

## **Intermedia Research Creation and Hydrapolitics: Counter-environments of the Commons**

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All the bells tolling and alarms now ringing from innumerable corners suggest through their confusion that we have, finally, basically, run out of time. The convergence of social and ecological crises and the paralysis of collective praxis that now marks our conjuncture as inert space, with its teeming urgencies and forebodings all in the trap, is the situation which provokes a new point of departure for intermedia research, while the historically unprecedented concentration of power wielded by capital on a global scale commands the burning of all beginnings. The research program of Intermedia Research Studio at the Department of Sociology, University of Alberta (<http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/irs/>) draws from many intellectual and cultural political sources but the cross pollination of Birmingham and Canadian cultural studies and communication theory, the critical, historical social sciences, including social reproduction feminism, post-Western Marxism, decolonizing theory and political ecology are particularly important for us. The core question for our work asks “how do you represent social contradictions?” Social contradictions are not reducible to logical ones as they are embodied, as they unfold over time, as they are not one but a tangle of many, and as power makes them disappear to thin air. In this regard, they pose for us nothing less than a crisis of representation,

the very problematic that cultural studies introduced to the humanities and social sciences, now some time ago. Social contradictions accumulate violence, fuel conflict, and crises are their symptoms. Their gravitational field constrains the terrain of social justice politics, thus the problematic's importance. But in the work of the Intermedia Research Studio over the last fifteen years, there has come to be a definite zone of intersection and overlap between intermedia research and what we in Canada have come to call research creation. (Chapman and Owen 2012, Loveless 2015) This chapter theorizes this intersection and articulates the scholarly problematic to which it pertains, while offering a sketch of the broader cultural political stakes in play. I organize this chapter as a tryptich. The first panel sets in place the key features of our prolonged but still contemporary "crisis of representation" to which both intermedia research and research creation responds, through a critical consideration of Natasha Myer's astonishing and wonderful research creation experiment "Anthropologist as Transducer in an Ecology of Affects." The second panel offers a sketch of an intermedia theory of the commons which underpins the approach to intermedia research we have taken at the Studio. (Mookerjea 2001, 2002, 2003, 2010, 2011, 2016) The final panel then focuses on the questions of contradiction and their representation and theorizes intermedia research creation through an engagement with Jacques Ranciere's writings on aesthetics.

## 1

"Anthropologist as Transducer in an Ecology of Affects" reports on a methodological experiment —*adanceaday*, one dance composed per day over one complete year (2007-08)—

Natasha Myers carried out in order to refine the “craft of making fieldnotes” or, as she puts it with marvellous precision, “cultivate new dexterities for sensing, recording and propagating movements and affects”. (Myers 2014) *Adanceaday*, she explains, is a para-site—a spin off, or supplement—to her current research on the visual and performance cultures of the life sciences. The site of her ethnographic fieldwork would seem to be a molecular biochemist’s lab where researchers are studying the role of proteins in cellular metabolic processes. The metabolic functioning of these proteins apparently involve a kind of signalling biochemists call *transduction*. Insofar as these signals are transformed in their movement through the viscous material of the cell, the movement and action of these signals are open for interpretation. The signals’ affectivity and behaviour appear to be critically dependent upon the medium through which it is transduced.

The dance-a-day experimental para-sites this paper describes thus involved “an intensive, daily training regime in sensory transduction” so that our ethnographer would be able to “articulate and document ephemeral differences in affects, energies, and intensities” of the intra-cellular, molecular signalling processes as these depart in some movement of becoming. The para-site experiments themselves involved a discipline of the body, the composition of a series of dances that ran, it seems, somewhere between a regime of athletic training, meditation, yogic discipline, perhaps even mimetic or at least magical invocation, in order that the ethnographer becomes bodily capable of transduction. A second step of this experiment involved another act/process of transduction turning these daily dances into gestic energy diagrams or kinetic traces that Myers presents in a compelling daily blog for the year. Along with its point of departure in the molecular biologists’ questions regarding the cellular *media* of extra-cellular signal

transduction, this range or distribution of procedures, processes, translations and transformations, strikingly manifest this research's intermedia character, the implications of which remain for us to explore.

But among the stakes of this research, it seems equally clear, is the possibility of inventing a new imaginary for our scientific understanding, enabling molecular biochemistry to move beyond both industrial-mechanical factory and postindustrial informatic imaginaries for understanding what these proteins and cells do. "Proteins are frequently figured as working machines that transduce force and energy within the cell . . . Pulling signal transduction out of the deterministic registers that inflect its use in molecular biology" Myers suggests "it is possible to render it otherwise" so that "a propagating signal cannot be reduced to information or code, and transduction cannot be reduced to information transmission or translation." (10) This ambition to trigger a restructuring of historical and epistemic imaginaries is perhaps where Myer's experiment is most obviously a project of research creation insofar as it thereby plugs itself into what Jacques Ranciere (2004) theorizes as the "aesthetic regime of art" and so reaches toward the social praxes —rather than alleged foundations— of knowledge and, as we will soon enough see, thus falls headlong into the abyssal contradictions of this regime as well. Any such "structural revolution" or "paradigm shift" in post-Enlightenment science today cannot, however, avoid the debates and critiques of the entanglements or complicities of science with colonialism and its persistence as neocolonialism. Indeed, as now a formidable and authoritative body of research has demonstrated, the modern scientific project and the colonial project were at least mutually enabling even if that is not the whole story on either side. Moreover, Anibel Quijano's (2000) theory of the colonial matrix of power builds on such scholarship to propose a way for us

to think the structural persistence of this historical link between power and knowledge in the present. Anthropology as a discipline, and the ethnographer as a key narrative character in this disciplinary discourse, have both been sites for the critical interrogation of this history and this matrix of power; thus the larger stakes of Myers' research and this experiment. (Asad 1973; Marcus and Fischer, 1999) Consequently, we will need to interrogate and assess this experiment in relation to its power of critical intervention in all three imaginaries, the colonial as well as the industrial and informatic.

