

Article

# Intermedialities as Sociopolitical Assemblages in Contemporary Art

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**Abstract:** This article is an introductory essay to the Special Issue “A Comparative Study of Media in Contemporary Visual Art”. It starts with a short overview of the terminological discussion about intermediality as a concept and its relationship with medialities with other prefixes—such as mixed, intra-, multi-, and transmedialities. So far, intermediality has been discussed less by art historians than by literary scholars. This introductory essay argues that critical analysis of intermediality in contemporary artworks may offer additional insights for investigation of the issues addressed in these artworks. The case studies in this Special Issue underscore this view. As a kind of kick-off, the second part of this essay includes a short case study that focuses on two artworks by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué in order to provide insight into how intermedial relations can act as metaphors for the sociopolitical relations addressed in his artworks. Applying philosopher Manuel DeLanda’s “assemblage theory”, philosopher Edward S. Casey’s concept of “absorptive mapping”, and anthropologist Tim Ingold’s view of living beings as consisting of a bundle of lines facilitates the highlighting of the sociopolitical aspects of intermediality in Mroué’s artworks.

**Keywords:** intermediality; assemblage theory; absorptive mapping; modalities of medium

## 1. Introduction

If mass media tend to conceal the active role of a medium as mediator in order to take the truthfulness of a message for granted, many contemporary artworks precisely seek to undo such concealment. In this respect, artists have adopted the strategy of the confrontation of different media in a single artwork as a productive strategy. While “monomedia” used to be associated with Greenbergian Modernism, with its focus on essentialism and purity, contemporary artworks that confront various media in meaningful ways serve as interesting explorations for comparative studies of visual media. This does not mean that the essays in the Special Issue “A Comparative Study of Media in Contemporary Visual Art” focus on the differences between media. The blurring, transgressing, and interrogating of these boundaries and interactions between media generate more interesting perspectives. Moreover, the contributions to this Special Issue investigate intermediality not only as a formal confrontation of media, but also as a political notion.

This article is an introductory essay to the Special Issue “A Comparative Study of Media in Contemporary Visual Art”. It starts with a short overview of the terminological discussion of the concept of “intermediality” and its relationship with medialities with other prefixes, such as mixed, intra-, multi-, and transmedialities. So far, this debate has mainly taken place in literary and film studies, as well as in media and communication studies. Literary scholar Lars Elleström, for instance, developed an interesting model for understanding intermedial relations. Surprisingly, art historians have paid less attention to the interrelated terminological complexity.

The second part of this introductory essay includes a short case study as a kind of kick-off of this Special Issue. The case study discusses how intermedial relations can act as metaphors for sociopolitical relations, on the basis of two artworks by the Lebanese artist



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Rabih Mroué that address sociopolitical issues in multiple ways. The interdisciplinary theoretical framework includes philosopher Manuel DeLanda's notion of "assemblage theory", philosopher Edward S. Casey's concept of "absorptive mapping", as well as anthropologist Tim Ingold's look at living beings as consisting of a line or bundle of lines. These particular views help to provide a new kind of understanding of the various sociopolitical aspects of the artistic media applied by Mroué.

## 2. Terminological Discussion of the Concept of Intermediality

In his essay "Intermediality and Interarts Studies", literary scholar Claus Clüver describes how comparative media studies became a prominent subject of research in the 1990s, focusing mainly on interrelations between literature and other artforms. He notes a difference with scholars in Media Studies, who have particularly investigated issues of the production, function, distribution, and reception of mass media. Because their media—such as television—include multiple media, intermediality largely featured implicitly as part of their field of research (Clüver 2007, p. 19). In order to explain several terms at the center of the debates on intermediality by literary scholars, Clüver uses a table created by Eric Vos in 1997 as a starting point. It includes four kinds of word–image relations: transmedial relations, multimedia discourse, mixed-media discourse, and intermedial discourse. The first is described as a process of transposition, for instance in ekphrasis, where an image is described in words. Next, multimedia discourse is characterized by a juxtaposition of media, like in an illustrated book, while mixed-media discourse combines images and text, a commonly used strategy in posters. Finally, intermedial discourse pertains to a process of fusion, like in calligrammes (Clüver 2007, p. 26). As will be argued below, "fusion" does not fully apply as characterization to my case study. This is why the slightly different definition provided by media theorist Yvonne Spielmann is particularly interesting. In her 2001 essay "Intermedia in Electronic Images", Spielmann discusses the differences between multimedia, mixed media, and intermedia. She defines the two first concepts in terms that barely differ from those used by Clüver six years later. Multimedia, she argues, is a useful notion in the case of the synchronous occurrence of different artforms within an integral medium (such as theater) that still remain distinct from each other (Spielmann 2001, pp. 56–57). As a term, mixed media should be applied to works that include elements of one medium in another (e.g., the use of photographs in film), but without the occurrence of any transformation in either one. Even though Spielmann suggests that the category of intermedia deals with the interrelationship between media to the extent of merging with each other, she emphasizes that the different media elements also remain recognizable, while the ensuing processes of transformation are reflected in the images (p. 56). This definition is in fact most useful for my case study here.

