

## Medium Specificity/ Autopoietic Form

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*Patently, art does not have a monopoly on creation, but it takes its capacity to invent mutant coordinates to extremes: it engenders unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being. The decisive threshold constituting this new aesthetic paradigm lies in the aptitude of these processes of creation to auto-affirm themselves as existential nuclei, autopoietic machines.*

(Felix Guattari)

In the opening pages of her 2010 collection of essays, *Perpetual Inventory*, Rosalind Krauss states that the anthology “charts my conviction as a critic that the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art.”<sup>1</sup> Such a declaration is not unexpected: Since the late 1990s in particular, Krauss has elaborated critical artistic practices resistant to the so-called “post-medium condition” triggered by postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> Contra hybrid, intermedial genres such as installation art, Krauss argues that the most important contemporary art turns on the invention and reinvention of mediums, each of which carries within it a set of recursive structures that provide a logic for production and a matrix of meaning.

Yet the statement is not without a certain historical paradox. It was Krauss, after all, who in the early 1970s delivered a penetrating critique of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the two writers most closely linked to the discourse of medium specificity in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Greenberg’s and Fried’s modernist criticism, she argued, telescoped history into the dissembling objectivity of master narratives, and it was against this looming teleology that Krauss sought out aggregate, impure, and self-deferring mediums such as film and opted for alternate terms such as “technical apparatus” in her criticism of the 1980s and 90s.

But what if one were to reorient the discussion of medium within contemporary art away from the question of specificity and towards an articulation of form? How would the terms shift in character and relation, and what potentialities might be revealed? Consider Maria Eichhorn’s *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company*, a work commissioned for Documenta 11 in 2002 that involved the establishment of a public limited company with a single shareholder, Eichhorn herself. Eichhorn stipulated

that the company's assets—the required initial investment of €50,000—should never appreciate in value. She further transferred all shares to the company itself, thereby eliminating her role as shareholder. Stripped of the possibility of profit, the company forfeits its *raison d'être*, but also cannot fold. The €50,000 investment, meanwhile, loses its representational and mobile character as capital and becomes mere matter, static and dead.

*Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company* is an example of a work of art whose form, rather than medium, is recursive. As a legal entity continually divesting itself of its own financial potentiality, it is a glittering kernel of autonomy within a market system premised on the capital of art. Documentation regarding the company's establishment can (and has been) purchased, thus participating in an external appreciation of value that its internal rules disallow. Yet the company *itself* is owned by itself. Impervious to market fluctuation, it simultaneously evacuates and gives form to capital, each operation a figure to the other's ground.

The mediums for Eichhorn's work of art are the legalistic discourse of financial institutions, the profit motive of capitalism, the aesthetic valuations of the art world, and the means by which such valuations translate into financial worth. Eichhorn did not reinvent these mediums; indeed, she appropriated them readymade. What Eichhorn invented, to use a phrase drawn from Felix Guattari, are the "mutant coordinates" of a form that is capable of both endless self-production and constant irritation within the very mediums from which it is plied.<sup>4</sup> To speak of the "medium specificity" of *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company* is to redundantly describe the work of art's constituting matter without articulating its animating form. Rather, one might term its medial condition as "aspecific": a *de facto* situation and a processual state.

Like an increasing number of contemporary works of art, the form of *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company* is not a shape or object, but a behavior. Such works frequently have multiple, fluctuating, and contingent mediums; their critical capacity, meanwhile, derives from their situatedness within interactive ecologies, some of which involve other works of art, but many of which do not.

How does one recalibrate seminal terms like "medium" and "form" in response to the character of such works? This essay proposes one possible defamiliarization through the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, whose elaboration of systems theory in the 1980s and 1990s has widely influenced the analysis of communicative structures in sociology, science, and law.<sup>5</sup> Luhmann's systems theory is a totalizing theory of social production, and as such, not without ample pitfalls of its own. Within the

context of contemporary art, however, its decidedly nondisciplinary vocabulary provides new purchase on a set of foundational art historical terms and a dynamic description of their relations, and it is these aspects that I seek to foreground here.

For Luhmann, the term "medium" does not refer to individual media, for example, painting or sculpture, and the normative conventions or technical supports that determine them.<sup>6</sup> Rather, Luhmann conceives of medium broadly as the means by which communicative acts occur. Just as oil acts as a vehicle for pigment in paint, a medium is a facilitator; it establishes a condition of possibility for the appearance of forms, but is in itself formless and fluid. Drawing from the psychologist Fritz Heider, Luhmann understands medium as coupled with form in terms of relations or proportionalities: Form is a tight configuration of elements, whereas medium is a loose configuration, potentially of those same elements. Medium and form are therefore mutually dependent, and may constitute and reconstitute each other through time.

