Rethinking the Medium: Theoretical Underpinnings

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Abstract: This study examines the concept of artistic medium and some of its recent reconceptualizations in philosophical aesthetics, weighing its current relevance in the context of mostly unfavorable positions in contemporary art, generally characterized as post-medium. In the three sections of the paper, I identify the essential terms and distinctions required to redefining the medium. In this regard, I invoke Stanley Cavell, Rosalind Krauss, and Sherri Irvin, who theorize automatisms, conventions, rules and practices as symbolic supports; and Dominic Lopes and Elisa Caldarola, who put forth and develop the notion of medium profile, respectively. Revolving around the theory of the medium advanced by Rosalind Krauss, my analysis shows the ways in which Krauss, building on the theoretical terms that underpin Stanley Cavell's conception of the ontology of film, anticipated or influenced some of the current definitions of the medium. Namely, the correlated notions of automatisms, conventions, rules and practices by virtue of which Krauss conceptualizes the medium undergird Sherri Irvin's thesis positing rules for presentation, conservation and participation as symbolic resources with expressive force that form part of the medial structure of contemporary artworks.

Keywords: artistic medium, technical/symbolic support, automatism, conventions, rules, practices.

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Reconceptualizations of the artistic medium
a. Medium

Philosopher David Davies identified two ways in which the importance of the notion of *medium*, understood in instrumental terms, has been downplayed in philosophy of art, as well as the contrary tendency of giving it primary significance. Positions that questioned the importance of the medium for the existence and appreciation of works were based on a conception of art associated to the Croce-Collingwood theory, according to which the work stands in "a merely contingent relationship to an artists's working of a medium."[1] For instance, Collingwood put forth a distinction between art and craft likened by Davies to the conceptualist artists's approach, based on a definition of art as an act of ideational conception.[2]

Countering such thesis, Richard Wollheim famously showed that this view fails to take into account the difficulties posed by materials, their recalcitrance and unpredictability, as well as their resolution – which cannot be fully anticipated and realized in mere mental images – as essential aspects of the expressive process; moreover, that when an artist mentally conceives of an art piece, she does so in terms of the medium in which she works, intrinsically a particular medium.[3]

A different strategy was adopted by Joseph Margolis, who distinguishes the physical medium from

1. David Davies, "Medium," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182.
2. Davies, "Medium," 182.
3. Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 28-29.

the artistic one. The American philosopher argues that when we speak of mediums, we refer to both meanings at the same time and that an artistic medium is to be conceived as an embodiment in a physical one.[4] For instance, in painting, the physical medium consists of pigments applied to a surface, whereas the artistic medium consists of a system of brushstrokes, just as dance is embodied or takes physical form through body movements, which are distinct from the "artistic medium of articulated steps."[5] Further reducing the ambiguity of the notion, Davies complements the layered description of the medium with another element: ranges of sensible values such as pitch, tone, texture, color, etc. that artists work with when making a work in a given artistic medium.[6]

The contrary tendency in conceptualizing the medium has given it an overwhelming importance as the main source of artistic activity and criteria for evaluating works. This celebration of the medium for its *intrinsic* values is based on the doctrine of medium purity that reached its clearest form in the writings of the American art critic Clement Greenberg.[7] As Dominic Lopes has convincingly shown, it is this doctrine that represents the target of the "medium skepticism" dominating contemporary thinking on art, a symptom of a "medium materialism" which identifies media with material things.[8]

The renowned art critic and historian of art Rosalind Krauss responded critically to Greenberg's essentialist thesis by proposing a reconceptualization of the medium which detaches it from materiality by substituting the traditional idea of physical medium with that of technical support.[9] Despite the fact that her theoretical work is better known for having defined contemporary art as a "post-medium condition," rather than renouncing the medium, Krauss puts forth a different way of defining it, exerting a strong influence on some of the most recent conceptions of the medium in the current context of art, such as those supplied by Dominic Lopes, Elisa Caldarola and Sherri Irvin.