Obviously, the basic element in "intermediality" is "medium". As a result, contributors to the terminological debate often start by defining this key term. Clüver opts for a definition formulated by Rainer Bohn, Eggo Müller, and Rainer Ruppert in 1988: a medium is that "which mediates for and between humans a (meaningful) sign (or a combination of signs) with the aid of suitable transmitters across temporal and/or spatial distances" (Clüver 2007, p. 30). This definition in particular applies to mass media that have to communicate as transparently as possible. In contemporary artworks, however, media are often applied in unexpected ways, which draws attention to how these media "interfere" in (visual) communication, rather than that they serve as the most suitable transmitters. This does not mean, however, that we should define mass media very differently from artistic media. Philosopher Jos de Mul's following observation is thought-provoking here. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination", he argues that media in general play a crucial role in the configuration of the human mind and experience: "Media are interfaces that mediate not only between us and our world (designation), but also between us and our fellow man (communication), and between us and ourselves (self-understanding)". This also includes artistic media, according to De Mul, because they are "interfaces that not

only structure the imagination of the artist, but the work of art and the aesthetic reception as well" (De Mul 2009, p. 95).

Although the importance of the artistic medium was first highlighted by art critic Clement Greenberg, in his writings of the 1950s and early 1960s he mainly propagated the idea that artists should strive for purity in their use of their selected medium and he mainly focused on the physical aspects of a medium. Art historian Rosalind E. Krauss, initially one of his followers, redefined "medium" on the basis of sets of conventions in the late 1970s, encouraged by developments in modern art such as Land Art (Krauss 1979, pp. 30–44). In the anthology *In Terms of Painting*, art historian Anaël Lejeune uses Krauss's view in order to downplay the importance of studying media: "A medium is but a momentary state of consensus, on both practical and critical levels, about a certain number of conventions" (in Ehninger and Krause-Wahl 2016, p. 199). In contrast to Lejeune's view, this introductory essay, as well as the other contributions to this Special Issue, will demonstrate the fruitfulness of investigations of how media use conventions.

A far more extensive model than the one provided by Clüver is Lars Elleström's model for understanding intermedial relations, presented in an essay in 2010 and, in a more detailed revised version, in 2021. Elleström motivates the importance of his model by claiming that "[u]nderstanding mediality is one of the keys to understanding meaning-making in human interaction" (Elleström 2021, p. 4). This claim raises the question of the difference between "mediality" and "intermediality." In this respect, Elleström considers the prefix "inter" as a kind of bridge: if media are fundamentally similar, there is nothing to bridge; but if media are fundamentally different, it is almost impossible to connect them in one way or another. This leads him to defining intermediality as "a bridge between media differences that is founded on media similarities" (p. 5). In order to systematically investigate what happens on this bridge based on similarities and in-between differences, Elleström developed a model in which he identifies four traits or modalities of a medium: material, spatiotemporal, sensorial, and semiotic traits (p. 8). Each medium has physical aspects, either solid or non-solid. Its existence relates to the dimensions of space and time, and it addresses at least one specific sense (visuality, tactility, etc.). The fourth modality, which is mental rather than physical, derives from the other three modalities. Mediation does not take place "[u]ntil the perceiver's mind comprehends them as signs" (p. 20). According to Elleström, each media product (or artwork, in the context of my argument) contains at least one mode of each of the four modalities (p. 46). This means that within each modality it is possible to identify differences as well as similarities between media. For instance, all visual media address the sense of visuality, but can differ in material or spatiotemporal qualities.