But it is equally important, as we shall see, to underscore that Myers also quite emphatically makes clear that “[t]hough I did move and draw, *adanceaday* was not an art project. It was an experiment in methods focused on cultivating new modes of attention, and refining the craft of making fieldnotes.” (12) As such, it is a project that seeks to advance the frontiers of her own social-science: “Becoming anthropologist could be understood as an ongoing process of becoming a better-attuned transducer of an ecology of affects. One must keep learning how to ask new kinds of questions about the world and its practitioners, in all their peculiarities, specificities, and differences, and this involves articulating, training and continually retraining one's sensorium.” (11) Accordingly, she locates this methodological experiment in relation to the manifold critical transformations and reinventions that anthropology has embarked upon — its becoming a “third space”, its rapid revolution from a reflexive turn to recursive one— in response precisely to the discipline's extended confrontation with the colonial scene of its emergence. In this instance, disciplinary reinvention and methodological experimentation entails an engagement with experimentation in the life sciences: “As an anthropologist I want to understand how experiments are staged, how experimental phenomena are rendered, and what

the results are made to mean . . . I need to learn how to register subtle and nuanced movements, gestures and affects, as they coalesce and converge in experimental efforts to render significance and tell stories about living bodies.” (8) Thus “tuning in, honing attentions, thinking otherwise, and manifesting alternate worlds require forms of experimentation with concepts and media” in order that a kinesthetically entangled and embodied mode of inquiry may be invented. Here, however, we encounter a productive tension in Myers’ para-site research that will be both the point of departure and the focal point of the argument of this chapter. This tension is precisely one between *adanceday*’s deeply rooted immersion in the cognitive-political project of innovative social science, on the one hand, and its consequent methodological strategies and tactics that, as Myers admits from the outset, “can render anthropological inquiry closer akin to an experimental arts practice than a social science.” (2)

Our first encounter with this tension, then, springs from the concept and process of transduction seemingly at the heart of this work of research creation. How are we to understand its deployment here? Are the processes of transduction involving the dances and their situational muses then the same as those processes of transducing the gestic diagrams from these dances? Where and how then does the blog including its more theoretical text intervene here? If these are three kinds of transduction, then how do they work in relation to the processes of transduction the proteins perform? What, in other words, is ethnographic “thick description” in this instance? Given that there is no description without interpretation and, I would argue, no interpretation, without narrative, what poetics enable such relays or parallels?

Myers herself prefaces her experiment with the Deleuzian-Spinozist question “What can a body do?” (1) and authorizes her intervention into the sensory regime of ethnography here, she

tells us, by allowing herself to be “lured to think of living bodies as fleshy antennae whose physiologies act as a kind of resonating media that oscillates between conductance and resistance” so that a certain figure of the body, posited as energetic and excitable, responsive and receptive, ends up serving as the reification that stands for the transducer of affect. (10)

Consequently, some currents of affect theory might be tempted to address questions about the theoretical weight carried by the concept and, indeed, by the embodied practices of transduction here, by turning the issue immediately into a restrictively metaphysical one, whether of the One and the Many or one regarding Spinoza’s doctrine of substance or Bergson’s doctrine of matter. Such a normalized way of proceeding with our reflections would lead to two theoretical dead ends intermedia research creation would want to avoid. First, by reducing Myer’s research creation practice to the established disciplinary game of European philosophy’s supervision of world affairs, we would evaporate the material specificities of this practice and the encounter with the heterogenous it offers us. Rather, philosophical production might then be able to extract the raw materials and resources this singular practice provides for the preservation of its aura but at the cost of depoliticizing the questions we are asking here. Secondly, as a consequence of this depoliticization, the substitution of Spinoza’s metaphysics here, say, for an investigation of the political poetics generated by the relations between these four mediations of transduction, leaves precisely the body’s capabilities and potentials untheorized. Myers’ opening conceit that her dances amount to experiments with “ways to hitch rides on the movements of concepts, understanding concepts to be dances with meanings, bodies, and worlds” and not “not attempts to ‘capture’ concepts or the essence of a text” would then be rendered trivial and empty. (12) In order to resist this normalcy of depoliticized scholarship, the body in question here needs to be

located in the histories that weigh upon its possibilities and with regard to the social relations of reproduction on which it depends. As so many positions in contemporary cultural studies from feminist theory and beyond have all insisted, this includes the body's situation in intersecting oppressions and its burdening by the accumulated violence of the world ecology of historical colonial capitalism. Therefore, the question for intermedia research creation is not the classical metaphysical one "what can a body do?" but rather the question "what can a body do with other bodies?" in the postures of which theory and praxis clash and collide. (And Myers herself seems to incline just this way when she speaks of "getting *involved* in the beings and doings of all kinds of bodies" and as the involvement of situational muses, passers by on the street, and a dance witness or two also suggest.) (1) Indeed, as we shall see, Myer's research creation practice poses this question — "what can a body do getting involved in the beings and doings of all kinds of bodies?"— through the intermedia relays it conjures between these four kinds of transduction.