In line with Kraussian reasoning, Dominic Lopes formulates the definition of medium as the sum of resource and technique.[10] Her reconceptualization of the medium as a technical resource is characterized by Lopes as a viable alternative to medium materialism, general enough to encompass various arts that work with symbolic resources used through certain techniques, such as literature or music.[11] The technical element is significant in Lopes' conception particularly because the same resource, for example paper, by applying different techniques, can lead to painting, drawing, (musical) composition, etc. This is why the medium is not just a resource, but a *technical* resource. Furthermore, the same technique can be applied to very different resources, which may prove useful for understanding certain works of contemporary art.[12] The latter idea can already be found in Rosalind Krauss's *Perpetual Inventory* (2010), in her interpretation of the work *dor* (1974), where Peter Campus applies pictorial techniques to non-painterly resources (video camera, projector and wall), and is used by Krauss to describe the media affinity between Campus's video installation and painting. The idea that a technique can be applied to a variety of resources foreshadows the concept of a *medium profile*, for which a technique need not be restricted to a single medium but can be "shared" by multiple mediums within a "family of media."[13]

b. Medium profile

In the taxonomy of art proposed by Lopes, as opposed to genres, styles, traditions and so on, the arts are partially individuated by their medium. His position is self-described as a minority one in art theory, currently dominated by medium skepticism.[14] Lopes's thesis can be viewed as a residue of the modernist doctrine divided by Noël Carroll into two theses: descriptive and prescriptive.[15] According to the descriptive thesis, each art is differentiated from the other arts by its distinct medium. According to

4. Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), 41-42.
5. Margolis, *Art and Philosophy*, 41-42.
6. Davies, "Medium," 181.
7. Davies, "Medium," 184-86.
8. Dominic McIver Lopes, *Beyond Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 135.
9. Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 7.
10. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 139.
11. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 138-39.
12. Elisa Caldarola, *Filosofia dell'arte contemporanea: installazioni, siti, oggetti* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020), 41.
13. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 140.
14. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 134.
15. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 135.

the prescriptive thesis advanced by Clement Greenberg and termed by Carroll the "medium-specificity thesis," the work of a particular art must aim at *exclusively* achieving those effects that are unique to that art through the use of its distinct medium.[16] However, as Lopes has shown "the proposition that the arts are individuated partially by media does not imply the prescriptive thesis" and could only be threatened by the invalidity of the descriptive one.[17] If this is the case, the skepticism of the medium is unfounded, its target being the doctrine of specificity and a material conception of the medium.

Further refining his thesis, Lopes proposes two readings of the taxonomic sentence, a strong one – "each art is individuated partly by its medium"; and a weak one – "each art is individuated partly by a medium profile."[18] The notion of "medium profile" supplied by Lopes adopts Beyers Gaut's idea that mediums can incorporate, or *nest* other mediums.[19] The phenomenon can occur at different levels. For example, when we talk about cinema, we may consider the media it can encompass, such as traditional photographic cinema, digital film or analogue video film, and we may specify the level we mean: photographic image or visual image.[20] The different levels can be viewed as a representation of a tree of mediums. Lopes has rendered it as follows: [21]

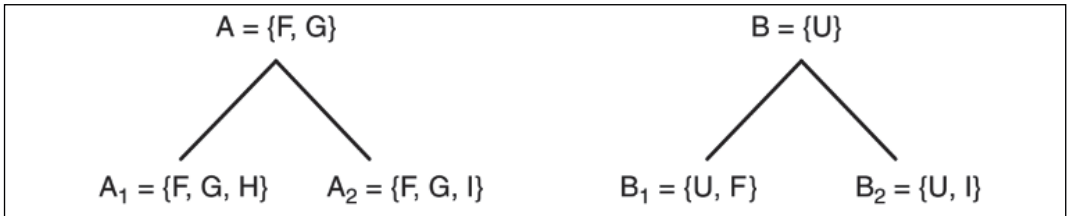


Figure 1 Medium profiles are sets of technical resources. Medium profiles A_1 and A_2 are nested in medium profile A. Medium profiles B_1 and B_2 are nested in medium profile B. Note that an element that is core to A is part of B_1.

The diagram captures the fact that the media embedded in a media-nest share some technical resources – for example, language, speech and inscriptions are linguistic media that share elements of semantics and syntax – and that they need not be unique to those media. Inspired by W. J. Mitchell's culinary comparison, Lopes suggests that, conceived this way, arts with different media profiles can have certain media in common, just as different culinary recipes share certain ingredients.[22] Italian theorist Elisa Caldarola astutely rephrases Lopes' proposal as follows: "many works do not have a single medium but have a medium profile that is the result of the combination of several media, understood as resources of any kind, manipulated by any technique to convey content or to highlight certain properties."[23]

A current conception of the medium in contemporary art moves away from "medium materialism" and, in line with the physical medium/artistic medium distinction, redefines it as a set of symbolic resources used by artists through certain techniques to convey ideas. The composite and hybrid nature of the medium is manifest in recent works of contemporary art, which, rather than making use of a single medium combine several media and techniques. It is also characteristic of older works, such as the above-mentioned video installation *dor* (1974) analyzed by Krauss to exemplify the affinities between the mediums on which the work relies. At the same time, Campus's artistic strategies are interesting, Krauss will argue, because they are likely to discover new conventions, and thus, invent new media. In what follows, I detail Krauss's thesis of the medium within a theoretical framework that