Luhmann's articulation of medium opens up to the exigencies of contemporary art in a number of ways. First, Luhmann's coupling of medium and form is *aspecific*. The form/medium distinction may be narrowly conceived in terms of an object: matter gathered into definite shape as opposed to loosely distributed, as in the difference between a pyramid of sand fashioned on a table and the loose sand of the beach upon which such a table might sit. But a work of art's form might also emerge out of multiple, simultaneous mediums, artistically or otherwise defined. One could conceive of the form of Gabriel Orozco's *Sand on Table* (1992), a photographic image of precisely the form/medium distinction described above, for example, not simply in terms of the photograph's composition, but the analogic transit between the table as a physical site where a form/medium distinction is performed and the photograph as a temporal platform by which this event is contained and conveyed. The flexibility of the form/medium distinction thus spans micro and macro art systems, and further, allows mediums to be continually constituted rather than *a priori* defined.

Luhmann conceives of medium and form as intrinsically, rather than circumstantially, co-dependent. Thus, a medium has no abstract identity or determined set of conventions that particular forms only provisionally embody. Rather, mediums only become visible by way of the forms constituted through them; in turn, forms do not emerge without the facilitation of mediums. The practice of institutional critique produces institutionality as a medium just as the medium of the institution allows for

a configuration of elements to form into institutional critique. Similarly, the interventionist forms of many activist-oriented practices (Critical Art Ensemble or The Yes Men, for example) are often intended to force a loose configuration of elements within a political-economic medium such as global capitalism to thicken into a legible structure that can be perceived, analyzed, and potentially dissolved. The shifting relationship between medium and form thus allows for works of art to act swiftly and nimbly, keeping pace with the ever-quickenning speed of capitalism itself.

Luhmann's formulation is temporal and understands forms not in terms of stable objects, but contingent events. A work of art is conceptually constituted within one medium, or condition of possibility, but it may also be dissolved and reconstituted by way of another. Much of the way art practices and discourses animate other art practices and discourses is by virtue of these reconstitutions. The inception of minimalism is one such example: If Frank Stella's paintings of 1959 emerged out of the American discourse of medium specificity (with its priority on mining the limiting conditions of the painterly support), contemporaneous artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd almost immediately reconceived of these paintings as insistently material objects that dialogued with the literalness of their own sculpture. The temporal nature of the form/medium distinction thus acknowledges the way in which reception and interpretation are *constitutive*, rather than incidental, to the identity of works of art. It also explains why a configuration may be a work in some cases, but not in others.

Luhmann's articulation of medium depends on the foundational role of the observer in making the distinction between medium and form. In their respective formulations of medium specificity, both Greenberg and Fried advanced the centrality of the observing subject or critic.<sup>7</sup> Luhmann departs from these approaches in his emphasis on the subject's *perception* over and above his or her *judgment*. This means that questions of evaluation shift from designations of quality to estimations of success, wherein success is measured (with no specific positive valence) by the ability of a medium/form distinction to generate further distinctions for one or several observers. Likewise, while the observer is constitutive in describing the medium/form distinction, she necessarily occupies the blind spot of her own point of observation. As such, a second observation is required to situate the first, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Contradiction, contingency, multiplicity, and delay are thus woven into the very texture of observation, and consequently, the role of observation in determining medium and form.

Finally, Luhmann's coupling of medium and form shifts attention away from identity and towards boundaries. Following the mathematician George Spencer-Brown, Luhmann argues that each form/medium distinction creates an inside and an outside of that form, and further, that "the question of what lies on the other side of the form is posed anew in each instance."<sup>9</sup> Whereas narratives of twentieth-century modernism frequently depend on the relative stability of art as a category to either continue or supersede, Luhmann's aspecific conception of medium and emphasis on processes of differentiation and distinction allow for an epistemological, rather than ontological investigation of how communicative acts come to mean. Observing distinctions (whether traditional "canvas/painting" couplings or the increasingly frequent "project/practice" pair) is therefore an experimental, rather than disciplinary gesture, one in which "art" is a permeable and often temporary form posited relationally by way of a broader medium.