We can then begin to develop a more concrete sense of the intermediations between these four kinds of transduction Myers' experimental research creation project invents and ultimately pull from this larger lessons regarding the intersection of intermedia research and research creation by briefly considering some of the parallels between this methodological experiment and some characteristic strategies and tactics of contemporary critical art.

We have already noted the first and most starkly obvious of these which entails the displacement of one privileged medium into a dispersal of relationships between several media. In contemporary art, canonically, this is the move from easel painting or sculpture, for example, to virtually anything and everything including media such as binary code or erosion chosen strategically to problematize the very idea of medium at its limit in the first place. Here, we have



a parallel move from ethnographic writing to something like dance and to something like drawing or calligraphy. But there is one step more here. The first flourishing of experimental ethnographic writing from a few decades ago did everything except consider the materiality of the processes of reading ethnographies as an immanent practice of ethnographic research whereas for Myers the dances and gestic diagrams offer up readings of texts as much as they pursue or memorialize movements and affects. (12) On the other hand, this link to writing, literacy and textualization itself repeats through Myers' blog and essay the relationship of critical art practice to its *statement*, whether referring explicitly to a brand name theory or not, but without which contemporary art seems incapable of framing itself off from the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life it works with.

Moreover, the dances and gestic diagrams were composed not only at Myers' field research site or at her home but in all kinds of public spaces, it seems, including a streetcar ride, drawing in or casting spells upon people or things, whether they would know it or not. In this way, the para-site research shadows the move of contemporary critical art from the flagship galleries of the capitals of culture to virtually anywhere and everywhere just as contemporary science and technology studies has insisted that the laboratory always and everywhere remains part of the social world despite all the purification technologies, airlocks and padlocks with which it encloses itself into proprietary secrecy. But it also thus demonstrates, ironically and literally, actor network theory's solemn critical advice to "follow the actors" to be a piece of nonsensical instruction as useful as an IKEA manual as we observe the agency of vapours billowing out of a smokestack dutifully and ethologically recorded in the blogged energy diagrams. (Latour 2005:22)

Nonetheless, this is not the only mystery made manifest and concretely embodied by this research creation practice. If the daily dances undertake to transform and redistribute the ethnographic sensorium by intermediating its transformations through the diagrams and blogposts then we are also made to confront, in relation to the range and variety of protein transduction biochemistry seeks to comprehend, the very non-identity and illegibility of the dances themselves. For the gravitational force field created by the other mediations seem to pull apart the dances from themselves, as Myers tells us that if “dance were understood as the expressive and rhythmic movements of a human dancer’s body moving to music, then most of the dances would be unrecognizable as dance. This practice was not an attempt to perfect technique or musicality, though once in a while I turned on music and just danced.” (12)

Whether it is through the energy and movement of the drawings or through the theory readings of the blog posts or the biochemical pathways of the proteins or through the intermedia ecological system they all together comprise, some mystery or riddle has thus befallen the dances—or its ecology—rendering this research creation assemblage into something like a koan regarding the history of the dancing body and the accumulated violence of its entanglements with other bodies. Experimental ethnography in recent decades has been rather Kantian insofar as the analogies it has mobilized to guide itself (with fiction and montage for example) posit an aesthetic constitution of its cognitive capacities. Here, however, not only the cognitive content of *adanceaday* but also its critical force is whatever it is not only by virtue of the way it restructures our anthropological imaginary but also that of the biological sciences, indeed each through the other, regardless of the position one takes in anthropology’s internal debates regarding its status as a science or a humanism. But in that case, Walter Mignolo’s (2011)

intervention via what he calls the decolonial option then stands as some kind of benchmark for the present stakes of ethnographic experimentation. For Mignolo, the decolonial option is an epistemic strategy of delinking from the dominant eurocentric regime of thought through a two part operation that had been a staple of anthropology for some time, mobilizing the “salvage paradigm” in order to provincialize the universalist pretensions of metropolitan epistemes.

Mignolo, moreover, proposes a mode of delinking proper to the world of contemporary art which he theorizes as a decolonial gesture: “decolonial options, attitudes, and turns need decolonial gestures to be constituted, felt, seen, understood as such”. (2014: np) Any epistemic revolution that remained oblivious to the epistemic violence of the colonial matrix of power through which anthropology finds its historical condition of possibility and that thus leaves its eurocentered foundations intact would be a half-baked epistemological breakthrough at best. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Myers’ dances go even further than what the theory of decolonial gestures proposes to do. The dances are decolonial gestures insofar as the gestic diagrams become an allegory of brand name “travelling theory” (Said 1983, Davies 1995) circulating through the commercial networks into which Spirit is currently sinking. By tangling the signature, the logo, the ideogram and the figure into an indeterminate movement, the gestic diagrams delink the blogged theory readings from that corporate-academic dispositif. The dances of the extracellular transduction movements critically appropriate the theory readings by *situating* them, so that we feel the shock to thought reverberating from the decolonial attack against the universal: After all, how convenient it is that protein transduction as it occurs in life on the planet should take care to follow the lead European philosophy steps out for it? But the dances also thereby remember, as most current posthumanisms do not, the animist agentic magic lying in the deepest recesses of