16. Noël Caroll, "The Specificity of Media in the Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no. 4 (1985): 6-7. https://doi.org/10.2307/3332295. Carroll analyses the relationship between the two theses and rejects the descriptive thesis as a premise of the prescriptive one. His arguments are countered by Lopes in *Beyond Art*, subchapter "From Means to Media," chap. 7.
17. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 137-39.
18. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 139-40.
19. Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 290.
20. Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, 290.
21. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 140.
22. Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 140.
23. Caldarola, *Filosofia*, 42.

encompasses several notions fundamental to it: automatism, convention, and rule. These notions were of concern to theorists who preceded Krauss's conceptualization (Stanley Cavell and Timothy Binkley) or whom it inspired (Sherri Irvin).

The conventional nature of the medium and the new supports

The relationship between the physical and the artistic medium can be described by appealing to two related notions: automatism and convention. These originate in the ontology of film and capture both the physical and technical dimension of the medium, which articulates artistic content in a material. Automatism captures the oscillation between tradition and innovation that characterize approaches to defining the medium at the cusp of the modernism-postmodernism divide, when the traditional conventions of art collapse. In this context, some artists discover new conventions either within or outside of the medium, and thus invent new mediums. These must be understood in the Kraussian sense in which the traditional concept of physical support is replaced by the technical. Krauss insisted on the conventional nature of the medium and reformulated the relationship between contemporary art and the art of the past in the form of the /medium/ paradigm defined as the opposition of the terms "memory" and "forgetting." In the "extended field" of the medium, the technical support plays an important role as it preserves the memory of certain moments in the history of exhausted traditional media, but also responds to the need of inventing new ones.[24]

a. Medium, convention, automatism

Certain kinds of work, such as "dematerialized" conceptual or performative art, raise questions about the applicability of the distinction between the physical and the artistic medium. In other words, is it possible for certain works to only have an artistic medium without also having a physical one? Timothy Binkley, concerned with the continuities and discontinuities between pre-modern and conceptual art, put forth an interesting answer to this question. He argues that the role of the medium in modern art has been misunderstood and points to the conventional nature of the medium as the source of continuity in the medium's function: "A medium is not simply a physical material, but rather a network of conventions which delimits a realm over which physical materials and aesthetic qualities are mediated."[25] Thus, a medium is a set of conventions that specify the aesthetic properties of a piece.[26]

According to Binkley, a piece can articulate a particular artistic statement either in a physical medium, as in traditional art, or in a "semantic space."[27] Consequently, even if by the distinction physical medium-artistic medium we have in mind dematerialized conceptual artworks we should not encounter difficulties, since the action that articulates a certain artistic idea through a set of conventions can take place both on a physical medium and through alternative modalities. At the same time, as Davies points out, in the case of materialized works, defining the medium as a set of conventions that specify a piece describes the contingent and conventional nature of the relationship between the artistic and the physical medium.[28]

Concern with the role of the medium in postmodern art, whose expanded artistic field demanded, in Rosalind Krauss's view, a similar conceptual expansion of critical discourse, resulted in one of the most influential theories of the artistic medium in contemporary art. Krauss defined the medium as "a set of conventions derived from, but not identical with, the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic."[29] In reconceptualizing the medium, she draws on the theories developed in the early 1970s by Stanley Cavell, his contemporary at Harvard's Department of Fine Arts as a member of the Philosophy Faculty.

Specifically, Krauss makes use of the notion of automatism that underpins Cavell's conception of the ontology of film and its photographic substrate. The task of modern artists, Cavell argues, "is no

24. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 28.
25. Timothy Binkley, "Piece: Contra Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 3, (Spring 1977): 269, https://doi.org/10.2307/430287.
26. Binkley, "Contra Aesthetics," 270
27. Binkley, "Contra Aesthetics," 273.
28. Davies, "Medium," 189.
29. Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 296, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344204.

longer to produce another instance of an art, but a new medium within it."[30] As an alternative term, Cavell proposes the idea of establishing a new *automatism*, a notion he uses in more than one way. On the one hand, the term designates genres of art, such as the fugue and the dances as musical forms, but also "modes of achievement within the arts," a meaning exemplified by modulations, inversions, cadences, "local events" around which the genres take shape.[31] Photography or film, for instance, have a physical basis whose meaning is given by automatisms understood as "artistic discoveries of form and genre and type and technique."[32] Both meanings are situated in relation to tradition: "in mastering a tradition, one masters a series of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them one's work is assured a place within that tradition."[33]

