

CUMMA PAPERS #17

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

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ART AND CONFLICT  
A SURVEY AT  
THE BATTLEFIELD

Politics happen when conflict happens. According to Chantal Mouffe, "The political always has to do with conflicts and antagonisms".<sup>1</sup> However when conflict is absent, it is not because consensus has been reached; on the contrary, it is a consequence of exclusion. Politics establish the tenacious possibility to proclaim difference and keep it engaged with power structures. That is why politics claiming to be democratic need not be so concerned with ensuring a space of rational consensus, but with guaranteeing the survival of uncertainty and the possibility of conflict.

In relation to art, the argument follows a similar logic. We can say: art happens when conflict happens. The reason for art existing in Western societies may be nothing more than the introduction of difference into contexts where it pretends to be consensual. In her recent book *Agonistics*, Mouffe conceives of art as a kind of intensifier of social dissent, stating that the purpose of an artistic intervention is “to challenge the post-political view that there is no alternative to the present order”. According to Mouffe, it is in this fashion that the field of art constitutes “a crucial site of intervention for counter-hegemonic practices”.<sup>2</sup>

Jacques Rancière describes this dynamic in a similar way when he writes, “art and politics hold each other as forms of dissent, as re-arranged operations of the common sensible experience”.<sup>3</sup> Mouffe and Rancière are in agreement even when they argue that the potential of art as a counter-hegemonic practice is not limited exclusively to the space of representation: “First, art is not political for the messages and feelings it conveys about the structures of the world. It is not political either for the ways it represents the structures of society, the conflicts or the identity of social groups”.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, according to Rancière, “[...] what is really proper to art is that which carries out a new distribution of material and symbolic space. And that is what makes art so engaged to politics”.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, a mere space of representation is simply not enough when arming art for dissent. The questions raised by both thinkers indicate that what is at stake are some recognisable qualities that are inherent to mediation processes. As Godard’s famous claim goes, “the problem is not to make political films, but to make films politically”.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely in the confrontation between the “what” and “how”, between the adjective “political” and the adverb “politically”, or that which is identified, on our part, as “representation” and “mediation”, where we believe that the issue of the political in art is finally played out.

Although it is relatively easy to both imagine counter-hegemonic practices in relation to representation, and find its various genealogies within and beyond the art of the past two centuries, it is considerably more complex to consider counter-hegemonic practices in terms of mediation. Often identified with the assimilation of difference into established norms, cultural mediation co-opts art as an adaptive tool to facilitate the homogenisation of difference. In what follows, we will consider the potential for cultural policies;

<sup>1</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *The Return of the Political*. (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. “Introduction.” In *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*. (London and New York: Verso, 2013), XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Le spectateur émancipé* [The Emancipated Spectator]. (Paris: La Fabrique editions, 2008), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Rancière, Jacques. “Políticas estéticas” [Aesthetics and Politics]. In *Sobre políticas estéticas* [The Politics of Aesthetics]. (Barcelona: MACBA and UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), 2005), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, McCabe, Colin. *Godard: Image, Sound, Politics*. (London: Macmillan, 1980), 19.

production and distribution venues; museums; collections; and curatorial and educational activities to work as mechanisms for both the articulation of dissent and the spreading of unprecedented artistry. Can we really talk about mediation operating as a counter-hegemonic practice or can we only view it as a point of contention, an immediate hurdle to the controversial power of artistic practice?

Next, we will propose some cases in which to explore the established tension between the inclination toward difference that is usually attributed to artistic practice, and the tendency to neutralise that is usually attributed to mediation. What is at stake is the possibility of understanding mediation as a space for dissent, a way of thinking art politically to deal with the implications it can have in the art world. In other words, we are also concerned with the possibility to think about the artistic institution and not only art drawn from the same dissenting roots of democracy itself.

## MONUMENTALISE

Ana Palacio, the Spanish Government's Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2002 and 2004, opened Santiago Sierra's intervention at the Spanish pavilion in the Venice Biennale with a discourse that hid under the cloak of the autonomy of art practices. As we may recall, Sierra's intervention included two uniformed guards at the pavilion's back door, preventing anyone without accredited Spanish nationality from entering. The intervention was therefore trying to short-circuit the logic of international diplomacy on which the Biennale is based. It also ridiculed the Partido Popular party's conservative reforms to the Immigration Act that resulted in Europe's most restrictive immigration legislation to date.