antecapitalist life that the colonial project sought to drive from the face of the earth. In delinking the laboratory from itself as the pretext of this project, the dances transduce the blog citations of reified and scrapbooked theory into something like magical formulae, pig latin legalese authorizing the experiment as such. And, to be sure, Mignolo's critique is aimed directly at the level of epistemology even though the resurgent indigenous subaltern traditions this critique allies itself with do not reify themselves into such modern partitions of social being. Not surprisingly, it then wears on its sleeve as a symptom the facts our situation, in which knowledge, culture and discourse appear in the world only through the mediation of the world market and the fullness of being of its apparent choices: "By saying that the decolonial is an option and that decolonial aestheSis is an option, we mean that there are other options. In fact, we assume that there isn't anything but options" (Mignolo and Vasquez 2013: np) rather than irreducible and inescapable political struggle and conflict in the face of impossible choices. In this regard, Myers' research creation moves beyond the decolonial option. Through the intermediation of any of their transduced options, the "unrecognizable" dances certainly do not retrieve the reifications of any formally codified and traditionalized dance practices in drawing on them all for its conditions of possibility. Rather, their absent presence in this research creation situation leaps beyond the racialized, epistemic, ethnic museum space in which Mignolo's critique operates and gestures toward the temporalities of cultural and class political praxis and its crises.

What lessons can we draw from Natasha Myers' research creation experiment regarding the intersection of intermedia research and research creation? In taking up this question in the remainder of this chapter, I sketch out here a necessarily condensed account of the *intermedia theory of the commons* underpinning the research underway at the Intermedia Research Studio in the Department of Sociology, University of Alberta. The convergence of ecological and social crises makes the question of navigating social contradictions an even more urgent one for social justice politics today and the theoretical problematic of the intermedia commons figures crucially in the Studio's research probes which explore the representational dilemmas posed by the entanglement of multiple social contradictions of power and politics.

The critical challenge we take on regarding the problematic of intermedia has to do with the tenacious persistence of reification, technological reductionism and transcendence that beset any engagement with it. All of these genre conventions of modern colonialist discourse are in play, for example, when the term media is used in its narrow, restricted and conventional sense which crystallizes its object by pulling away from questions of power, capital and violence that mediate social belonging along with its exclusions and class instrumentalities. Debord's (1977) theory of spectacular society famously diagnosed this fetishism—the substitution of images for social relations—while theorizing its roots in the separation and enclosures of capital formation rather than as the accumulation of images as such. In doing so, Debord reactivates the specific difference of Marx's dialectic from Hegel's which turns on the representational dilemmas posed by what Marx theorizes as the exchange abstraction underlying the value form on which the possibility of capital accumulation rests. The abstraction presupposed by commodity exchange is institutional and so concrete and a social reality but also an appearance from which the key story

of capital's power is structurally and fetishistically occluded. (Marx 1977) Thus a dialectic emerges in which the restricted sense of mediation and this more general one of the conditions of possibility of belonging, exclusion and exploitation point to each other without being reducible to each other. Insofar as the work of Canadian political economist and communication theorist Harold Innis (1951) anticipates many aspects of Debord's intervention, while locating his critique in the singularity of historical marginalization, his "bias of communication thesis" has served as an important fulcrum around which we have tried to rethink the connections between Marx's critique of political economy, information saturation, the cultural politics of new and old media, and what Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) call the "environmentalism of the poor".

As an economic historian of social institutions through which the British Empire became the dominant power in the Americas, Innis was sensitive to the significance of problems of communication for the working of markets and the possibilities of capital accumulation through the Atlantic cod fisheries, the Fur Trade, the Atlantic triangular trade, the opening of the Canadian West via railroad construction, the wheat boom and immigration, each of which are major turning points in Canadian settler colonial nation-building. Innis writes his communication theory as the British Empire is being superseded by U.S. cold war leadership intervening in another wave of globalization of the system of nation-states through decolonization in Asia and Africa. The capacious scope of his historical imagination is crucial to our understanding Innis' bias of communication thesis and his denunciation of our "obsession with present-mindedness" which he theorizes as the "space bias" of modernity. (Innis, 1952) In this diagnosis of the spatialization of time and history as the paradigmatic crisis of modernity, Innis joins not only Debord (1977) but also Lukacs (1972), Lefebvre (1991) and Heidegger

(1962) among others. But it is the specific way Innis formulates the matter that is important to us here, not the least of which is his idiosyncratic deployment of the term “bias” itself.