On the other hand, automatism is a material basis. This category is developed by Cavell in the context of his reflections on the ontology of modernist film. Through its mechanism of manufacture, the camera produces the material basis of film, which Cavell describes as "successions of automatic world projections," a phrase which brings up the related term, namely the "automatic" process [*automatism – automatic*]. In Krauss's words, this definition of film is based on "the idea of automatic conditions built into the medium's physical basis."[34]

Cavell deliberately uses the notion of automatism with different meanings and encompassing several layers, his choice being motivated on the one hand by the identity of the art of film, and on the other by the nature of modernist art, which is aware of its material basis and relies on it.[35] Substituting the notion of automatism with terms like form or genre would not clear up the confusion, Cavell argues: "But confusion here is caused by precisely by the fact that this concept is justified in both places. And it will not be dispelled by redefining or substituting some labels. It could also be said that modernist art is itself an investigation of this confusion, or of the complexities of this fact."[36]

Cavell's position must be understood in the context of the '60s and '70s, when conventional art forms and genres were collapsing. In Krauss's view, Cavell stands at the precipice of the "formalist implosion" and he resists this collapse through the concept of automatism.[37] Instead, by deciding to use the term medium, albeit having grown "lexically toxic," Krauss seeks to preserve the rigor of the concept, since adopting the notion of automatism would confer undesirable associations with the meaning of psychic automatism as it was used in Surrealism.[38] She explains Cavell's choice in favor of automatism and his use of both terms (medium and automatism) as a form of resistance to the fate of modernist art, towards which Cavell would have felt a profound sense of discouragement.[39]

While Cavell's reasoning is convincing, one must pay attention to the fact that the fine distinction he makes at the terminological level can cause confusion: the material bases of the arts are *automatic*, and the modes of making within the arts are named *automatisms*.[40] Although he identifies as separate the two levels of the "artistic fact," in Cavell's conception the material layer and the layer of the production of a new medium overlap. Terminological choices aside, it is important to keep in

30. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 103.

31. Cavell, *The World Viewed,* 104-5.

32. Cavell, *The World Viewed,* 105.

33. Cavell, *The World Viewed,* 104.

34. Krauss, "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection," *October* 92 (2000): 12. https://doi.org/10.2307/779231.

35. Cavell, *The World Viewed,* 105.

36. Cavell, *The World Viewed,* 105.

37. Krauss, "The Rock," 12.

38. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 78-79.

39. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 97-99.

40. Cavell's terminology and argumentative approach are not easily unraveled, an aspect that has led to questioning the compatibility of the Kraussian proposal to reinvent the medium using Cavell's concepts of medium and automat. An interesting analysis in this respect has been put forward by the British philosopher Diarmuid Costello in "Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (2012): 819-54. https://doi.org/10.1086/667426 819-854. Costello locates a first source of conceptual confusion in Cavell's formulations in *The World Viewed* concerning the artistic medium in general (*media of the medium*) and the physical substrate of film (*automatisms of the automatic*). However, the nuanced way in which Krauss analyzes Cavell's notion of automatism as a source for reconceptualizing the medium as convention should not be minimized, particularly in the essay 'The Rock.'"

mind that understanding artistic media in Cavell's sense depends on this overlap of the material and the conventional: the concept of medium is defined as physical "material-in-certain-characteristic-applications," [41] where "characteristic" can be replaced by "conventional."[42] In short, medium equals physical material plus convention. Physical substance remains one of the two main elements in defining the medium, but the role of conventions for the artistic medium is crucial.

b. Technical support

Retaining the notion of convention, Krauss replaces the physical medium with the idea of technical support: artists borrow old-fashioned or obsolete technologies from the area of mass culture, such as animated film, the automobile and investigative journalism. In this way, the new concept of medium is distanced from that proposed by the theorist who inspired her, but the strain formed by the idea of convention remains common, branching out in different directions depending on how each positioned themselves in the *modernism-postmodernism dispute*. Sharing the context of the collapse of traditional conventions, both authors write about the discovery and invention of new conventions, either within the same medium (Cavell) or outside it (Krauss).[43]