Quite differently from Elleström, media and communication scholar Klaus Bruhn Jensen considers the phenomenon of intermediality as consisting of three categories: discursive intermediality, material intermediality, and institutional intermediality (Jensen 2016). For my argument, the first category is relevant, given that the last one focuses on organizational levels, while the second category pertains to the co-existence of separate media, for instance the use of various platforms in a campaign. Importantly, discursive intermediality includes attention to historical perspectives. According to Jensen, the term "intermedium" was coined by the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1812 (p. 972). It was only in 1966 that Dick Higgins introduced the "intermedia" concept to the field of art theory, in a discussion of Fluxus practices, including installations and performances. Higgins even claimed that "much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media" (Higgins 1984, p. 18). Since the 1970s, as argued by Jensen, scholars increasingly began to investigate media in the contexts of various cultural patterns and social settings, while they also paid more attention to spectatorship (Jensen 2016, p. 973). In 1987, media scholar John Fiske, in his study of television culture, suggested including audience members as a kind of medium, featuring as participants in processes of intermediality and communication (quoted in Jensen 2016, p. 974). In line with this view, the case study below will include spectatorship as part of the mediating process of the medium.

### 3. Sociopolitical Assemblages in Rabih Mroué's Intermedia Installations

In early 2023, in a former Dominican Church in Antwerp, the Extra City art center, presented *Images Mon Amour*, an exhibition of recent artworks by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué. His oeuvre focuses on the mediating role of images in times of war (Kesrouany 2022; Westgeest 2016, pp. 110–12). In the past fifteen years, he compiled an archive of images from mass media related to revolutions and war in the Middle East. For this article, two works from this exhibition are selected in order to provide insights into a specific aspect of these artworks: the sociopolitical role of intermediality in two different ways.

The video *Too Close Yet Inaccessible* (2022)<sup>1</sup> consists of a slow pan (horizontal movement) recording over a series of charcoal drawings, suggesting an endlessly ongoing scroll. The drawings present numerous little human beings, running in various directions. Some of them are hardly recognizable in the abstract expressive patterns of charcoal lines, which represent unidentifiable landscape-like environments. This theme is seemingly endlessly repeated in the loop of the video projection in diverse compositions, varying from full and chaotic to almost empty. Due to the sketchy style, it is not possible to discern aspects of gender or ethnicity. A narrow strip on top of these drawings evokes the association with a comic strip, but frustrates attempts of finding any narrative. At some points, the moving images freeze for a couple of seconds, mainly at places where English statements are included, such as: "Running from one country to another. Running from one side to another. Running from one time to another". This text confirms the impression that this artwork reflects on issues dealing with refugees.

Intermedia, defined by Spielmann as media merging with each other while the different media elements remain recognizable, is to be found in *Too Close Yet Inaccessible* in the combination of drawing, text, and video. These three media are equally important in this work, and they remain distinctive in it. As such, it reveals interesting similarities: the drawing and text consist of similar charcoal lines in their materiality, and the horizontal reading direction of the text is similar to the horizontal pan of the camera in their spatiotemporal traits (when the camera holds, the eyes of the "reader" continue the horizontal movement). In terms of the modality of material traits in Elleström's model, the intermediality bridges the differences between the charcoal lines on paper and the pixels and light of the digital video projection. The materiality of the screen becomes particularly prominent when associations are evoked with touching and scrolling on our smart phones: the process of scrolling, holding, and continuing.

What specific characteristics of the included medium of drawing may also function as meaningful? One may think of the use of lines. Lines are usually considered as just formal components. From this angle, it is an intriguing notion that anthropologist Tim Ingold, in *The Life of Lines*, considers a living being as always made up of a line or a bundle of lines, rather than thinking of organisms as blobs. In the life of lines, parts do not function as components, but as movements. Ingold suggests that in a world where everything is continually coming into being through processes of movement and growth, thinking in terms of a "life of lines" is more appropriate: "lines have torsion, flexion and vivacity . . . [and] bear the principle of deterritorialization" (Ingold 2015, pp. 3–4, 7, 14–15). Looking from Ingold's perspective to the lines in Mroué's drawings, the representation of the fleeting human beings becomes even more meaningful. The human figures have been turned into fleeting lines that emphasize being refugees on the move. The panning recording of the drawings by the video camera renders the lines even more lively and animated. The dynamic compositions of bundles of lines, however, make the human figures less visible. This observation calls forth Jussi Parikka's interest in "unfocusing" rather than focusing in artistic practices, and in layers of activities and dynamics of territories rather than static representations (Parikka 2019, p. 42). Although Parikka addresses environmental art practices in her essay "Cartographies of Environmental Arts", the visualization of "less visible operating principles" (p. 45) also applies to issues of migration.