(Mookerjea 2011)

Innis adopts the term “bias” from electrical engineers and more specifically from the circuitry of telegraphic signalling where a direct current is used to establish a reference point enabling an alternating current to amplify a signal. Rather than point to issues of mere opinion and prejudice then, Innis’ critique of objectivity (his target here are the claims of the new discipline of neoclassical economics to constitute a science) launched through his metaphor then proposes a mediation of mediation, just as “cutting on the bias” in tailoring creates a special property of the cloth cut. The bias of communication is not then its slant imposed by an abstract monadic subjectivity. Rather, Innis’ historical research investigates media with regard to whether the historically located, social, cultural and geopolitical assemblage of which they are a part turns up the bias of communication for strategies of projecting power across space or over time. Innis’ normative ideal illuminating this historical analytic sets its bias to balance the contingencies of space and time. Unlike the many ancient empires Innis examines, an ideal empire able to balance the communicative imperatives of space and time, he supposes, would endure. These historical studies, however, are but preparation for Innis’ main concern, capitalist modernity and its cutting edge, the British Empire, then in full collapse. (1952: 120) The communicative space bias of capitalist modernity, then, not only has to do with a system of communication making world scale markets possible but also mediating this space of accumulation with modes of political power —competitive and warring absolutist empires and then nation-states—on which the accumulation of capital depends but which accumulation then,

in a feedback loop, also fuels. Innis connects modernity's space bias then to the dominance of one assemblage of communication which he describes as "industrialized communication based on the eye". (1951: 79-81) This approximation of the theory of spectacle has the further advantage of enabling us to conceptualize *information* socio-historically, beyond the reifications of cybernetic theory and applied mathematics. Innis' historical approach to theorizing information thus sets into relation the history of writing systems, the emergence of prose, various genres of reports, the news and so on against oral tradition in order to pose the problem of information in terms of what we today call media ecology. Innis moreover connects his account of the dominance of "industrialized communication based on the eye" over all other modes of communication to his theorization of Canada's postwar passage between the British Empire and American imperialism and his grasp of the key global role that the American military industrial complex and the transnational corporation would come to play in the emergent cold war world order all of which are both cause and effect of "present mindedness."

This media-ecological (and dialectical) aspect of Innis' work was deeply important to McLuhan, who recognized its possibilities and built upon it, as it is for our mobilization of the concept of intermedia now. McLuhan's restaging of the story tells of the "world environment" projected by the American superpower and, in turn, theorizes Canadian society in terms of its cultural borderlines as the hidden ground of a *counter-environment* to American power, an idea to which we will return below. (McLuhan 2009) Famously, McLuhan's field theory of media environments arrives at its ultimate conclusions by including all technology under the rubric of media, since all technology communicate and extend the human senses; all technologies mediate by changing patterns and scales of perception. McLuhan eventually develops his inaugural



media ecological insight that “the message of a media is another media” (1964: 24) into his tetradic hermeneutic of “retrieval, reversal, obsolescence and extension” (1988: 116) which I argue yields the seeds of a new intermedia dialectic.

In order to grasp this possibility, we need to return briefly to his mentor’s bias of communication thesis and make clear that space bias and time bias, for Innis, are not binary oppositions. Within the structural dominance of modern space bias, rather, the time bias of communication offers the possibility of what Innis calls a “strategy of culture” that he argues might be able to offset the space bias of industrialized communication based on the eye from its inside. As a “strategy of culture”, Innis’ plea for time directs us to the ethico-political core of the problematic of communicative praxis. “Culture is concerned” he writes “with the capacity of the individual to appraise problems in terms of space and time and with enabling him [sic] to take the proper *steps* at the right *time*.” (1951: 85, my emphasis) Here is where we find Innis’ cultural politics; one that still appeals in Arnoldian terms to a humanist mobilization of high culture, to be sure, against the cultural imperialism of American mass culture. But there is even here a symptomatic slippage, as Innis turns to oral tradition as well, and so also to popular culture, for another possibility of a strategy of culture against present mindedness. (1952: 76) The mediation of mediation that the concept of communicational bias brings into the foreground, then, also opens the door to some kind of dialectical interrogation and cultural political intervention in our media ecology that moves the problematic intermediation from the domain of ontology to that of collective political praxis (just as *adanceaday* retrieved the rhythm and tempo of dance in order to interrogate the para-sites of its ecology).

McLuhan then transposes the terms of this Innisian dialectic and proposes to probe the possibilities of resonating intervals of televisual acoustic space against the hegemony of Gutenberg linearity. Yet readings of McLuhan tend to overlook the geopolitical situation that is decisive for both Innis' and McLuhan's thought. As a result, they also ignore McLuhan's exploration of what he calls those *cultural borderlines* that makes Canada different from both the US and Europe. As we have already noted, McLuhan here proposes the concept of a *counter-environment* in relation to the US led world information environment which he argues serves as the latter's hidden ground, enabling the workings of this world environment to become profiled in new and critical ways. (McLuhan 2009: 71-86) At the Intermedia Research Studio, we find this aspect of McLuhan's thought to be intriguingly suggestive and so appropriate and refunction this concept of *counter-environment* for our purposes to mean the sacrificial ground upon which history's victors stage their version of events. (Mookerjea 2015) Furthermore, we appropriate McLuhan's signature thesis "the message of a media is another media" and pull out an intermedia theory of the commons by reading Marx's formulation of his concept of mode of production in the *Grundrisse* (1973) in its light.

Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, sketches out an account of human collectivity mediated by reproductive relations with nature which are in turn mediated by social relationships. (1973: 25-30) Different modes of social reproduction organize these intermediations variously. The two mediations —social relations mediated by nature and transformations of nature mediated by social relations— comprise a vicious circle which resist all attempts to stabilize this concept of social reproduction either ontologically or historically. Rather, these two entangled axioms circulate at the heart of Marx's materialism of "sensuous praxes". This double mediation —

*intermediation*— is the condition of possibility of every kind of commons —from forests and streams to art, science and cities— which are all media technologies in McLuhan’s sense of transformations in the pattern and scale of sensuous praxes. Intermedia research consequently takes McLuhan’s hermeneutic tetrad of retrieval, reversal, obsolescence and extension to define strategic possibilities in subaltern and class struggles over the creation or enclosure of commons. Capital accumulation everywhere depends on the history of the commons as well as on its generative future which it must also nevertheless enclose as capitalist property in order to accumulate: this is its ultimate social contradiction. Our challenge then is to bring into representation social contradictions we live and embody at various scales and durations, by intermediating the restricted and general sense of mediation discussed here, as appropriate for the kind of creative commoning practices under study in a given research probe. In doing so, the creation of what I call a subaltern counter-environment is a critically important step and this brings us to the doorstep where intermedia research and research creation meet.

## 3

To start from a clear point of departure, not all intermedia research involves research creation. Whether or not all research creation requires some kind of intermedia research is a question I will leave open here for future investigation, even if there are reasons to think that it does, as we shall see. Nonetheless, it is with regard to the question of contradictions that are irreducible to logical contradictions and so to the question of their representation that I want to stage an encounter between intermedia research and research creation in this final panel of this

tryptich. Judging by the debates and controversies, research creation evidently entails some kind of unsettling of the institution of art by its migration into a different kind of institution, our research universities. If this is to amount to any thing more than a desperate attempt on our part to gentrify an increasingly shabby public system, then it is the deeper critical and political character of art that is at stake in this re-siting, as it most definitely is in this encounter. For this reason, Jacques Ranciere's theoretical engagement with its historical and contemporary institution is an indispensable point of entry. Ranciere's theorization of modern and contemporary art is important for us because he defends the project of critical art against affirmations of contemporary art's alleged post-Utopianism: and intermedia research creation is a mode of utopian theoretical practice insofar as it seeks for a passage in an impasse, for liberation in a deadlock, at least by winning a thicker description of the deadlock.

For Ranciere, art cannot be theorized by deduction from any general concept of art, beauty, man, subject, world, or being; rather his approach is rigorously socio-historical when he argues that art and politics (or more precisely, "metapolitics", since Ranciere is referring to politics beyond elite manipulations of the state) involve more fundamentally the "distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community" (2010: 25) For Ranciere, we can then speak of many historically and culturally different regimes of art. Contemporary art, both European and global, however is rooted to a historically and cultural specific institutional development Ranciere terms the "aesthetic regime of art." (2004: 10)

Regarding the historically specific redistribution of the sensible that is the aesthetic regime of art, Ranciere observes that art, in Schiller's foundational theorization, comes to be identified and institutionalized as art no longer by virtue of any criteria of ethical or technical

perfection but rather through a distinction between modes of being and more precisely its belonging to a specific form of sensory apprehension. Schiller says of the statue *Juno Ludovisi* under discussion that it is “a free appearance.” (2010: 27) The “free play” Schiller attributes to the experience of spectator of the *Juno* describes an activity that simply just is and has no end other than itself. As Marcuse would put it, “Art’s unique truth breaks with both everyday and holiday reality.” (1978:49) In this free play, this non-instrumental activity that is an end in itself, Ranciere, like Marcuse, finds a “consubstantial” new politics that is also a new distribution of the sensible. Famously, Schiller refers to the French Revolution when he reinterprets Kant’s arguments that the free play and free appearance of aesthetic judgement/experience suspends the power of form over matter and the power of intelligence over sensibility. Ranciere reminds us that Schiller interprets Kant’s theses allegorically: “The power of ‘form’ over ‘matter’ is the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature. If aesthetic ‘play’ and ‘appearance’ found a new community, then this is because they stand for the refutation, within the sensible, of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities.” (31) Schiller’s celebrated slogan that Man is fully human only when he plays turns on the opposition between the freedom of play and the servitude of work.

The key lesson Ranciere draws from Schiller’s allegory is that the “aesthetic suspension of the supremacy of form over matter and of activity over passivity makes itself thus into the principle of a more profound revolution, a revolution of the sensible existence itself and no longer only of the forms of State” (31) We will come back to this revolution below. But for Ranciere, the aesthetic regime of art, in its singular constitution through Schiller’s allegory,

establishes the inner link between metapolitics and art insofar as both demand a redistribution of the sensible. As Ranciere puts it, “aesthetic autonomy is not that autonomy of artistic making celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience. And it is that experience which appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life.”(32) But it is this very autonomy that then installs the aesthetic regime of art in a constitutive contradiction, indeed, as we shall see, not only one, but several, each of which will be crucial for our account of the intersection between intermedia research and research creation.

This contradiction, which Ranciere argues runs genealogically “originary and unceasingly at work” from the aesthetic regime of art through Utopian modernism to contemporary critical art, can be summed up, as he does himself, thus: in the aesthetic regime, “art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art.” (36) But let us take such contradictions one at a time and see how each of them falls into this one before we ask “fall through to where?”