As a descriptive schema, Luhmann's formulation of the medium/form relationship does not offer prescriptive guidelines for art's evaluation. But it does facilitate the charting of new genealogies of distinction responsive to the recursive forms increasingly prevalent in contemporary art. Let us take an example. In 1954, Lygia Clark made a collage framed by the mat of a *passee-partout*, and observed that when she abutted this *passee-partout* with a collage element of the same color, a line of space appeared between them. She observed that the line was an undrawn line, that it was contingent and indexical, and that it was found, not made. In a series of paintings that same year, Clark deployed this line to "break the frame" of the painting support. The line of space entered the composition, while the painting moved out to incorporate the frame. Two years later, Clark connected this "undrawn line" to the lines of space that appear between doors and lintels, windows and frames, tiles on the floor. She named it "the organic line," and began to use it as a structuring element in her work.<sup>10</sup>

Since Greenberg's articulation of medium specificity depended on exploring the limiting conditions of a medium in order to better secure its "area of competence," it was well equipped to make sense of the problem of edge. Fried later observed exactly this concern in the "deductive structure" of Stella's paintings and Kenneth Noland's "discovery of the center" in the radiating circles of his target forms. Edge, in Luhmann's terms, corresponds to the interior limit of a form. It establishes identity by virtue of a positive value: in the case of Stella or Noland, by way of the painting's support. Clark's "organic line," by contrast, concerns the *exterior* limit of a form: that

which is liminal, rather than integral, to a form's identity. It is a byproduct of making, but it is not making in itself.

By using the organic line as a generator, Clark shifted attention from support to frame, from edge to gap, and from the medium of painting as a historically continuous category to the medium of space through which the distinction of painting and not-painting occurs. It is precisely this interval that Gabriel Orozco harnessed when he placed an empty shoebox on the gallery floor as his contribution to the 1993 Venice Biennale. For Orozco, it was crucial to preserve the infrathin plane of space between the box and the surface upon which it rested. By insisting on the continuity of this space and that around and within the box itself, Orozco effectively displaced the form of the sculpture from the empty container to the volume of space that filled it. If the shoebox demarcates this form's interior edge, the infrathin plane of space beneath the box gestures to its exterior limit: that limit where form disaggregates into medium, or full space once again becomes empty. It is therefore the *shoebox* that functions as the organic line of this sculpture, dividing medium from form and work from frame.

From this perspective, Orozco's innovation lies less in his recuperation of the category of sculpture than in the way he slots traditional mediums such as sculpture and photography into the liminal interval described by Clark's organic line. Hence his notorious 1994 solo exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, in which he affixed single clear yogurt caps to each of the gallery's four walls at eye-level. Rather than solicit interest in themselves, the yogurt caps initiated the viewer's rotation in space as she pivoted within the gallery's architectural frame. In so doing, the caps coagulated the medium of space into an experienced form, one that could also be understood as social, historical, and institutional, as when, in *Home Run* (1993), the artist activated the space between the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a neighboring apartment building by asking residents to display oranges in the windows facing the museum. The physical coordinates of this work—oranges, windows, apartment building, museum—correspond to what may once have been called "sculptural" materials. In *Home Run*, however, they form an interface that allows the fugitive medium of "public space" to become visible as a contingent, relational, and *potential* form produced in the moment of observation.

It is precisely this interest in harnessing and manipulating "extra-artistic" mediums—mediums such as public space, ideological conflict, historical archives, communicative networks—that characterizes much contemporary art today. In such practices, the first function of a work is often to identify

form/media distinctions already being performed outside the normative parameters of art. Yael Bartana's *Trembling Time* (2001), for example, documents the Israeli state's orchestration of a monumental form of nationhood through the minute of stillness that begins Yom Hazikaron, the memorial day for Israel's fallen soldiers. Shot from an overpass into the bright lights of oncoming traffic, the video captures the moment when drivers, signaled by a siren's wail, stop their cars in remembrance of the dead. The video is first a tool of observation, one that records how the state carves an ideological form out of time and space. Extending this minute to a full seven minutes, Bartana calls attention less to the ritual's startling lack of movement, than to the indeterminate edges of the stillness itself. As one watches the cars' interminable grinding to a halt, their ghostly doubling, and finally their gradual return into motion, the video unhinges the specific contours of the ideological form and reveals it as a continuous thickness that permeates embodied experience within the nation-state as a whole. In producing this ideological "trembling," Bartana has, in Luhmann's terms, turned the state's own distinction between form and medium into another medium, one generated by the organic line that previously acted as their boundary.