This way, Sierra provoked the Minister to disseminate the debate about the policies of her own administration throughout the Venetian context. Instead of engaging in a dialogue with the artist, she opted to take the discourse of autonomous art to paroxysmic levels. According to her introduction, Sierra's intervention is "cutting-edge research into the outer limits of art", and his presence in the pavilion is related to his conceiving the space as a "groundbreaking, imaginative milieu associated with the most daring artistic exploits". According to the Minister, this act of "divulging the vitality of our art scene is also a way of conveying an image of Spain consistent with the status quo of an open, dynamic country".<sup>7</sup>

While two guards watched over the pavilion to act against foreign interference, Palacio felt comfortable including these words at the very beginning of the exhibition catalogue. Her text can be read as an aggravated symptom—as well as a caricature—of the

<sup>7</sup> Palacio, Ana. "Foreword." In *Santiago Sierra. Spanish Pavilion*. 50th Venice Biennale, edited by Rosa Martínez. (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores. Dirección General de Relaciones Culturales y Científicas / Turner, 2003), 9.

impulse of governmental institutions to domesticate art. To censor elements of the pavilion would have compromised the legitimacy of the Ministry's efforts to promote culture while providing Sierra with an even bigger audience. However, before dialoguing and expressing her anticipated disagreement with the opinions of the artist, the Minister made every effort to avoid the short circuit planned by the artist, launching a last, truly unbelievable attempt to monumentalise the proposal by reframing it as representing the interests of the State.

Robert Musil once wrote that monuments have a strange faculty for becoming invisible. The moment an artistic proposal is realised and linked to a landscape or a concomitant political system, it tends to disappear from our perception and consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Monuments are forms that, despite their intended role of serving memory, become collectively forgotten because they enable the construction of a placid context of consensus. This has nothing to do with the behaviours of art and the politics of dissent. With all its grandiosity and the potential violence of its representations, monumental nature makes itself evident in the manner in which governments subject art and politics to their goal of nullifying conflict.

## ART'S AUTONOMY OR ART'S LIFE

Monuments are made visible when political changes take place. Suddenly, when monuments become dysfunctional, they reappear in the public realm. However their period of visibility is equally elusive because the instigators of the new order feel the impulse to make them invisible again, often by means of destruction but also by means of confining them to public collections and museums.

As Dario Gamboni explains, the French Revolution produced a decisive turning point in the history of the destruction, as well as the conservation, of art. On one hand, for the first time iconoclasm was associated with the need to symbolise political change. On the other, that period saw the birth of the concept of national heritage and the modern construction of the museum.<sup>9</sup> While the political function of the art object was ultimately recognised with the advent of the Revolution and the removal of the symbols of the Ancient

<sup>8</sup> See Musil, Robert. *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*. (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*. (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997).

Regime, the mechanisms that separated objects from their everyday contingencies were likewise established, allowing them to accrue alternative symbolic content. The opening of the Louvre, the Musée des Monuments Français, and the public presentation of confiscated collections that belonged to the aristocracy and the church were emblematic of this development.

During the origins of modernity, acknowledging the political transgressions performed by art objects results in two different responses: destruction, or symbolic reconstruction in accordance with the emergent notion of autonomy. Etymologically speaking, “auto-nomous” means that something has been established by its own laws. With a renewed critical context ushered in by museums and the thinking of (among others) Kant, Hegel, Diderot and Schiller, an understanding of autonomy became essential. In particular, it contributed to the role of aesthetics as a law that presumably becomes inherent to understanding art practices.

Stephen Wright has recently suggested that “The price to pay for autonomy are the invisible parentheses that bracket art off from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm”.<sup>10</sup> We have witnessed it in our new millennium with Santiago Sierra’s pavilion. As evidenced in Ana Palacio’s text, the discourse on autonomous art is especially beneficial to the Minister, enabling her to defend Sierra’s proposal without addressing its political implications.

In fact, the interchangeability that Palacio applies between a discourse on autonomous art and its instrumentalisation in support of national interests indicates that the parentheses built around the notion of the autonomy of art are considerably closer to that of the invisible typology of monuments. “Monuments always fail”, wrote Musil. In terms of political efficiency, we nonetheless see supposedly autonomous art failing too.