Regarding Schiller’s *Juno*, the statue’s autonomy is argued to derive from its promise of a free community since this sculpture was, for the Greek sculptor of antiquity who created it, a translation into stone of a shared belief of a community and not art, since in this world there was “no experience of any separation between everyday life, art, politics and religion. In this logic, the Greek statue is art for us because it was not art for” its maker. (35) Whereas for Modernism, this contradiction doubles into two. In the case of Soviet Constructivism’s drive to revolutionize the social world by becoming it, “the politics of the free form demands that the work realize itself, that it eliminates itself in the act, that it eliminate the sensible heterogeneity which founds aesthetic promise.” (39) In the other variant, of “resistant form”, theoretically championed by

Adorno, the “social function of Art . . . is to not have one”. This is the work of art “that desires nothing, the work without any point of view, which conveys no message and has no care for either democracy or anti-democracy” the work that is then paradoxically “‘egalitarian’ by dint of its indifference.” (40) Moreover, Ranciere argues that both of these contradictions of the politics of aesthetics live on whether through the lineages of formal innovation, collage, Brechtian defamiliarization, or situationist detournement down through to contemporary critical art. In this regard, for Ranciere, there is no postmodern rupture between modern and contemporary art. The blurring of the boundaries between the specific world of art and forms of popular culture is constitutive throughout as a result of a movement of translation back and forth across the laser beam separating everyday life from art. Contemporary critical political art is therefore again “founded on the play of exchanges and displacements between the art world and that of non-art” (50) Now, it is a matter of art drawing upon spectacle in order to keep it at bay, to formulate the problematic in Guy Debord’s influential terms that remains crucial Ranciere’s argument as well as my own and to which we will return below. But throughout all the proliferations, mutations and transformations of collage, for example, across the field of contemporary critical art, for Ranciere there remains this originary and unceasing contradiction wherein art is driven to substitute itself for the given distribution of the sensible and yet withdraw from it in order to redistribute it. Ranciere builds this genealogical argument not only to challenge the idea of a rupture between modernism and postmodernism but also to displace recent academic debates opposing autonomous art to socially engaged art, and to criticize contemporary aesthetic ideologies ranging from neo-Christian communitarianism, an ever full basket of the most self-absorbed postmodern ironic playfulness, to the Lyotardian ethical dissolution of heterogeneity

that “goes hand in hand with a whole current of contemporary thought in which political dissensuality is dissolved into an archipolitics of the exception and in which all forms of domination, or of emancipation, are reduced to the global nature of an ontological catastrophe from which only a God can save us.” (42-43) Be that as it may, let us then keep multiplying some contradictions of our own.

Indeed, the most direct point of entry for intermedia research creation in the problematic Ranciere sets out here can be found in his engagement with the aesthetic politics of the Situationist International and Guy Debord’s theory of spectacle. In an essay devoted to exploring the “paradox of the spectator” that compares the aesthetic political pedagogies of Brecht’s epic theatre with Artaud’s theatre of cruelty and criticizes their deeper elitist determination by an underlying Platonic schema, Ranciere observes that both Artaud’s and Brecht’s attempts at “restoring theatre to its true essence” has “as its theoretical backdrop the critique of the spectacle.” (2007: 274) The conclusions Ranciere reaches in this essay—that the common power of theatre is ultimately the power of the equality of anonymous intelligences rather than either some kind of interactivity between performer and spectator or membership in the theater’s pedagogic community—are ones that I affirm and, indeed, appropriate here.

However, it is his discussion of mediation in this context that is more pertinent to my argument. Both Brecht and Artaud remain Platonic insofar as spectatorship is assumed to be passive and therefore colonized by the commodity spectacle. In Brecht’s theatre, the strategy then is to render a critical distance between the spectator and the spectacle through the mediation of theatre. In Artaud’s theatre, the strategy is rather to eliminate all distance between the spectator and the spectacle through the mediation of the performance into which the spectator is



pulled in as performer. Both reformers of theatre thus restage the Platonic opposition between the true living essence of the theatre —the dancing body of a community enacting its own principle, choreia, where everyone dances to a communitarian rhythm determined by mathematical proportion— and the simulacrum of the spectacle, reshuffling the terms of the Platonic scheme without abandoning it. Crucial to Ranciere’s argument is his reading of Debord’s theory of spectacle “as the reign of vision” which also leads him to understand Debord’s argument regarding spectacular separation along the lines of Feuerbach’s critique of alienation: “The Debordian critique of the spectacle still rests on the Feuerbachian thinking of representation as an alienation of the self.” (278) Theatre theorized and practiced in terms of the theory of spectacular society consequently “conceives of the externality of the stage as a kind of transitory state that has to be superseded.” (278) The telos of the performance then is to eliminate that mediatory exteriority into which the spectator’s gaze extends passively. “The program demands that the spectators be on the stage and the performers in the auditorium. It demands that the very difference between the two spaces be abolished.” (278) Thus the idea of emancipation underwriting this theatre, Ranciere argues, is that of the “reappropriation of the self” (278), rather than spectacular separation mediating an equality of intelligences. Spectacular mediation, Ranciere is suggesting against Brecht and Artaud, is not to be overcome, aesthetically, but rather allowed to do its pedagogical thing.