The organic line, conceived broadly as the interval that occupies a position between entities, is a boundary reconstituted by every distinction between medium and form. Yet, since the medium/form distinction can in turn function as a medium, the organic line is also the mechanism by which form becomes recursive. As Bartana's *Trembling Time* demonstrates, such recursivity may involve one medium/form distinction generating another. But it may also involve the maintenance of a single form, as in *Maria Bichhorn Public Limited Company*, where the potentiality of capital generates an organic line that is both constantly frustrated and endlessly renewed.

Luhmann, extending the biological theories of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to the realm of social systems, describes such behaviors as *autopoietic*, meaning auto- or self-producing.<sup>11</sup> An autopoietic unit is one that generates and regenerates itself via internal feedback, despite external events that require adjustments to its internal functioning. Such an entity's autonomy depends on the continual production of its own boundary. Since the positing of a boundary involves both the internal and external limits of a form, however, an autopoietic unit is not hermetically sealed, but rather "structurally coupled" with its environment in relations of dynamic interaction and response. In Greenberg's formulation of medium specificity,

recursivity inheres in the self-critical capacities of a medium; in Krauss's articulation of the technical apparatus, it provides a set of self-generating rules through which to justify artistic choices. An autopoietic conception of recursivity, I would argue, understands recursive operations as the means by which an artistic entity not only regulates identity, but creatively responds to its outside.

Francis Alÿs's *The Rumor* (1997) offers a succinct demonstration. The piece began when Alÿs initiated a rumor in a small Mexican town concerning an individual who had not returned to a hotel, and ended when municipal police issued a missing person poster based on verbal descriptions, thereby giving the rumor's immaterial fiction a material claim. Demarcated by these two events, the work of art's form consisted solely in its ability to recursively generate the work's identity as a set of related verbal utterances in relation to the larger medium of social communication through which it flowed. As an autopoietic unit, the rumor responded to deformations brought about by the medium: idiosyncrasies in narration, for example, missing details, or the addition or elaboration of information when the rumor was told. Indeed, such deformations actually *sustained* the rumor, which also demonstrates the interrelationship between medium and form. As such, Alÿs's rumor models, not simply the recursive operations of a work of art, reconceived as an autopoietic unit, but the way in which such a work can act as a "perturberance" within other self-organized systems that share its medium, such as community infrastructure or the geopolitics of the state.

It follows that one central task of the "historian" of contemporary art is to excavate the organic line that lies between these various configurations, to give texture to how this boundary delineates inside limits from outside space, and to chart the "mutant coordinates" of experience produced in its wake. To approach works of art as autopoietic forms produced in relation to a multiplicity of *aspecific* mediums is to conceive of art's autonomy as operative, rather than merely ideological or aesthetic. Such an autonomy does not concern the specificity of art within an art system, so much as the way works of art organize themselves into acting entities that can be observed and described from various locations, each of which contains its own blind-spot, its own aporia of situated space. Contemporaneity is one such blind-spot. But it is also the generative platform from which to construct the conditions of possibility for works of art, and the subjects that observe them, to exist.



## Notes

- 1 Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. xiii.
- 2 Also see "Reinventing the Medium" *Critical Inquiry* 25: 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 289–305 and "A Voyage on the North Sea," in *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism" [1972], in *Perpetual Inventory*, op. cit., pp. 115–128.
- 4 Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 106.
- 5 See in particular Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* [1984] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- 6 Niklas Luhmann, "The Medium of Art," in *Essays on Self Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 215–226 and *Art as a Social System* [1995] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- 7 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" [1960] and "Complaints of an Art Critic" [1967] in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticisms, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 85–93, 265–272; and Michael Fried, "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella" [1965], in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 213–265.
- 8 Niklas Luhmann, "Speaking and Silence," *New German Critique*, no. 61 (Winter 1994), pp. 25–37.
- 9 Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, op. cit., p. 123.
- 10 Lygia Clark, "Lygia Clark and the Concrete Expressional Space" [1959], in Lygia Clark, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1998).
- 11 Niklas Luhmann, "The Autopoiesis of Social Systems" and "The Work of Art and the Self-Reproduction of Art" in *Essays on Self Reference*, op. cit., pp. 1–20, 191–214; Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* [1972] (Boston: D. Reidel, 1980).