## AVANT-GARDE AND ARRIÈRE-GARDE

However, the discourse on autonomous art cannot be considered to only be a euphemism derived from the split between art and politics. Throughout history, the notion of autonomy has been used to uphold a concept of art based on transcendence whose political implications have been tested by artists and thinkers. One of its progenitors, Friedrich Schiller, explored the redemptive function of art when renouncing its ability to intervene directly with reality. Quite some time later, Theodor Adorno extrapolated that art could only be beneficial to the world if it built relationships based on negativity. Consequently, to ensure art’s autonomy it became essential to engage with critical attitudes.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, Stephen. *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2014), 12. Accessed September 15, 2015: <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf>

With the avant-garde movements of the last century, art positioned itself in a relationship of conflict that was incongruous with reality. The project of the avant-garde is to dismantle unquestioning consensus to empower society. This was brought about through the influences of Russian formalism and Bertolt Brecht, who exposed audiences to experiences of estrangement in their daily lives to awaken understandings of the inner mechanisms of their lived experiences. Moreover, according to the conclusions of Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg, artworks should provide experiences of shock, pushing the viewer to the limits of language from where they could also gain insights into other types of lifestyles.

However, with the growing political awareness that comes with the avant-garde, the ideological concept of autonomy shows signs of fatigue. First, Dada and especially Marcel Duchamp pointed out that the art object often submits to the rules that keep it confined. Then, with the progressive commercialisation and museumification of avant-garde art, it soon became evident that with increased distribution, art can end up restricted to the same roles that harden society, rendering it incapable of producing its expected changes.<sup>11</sup>

Well into the second half of the twentieth century, the so-called neo-avant-garde artists began considering alternatives to establishing a conflictive relationship with reality. Hal Foster sketched out a general impression in which, from the standpoint of the avant-garde, these artists tend to move toward positions in the *arrière-garde* to adopt an attitude more like that of resistance.<sup>12</sup> The ability to challenge cultural patterns is in these cases conceived as interferences performed from within society, and as actions on a micro-political scale, not as widespread cultural breakdowns. They also consider that artistic interventions increase in effectiveness as they abandon the privilege of autonomy and yield to the conventions of their own field. This results in the benefit of diligence when trying to integrate within subcultural movements and establish alliances with potentially subversive social groups.

However, in this post-autonomous context, it also becomes urgent for art to be conceived of as alternative media. It has to be able to gain enough room to maneuver and construct situations beyond those mediations that are proffered by art institutions. In 1971, Allan Kaprow pointed out that understanding art as a concomitant practice resulted in artists “engaged in changing jobs [...].

<sup>11</sup> The construct around the concept of the failure of the avant-garde is based on Peter Bürger's classical essay: Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). In regards to the thoughts of Schiller and Adorno, as well as those in relation to the questions of estrangement and shock produced by the avant-garde, the following have also been useful: Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2004); and Hantelmann, Dorothea von. *How to Do Things with Art*. (Zurich and Dijon: JRP/Ringier and Les presses du réel, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Foster, Hal “For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art.” In *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), 139-155.

to become, for instance, an account executive, an ecologist, a stunt rider, a politician, a beach bum”.<sup>13</sup> In this light, an art practice can all of a sudden become just a pile of Xeroxes or a publication, an infiltrated action on TV or a street performance, a website or a collaborative action. More recently, we have seen how conversations and lectures have rapidly proliferated as the preferred means of blurring categories of art to establish potential relations with the pedagogical realm. Collaborative practice and the field of education can still be seen as the last frontier through which the blurring of art is filtered.

## REARTICULATE

*Is the Museum a Battlefield?* is a 2013 Hito Steyerl lecture that was part of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. The video version circulating online omits its condition as a work of art, appearing instead as “documentation of Hito Steyerl’s lecture”.<sup>14</sup> Within her narrative, the artist traces a history of museums that relates its ivory tower looks with its contested past of exhibiting the spoils of the French Revolution. Steyerl suggests that within the origin of the museum lies a battlefield, and this conflict can be found in historical examples as well as new museums just beginning their activities.

Steyerl uncovers how contemporary art is financed by the arms industry, revealing the names of companies that have sponsored the latest editions of the Istanbul Biennial itself. The artist invites us to follow the trajectory of a bullet, starting from its firing on the battlefield to it hitting the museum and becoming a work of art. According to the artist, to be able to use art to transform the museum as well as reality, it is necessary to recover the true version of that battlefield which is at the center of all artistic production. The question that Steyerl poses to us, therefore, is what possibilities we have to seize the current momentum of that bullet and change the direction of its course.