Regardless of what one thinks of Ranciere’s critique of Brecht or Artaud, the point I want to draw to our attention is that spectacular separation is more than self-alienation. For Debord, as for Marx, separation is the enclosure of the commons, the accumulated violence of the destruction and subalternization of other modes of social reproduction and alienation, moreover,

is commodity exchange itself and the supremacy of capital as legal class property. The spectator of the spectacle is as much a commodity as the spectacle and indeed, as spectacular. The externality of the spectacular stage is already internal. For Marx, moreover, the political project is *the reappropriation of the commons and so of the body qua nature, technology, cooperative collectivity and the equality of the general intellect as a common power*, and only in that regard amounts to any reappropriation of the self. In any case, with regard to these oppositions between spectator and spectacle, spectacle and theatre, as with the opposition of art to the non-art of everyday life, we confront the contingency that spectacular society is as constitutively contradictory as is the aesthetic regime of art. Indeed the aesthetic regime of art is contradictory in as much as social life, the given distributions of the sensible, are all riven with contradictions. One could say the aesthetic regime of art steals its constitutive contradiction from the social contradictions of history, or encloses it, such is the abyss of the tangled multiplicity of historical contradictions.

For example, we have already noted that the aesthetic regime of art takes for its principle, “originarily”, a more profound revolution than the French Revolution: a social-historical revolution of the distribution of the sensible. It does so, Ranciere argues, insofar as aesthetic play and appearance, in founding a new community, refuse or refute the “opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities” since the “legitimacy of domination has always rested on the evidence of a sensory division between different humanities.” (2009: 32) But not just between two humanities, the men of culture and the men of nature, but also between two “races”; between the human and the racialized subaltern, the black atlantic slave. For a new distribution of the sensible was imposed

and consolidated by the warships of the men of property across the planet which transposed the Christian doctrine of the chain of being into a political aesthetic of a hierarchy of races in the half century between Caribbean cycle of revolution (1730-1750) and the French Revolution.

(Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000:17) Among the contradictions of the French Revolution then is the great slave revolution of San Domingo. Haiti names for us one of the ways the French Revolution is non-identical with itself. (James 1989, Buck-Mors 2008) Not only are revolutions in the distribution of the sensible contradictory, but over the long duration of such revolutions through which capitalist social reproduction conquers the earth, even the commons, crucial to capitalism in a multitude of ways, is contradictory. As Silvia Federici (2004: 97) argues, at the very same time when the agricultural commons are being enclosed, the modern colonial state, through the witchhunts and a myriad disciplinary and biopolitical innovations, turns women's reproductive power into a patriarchal commons for the proprietors of capital. Now perhaps we can hear the heartbeat of mediation through the pulse of such different contradictions. At least we might detect symptoms of the political unconscious of the aesthetic regime of art in the abyss of contradiction. Is not the affirmation of the appearance of play, after all, not also a resonating interval of the experience of marronage, desertion, and mutiny of the "many headed hydra" of slaves, witches, savages, sailors and pirates who rebelled against plantation slavery, settler colonialism and transatlantic capitalism in the dawn of its singular emergence, seeking to regain or rebuild the commons? (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000)

Bending McLuhan's concept of "counter-environment" to my different purposes here, I want to then suggest that the distributions of the sensible of such a hydrarchic regime of politics allow us to retrieve a subaltern counter-environment, a hidden sacrificial ground, to the aesthetic

regime of art, to its diasporic migration from palace, estate, and the “hysterical white cube” to anywhere and everywhere. We can now specify that the relationship of intermedia research creation to contemporary critical art is precisely one of intellectual piracy and reverse engineering: a piratical parasitism: Our modus operandi is to recycle the strategies and tactics by which critical contemporary art pursues the contradiction of the aesthetic regime of art in order to transduce a singular, subalternist, critical, theoretical poetics able to describe social contradictions. If, as Ranciere argues, critical art has to negotiate the tension between art’s impulse to become life and yet still implode into its own autonomous dimension across some infinitely receding threshold, then intermedia research creation has to intermediate the simulation of this tension in the other direction: intermedia research creation can only counter its own inescapable drift into autonomous reification and discover social life (that is to say, rise, dialectically, to the concrete) by bringing into relations of legibility and illegibility autonomous, reified fragments of aesthetic form with their distributions of the sensible. What do intermedia research creation probes create? In a word, subaltern counter-environments, that’s what our probes look for. Intermedia research creation creates by redistributing the sensible, but redistributing the sensible never happens outside of social constraints, so it is only possible in relation to blockages and obstacles, limits and barriers: this is how social contradictions are unearthed, brought to light etc. through the deflections warping the intermedia field at the ecological-sensible limit of its reproduction. (Thus Myers’ research creation experiment, recall, demonstrated that the autonomous work of art, having no social function, in its absolute indifference, is thereby not art but nature, here a pure biochemical process underlying both human health and disease, on the one hand, and, on the other, that the dancer-actor network

situating the lab in the world is not only a local site of embodiment or fragmentary topology of power but also the urban, technological anywhere totality of capital's temporal process such that nature is not simply nature but the history of power in nature). In this way, intermedia research creation interrupts praxis on the ground by withdrawing into such paradoxes, provoking questions where there were only instructions. By pirating critical art's substitution of itself for the given distribution of the sensible, intermedia research creation also criticizes theory by creating a more concrete abstraction, by representing a social contradiction, an abstraction that realizes itself as a koan, or, time-biased poem, heterogeneous to the reifications that comprise information, provoking questions wherever there is ideological closure and sense.

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