoon.han@umontreal.ca) and Laurence Schmidlin (laurence.schmidlin@gmail.com), by February 3, 2013. The participants will be notified by February 6, 2013. Please note that we will unfortunately not be able to take charge of travel and accommodation costs.

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Reference:

CFP: Unfolding the Medium (Montréal, 22 Mar 2012). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 8, 2013 (accessed Feb 1, 2026),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/4479>>.