In her essay "The Visual Flow: Fixity and Transformation in Photo- and Videographic Imagery", Spielmann discusses transformation and processuality as characteristics of video

(Spielmann 2013, p. 108). In terms of the modality of spatiotemporal traits, one could argue that the intermediality bridges the presence of the drawings and the time of the changing video projections. Alongside identifying differences, Elleström encourages one to notice similarities. The modality of the sensorial trait of the drawings and the soundless video is obviously visuality. This shared characteristic makes it interesting that the people in the video–drawing are passing by, literally running out of sight, from the vantagepoint of the spectator. This characteristic is underscored by one of the included texts: “Eventually, this image will be replaced by another and sooner forgotten. Eventually, this place will be replaced by another and sooner forgotten. Eventually, this text will be replaced by another and sooner forgotten. Eventually, this time will be replaced by another and sooner forgotten”. As mentioned in the title of the artwork, the spectator is standing too close by to be able to gain access to a clear overview of the scroll drawing. More importantly, however, the spectator is in the luxury position of being allowed to stand still and watch the video. Realization of this difference confirms the present reality of “on-the-move refugees” versus “comfortable inhabitants of safe countries”—an insight that may be identified as the semiotic trait of the applied intermedial medium.

Conversely, an opposite kind of interaction between artwork and spectator takes place in the artwork presented as first item in the exhibition *Images Mon Amour*. Mroué’s *Again We Are Defeated* (2018)<sup>2</sup> consists of 112 pencil drawings executed in A4 format. In these drawings, Mroué reproduces the outlines of corpses in photographs he found in newspapers. He prefers to use news imagery, because it would make people think about how they deal with mass media in their daily life (Wirth and Schamburek n.d.). In *Again We Are Defeated*, the lifeless victims of violent attacks become even more still as a result of the moving images projected over them in a loop. The video projection shows the shadows of drones almost “dancing” over the bodies. Spectators may wonder whether these drones should be interpreted as having caused the death of the drawn corpses, or if they are just arriving to investigate the crimes. In any event, the spectator also has to move (almost “dancing”) along the drawings presented in a rectangle (composed of seven rows of sixteen drawings). This also means that, if in *Too Close Yet Inaccessible* the “eye” of the video camera is moving, in this work the eyes of the spectator move quite similarly to the suggested “eyes” of the drones.

In her essay “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective”, video artist and philosopher Hito Steyerl has discussed the unusual nature of vertical perspective (Steyerl 2012). She argues that the recent new views of the world from space have caused us to reconsider our techniques of orientation. With regard to Mroué’s *Again We Are Defeated*, it is interesting that Steyerl in particular addresses the views from drones applied in military and entertainment images. Her remark that drones survey and track, but also kill (p. 22), confirms the observation that the shadows of the drones on the drawn corpses could be interpreted as projections of killers or investigators. According to Steyerl, the former distinction between object and subject in linear perspective has turned into a one-way gaze by superiors onto inferiors. The new disembodied and remote-controlled gaze is outsourced to machines and other objects, and this is intimidating (pp. 23–24).

If in *Too Close Yet Inaccessible* close-up observation of the drawings is frustrated by the moving camera, *Again We Are Defeated* calls for multiple perspectives on the part of the viewer, as well as other kinds of spectatorship: the drawings require close-up inspection while the swarm of drones invites a more distanced or “helicopter” view. In other words, a bridging of the intermediality of different spatiotemporal traits is at stake here.

The vertical perspective is actually the conventional perspective to the world in cartography. In *Too Close Yet Inaccessible*, the spectator has a horizontal perspective, which seems to be much different from the view taken in cartography. In *Earth-Mapping*, philosopher Edward S. Casey rethinks art as a form of mapping, but one that is unlike conventional cartography, which is based on the “plan” view from above (Casey 2005, p. 139). He discusses some abstract and landscape paintings in which the views are multiple or diffuse, and therefore they are also quite different from the perspective in traditional European

paintings based on a horizontal clear view through a fictive window. Casey counterposes the conventional “mapping of” in cartography with “mapping with/in”, which he characterizes as “absorptive mapping”. Instead of being about measuring exact distances, this is about immersing the viewer in order to sense a certain place. While looking at the included close-ups in *Too Close Yet Inaccessible*, the spectator becomes immersed (i.e., “too close”), without getting the impression of a distant look into a depth through a fictive window. However, as the latter part of the title underscores (“yet inaccessible”), the spectator can hardly identify with the fleeing people and their various positions. The location is too diffuse in order for him or her to imagine themselves standing there. Casey adds that the paintings he discusses are not like maps indicating places elsewhere; instead, multiple experiences of places and maps merge in the picture (Casey 2005, pp. 149–50, 189). Furthermore, Casey addresses people’s basic need to have a sense of where they are. In the absence of strict borders and familiar coordinates of orientation, confusion will erupt. This disorientation applies to both discussed artworks.