The video ends when the artist’s narrative is complete. However at the lecture site, an incipient debate developed before being suddenly ended by a burst of applause. More drama was added to the situation because the site was surrounded by a vast deployment of military forces trying to repress the recent revolt of Gezi Park

<sup>13</sup> Kaprow, Allan. “The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I.” In *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993), 104.

<sup>14</sup> Steyerl, Hito. “Is the Museum a Battlefield?”. Vimeo video, 36:48, posted by Museum Battlefield, March 2013, <http://vimeo.com/76011774>. Thinking about the double nature of Hito Steyerl’s lecture in terms of an art or education initiative was triggered at Nora Sternfeld’s workshop, *Exhibitions as Contact Zones. Post-representational Strategies in Curating*, organized by A\*Desk in collaboration with Fundació Joan Miró. Barcelona, March 2014.

development protestors. One of the few questions posed to the artist was: “What would you have done if you were the curator of the Biennial?”. Steyerl responded with a succinct throwaway line about being glad to have not been the curator.

However, can we so quickly dismiss the curatorial question from the debate Steyerl raises? Can the battlefield be reinstated in the museum, and is this a question that should enmesh only artists when considering the possibility to increase their own agency? Is it possible to change the direction of the bullets on a personal level? Does this have anything to do with mediation? Should it surprise us that the artist does not take into account the conflicts inherent within the Biennial’s curatorial structures, neither in her monologue nor in the subsequent debate? Does this not constitute a reinscribing of her work into the logic of an art object rather than letting herself extend and use the conversation to impact the structures of the Biennial beyond the parenthesis of the autonomous?

I recently had the opportunity to address these questions to Steyerl. Her response was: “if someone asks you what would you do if you were the Emperor of China and you answer that you are not him, does that reduce the debate?”. Indeed, as an artist Steyerl does not have to answer for challenges faced by the curator, but questioning the Biennial’s structures of mediation and challenging its administration about the bullet’s direction would have propelled a considerably more complex (and uncomfortable) debate. It is likely a discussion that would have become untenable in the socio-political context of the 13th Istanbul Biennial.

In fact, I imagine I would have received a similar answer if given the opportunity to ask Ana Palacio about why her text pointedly ignored the political implications of Santiago Sierra’s work. Now is clearly the time to look at things in reverse. While Steyerl avoids identifying herself with the *emperor* of the Biennial, the Minister bypasses discourse around the artist’s proposal. In both cases, what is at stake is the question of autonomy which is invoked in relation to different strategies and takes place within the dynamics of a variety of power relations. In the case of the Minister, autonomy survives as an instrument to eradicate controversy and impose a false consensus around the policies of her administration. However Steyerl’s insistence on remaining halfway between the artwork and its blurring to leave a conversation open to debate can be construed as a means to make conflict emerge in sustainable ways.



## AS A CONCLUSION

The autonomy of art cannot be understood as an inherent law or essential question anymore. It is even less simply a question of aesthetics. More likely, it is a question related to tradition and memory, to a set of codes and conventions of different origin that, over the years, have settled in and around art production. The autonomy of art described by Schiller in his seminal letters at the end of the 18th century is reinterpreted today as a question that, despite its apparent paradox, has more to do with mediation than with the purity of the art object.

We understand however that heteronomy, its opposite, works in a similar way. When, with the help of Kaprow and many others, art reacts and suggests ways for us to overcome the mediations that makes it an allegedly autonomous object, its capacity to elicit unrest can also be substantially diminished and blurred into a realm free of conventions. And so, while we can conclude that the autonomy of art is a product of mediation, we can also believe that mediation is at stake from the moment in which art spreads, and looks for ways to reach beyond the aesthetic code that its institutions defend.

Dissent is something that requires shifting, but also rearticulation. To the practice of art, it implies exploring the possibilities of deterritorialisation as well as a chance to play with the conventions used by the same institutions it entangles. It also implies that we must understand the mediation of museums occurs in non-neutral spaces. Like art, there is a necessity for museums to express and even represent themselves within sites of conflict like battlefields. If we still think of art and mediation as separate entities, it is because we traditionally wish to increase the effectiveness of art as an instrument of dissent. However in the aforementioned cases, we prove that this can result in the confinement and breaking down of dialogue.

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*Art and Conflict: A Survey at the Battlefield*  
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