Finally, we turn to a reflection on how intermedialities as constructions may act as sociopolitical metaphors in the analyzed artworks. An inspiring source for this undertaking is philosopher and artist Manuel DeLanda’s *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (DeLanda 2006). DeLanda considers social complexity as an assemblage consisting of varieties of wholes emerging from heterogeneous elements. The assemblage as metaphor was coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (as *agencement*), but reworked by DeLanda in order to define social complexity. DeLanda characterizes assemblages as wholes consisting of relations of exteriority. This means that in these relations a component can be detached and included in another assemblage, due to a certain autonomy of the elements. However, the components cannot explain the relations that constitute the whole: “the properties of the whole cannot be reduced to those of its parts”, because they result from the interactions of heterogeneous entities (DeLanda 2006, pp. 10–11). In other words, the properties of assemblages emerge from the interactions between parts. This view calls forth the bridge as a metaphor for intermediality proposed by Elleström. Because DeLanda focuses on social complexity as an assemblage, he identifies the following as examples: “interpersonal networks and institutional organizations are assemblages of people; social justice movements are assemblages of several networked communities; central governments are assemblages of several organizations; cities are assemblages of people, networks, organizations, as well as of a variety of infrastructural components” (p. 5). These assemblages show the “irreducible social complexity characterizing the contemporary world” (p. 6), including a variety of centripetal and centrifugal forces that relate to processes of, respectively, territorialization versus deterritorialization and social mobility (pp. 57–58). If the assemblage of interacting heterogeneous media in Mroué’s *Again We Are Defeated* mainly focuses on the centripetal forces in Lebanese society, the assemblage of media in *Too Close Yet Inaccessible* emphasizes the complexity of social mobility. This means that if the representations of people in the drawings do not indicate any specific interpersonal network, the drawn lines (Ingold 2015) of which the people and their environment are made, the included text, the use of news images as a source, and the bridging video recording and projection evoke an impression of social complexity.

#### 4. Conclusions and Discussion

Investigation of the intermedialities in Rabih Mroué’s artworks *Too Close Yet Inaccessible* and *Again We Are Defeated* appeared to be indispensable for addressing the sociopolitical aspects present only latently through the represented human beings. DeLanda’s “assemblage theory” served as a useful tool for such analyses. Elleström’s model proved helpful for understanding the intermedial relations as a kind of bridge of similarities that connects differences in traits of media. Ingold’s look at living beings as consisting of a bundle of lines provided insights into how both material and spatiotemporal traits can act as meaningful aspects of intermedial (video-)drawings. Casey’s concept of “absorptive map-

ping” contributed to understanding the often-overlooked role of the spectator as part of intermediality.

As argued in this introductory essay, it is important to encourage terminological discussions about intermediality and debates about its relationship with other forms of mediality among art historians in the field of contemporary art. The case study presented here underscores that an analysis of intermediality may generate significant insights into the visual mediation of the issues addressed in contemporary artworks.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rabih Mroué, *Too Close Yet Inaccessible*, 2022, video recording of drawings presented on 16:9 monitor, loop. See figure: [https://extracitykunsthal.org/files/uploads/exposition/KEC\\_RM\\_IMA\\_DEF\\_noCrops.pdf](https://extracitykunsthal.org/files/uploads/exposition/KEC_RM_IMA_DEF_noCrops.pdf), p. 21. Accessed on 28 March 2023.
- <sup>2</sup> Rabih Mroué, *Again We Are Defeated*, 2018, 112 pencil drawings on A4-format paper, HD-projection, loop. See figure: [https://extracitykunsthal.org/files/uploads/exposition/KEC\\_RM\\_IMA\\_DEF\\_noCrops.pdf](https://extracitykunsthal.org/files/uploads/exposition/KEC_RM_IMA_DEF_noCrops.pdf), p. 7. Accessed on 28 March 2023.

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