Anchored in structuralist thought, the *Kraussian* medium becomes a logic, a paradigm, understood in Barthesian terms as the sum of two opposing terms through which meaning is created.[44] Using the structuralist diagram, this binary relationship is expanded into a four-term group (two terms and their negatives) known as the "Klein group" or "Piaget group." Krauss first applied this logical process to the sculpture paradigm in her canonical text "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" from 1979. The operation consists in the expansion of a set of binaries in "relations of contradiction and implication" that is "transformed into a quaternary field, both [terms] mirroring the original position which at the same time they open up."[45]

In *Under Blue Cup* (2011) Krauss applies this structural strategy to the paradigm of the /medium/ defined as the opposition of the terms "memory" and "forgetting" in order to show that, despite the seemingly unrelated variations and dispersion characteristic of contemporary art, the medium is nevertheless a unitary field that can be mapped by these logical operations.[46] Thus, the extended paradigm of the medium encompasses two opposing terms (*memory* versus *forgetting*) and their negation. By combining them on the various "neutral axes of structuralism," the terms installation (non-memory/non-forgetting), kitsch (memory/non-memory) and technical support (forgetting/non-forgetting) are obtained. [47] The latter term responds to the need to forget the exhausted traditional mediums while preserving the memory of certain moments in their history.[48]

The open-ended notion of technical support is linked to Cavell's automatism, which implies rules or conventions. In Krauss's view, artists who discover the conventions of a new technical support resist the tendency of contemporary art to forget the role of the medium.[49] These artists, called "knights of the medium" (including Kentridge, Ruscha, Coleman, Sophie Calle, etc.) play an extremely important role in Krauss's thesis since they provide a reminder of the function of the medium for art, of the fact

41. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A book of Essays* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 221.

42. Costello, "Automat," 821.

43. Costello, "Automat," 822. Diarmuid Costello makes out a difference in the meanings of the idea of inventing new mediums in Cavell and Krauss's arguments: according to Costello, Cavell refers to reinventing new possibilities within an existing environment, whereas Krauss argues that artists can invent completely new environments. The difference between the two approaches would be located at the level at which they operate: "whereas Cavell is laying down certain conditions that must be met for any work to count as an instance of a given medium under such artistic and historical circumstances, Krauss is describing various determinate ways of meeting these conditions." Costello, "Automat," 841.

44. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 17.

45. Dan Eugen Rațiu, *Disputa modernism-postmodernism. O introducere* în *teoriile contemporane asupra artei*, (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2012), 251.

46. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 18.

47. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 128.

48. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 128. In a previous article, I discuss the Kraussian paradigm of the medium in relation to her position on installation art. Georgiana Buț, „Merging Art and Installation: Exhibition Installation in the 20th Century," *Studia UBB. Philosophia* 64 (2019): 35–62. doi: 10.24193/subbphil.2019.1.03.

49. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 19.

that "the medium undergirds the very possibilities of art."[50]

In Krauss's conception of the medium, as well as in Binkley's, the continuity of the medium and its functions from modern to postmodern art is given by conventions, a notion closely related to that of automatism. A recent thesis has highlighted a third, correlated term designating symbolic supports in contemporary art – rules as medium – which I will focus on in the next section. As we shall see, the notion of rule can already be found in Cavell's texts on automatism and is given a central role in the Kraussian reconceptualization of the medium.[51]

Rules and practices as symbolic supports

In contemporary theories of the artistic medium, the notion of symbolic support adjoins those of material and technical support already discussed and plays a structuring function in the economy of artworks, while highlighting important features in their appreciation. In Sherri Irvin's recent theoretical proposal, conventions work in conjunction with rules and practices, each understood as symbolic support. The following part of the paper discusses the relation between the three symbolic supports. Furthermore, building on Irvin's thesis, I address the importance of rules for configuring contemporary artworks and in defining their medium.

a. Rules as medium

The role of rules for apprehending the nature of the medium can be individuated in Cavell's texts from the 1970s on automatism. About three decades later, in *Under Blue Cup* (2011), Krauss refers to his concept of automatism as an "invocation of the rules of a medium."[52] The idea that rules are part of the medial structure has been echoed in new propositions redefining the medium, such as Irvin's *Immaterial. Rules in Contemporary Art* (2022). Irvin's line of argument can be seen as developing conceptions of the medium based on its conventional nature, an aspect of significant concern to authors such as Binkley, Krauss and Cavell. Rules and conventions are of paramount importance for both Krauss and Irvin. However, the stakes of the two approaches are different: while Krauss reclaims technological media in a state of obsolescence, Irvin values "the ability of everyday materials and objects to serve as meaningful artistic support."[53]

In short, Irvin argues that the rules for presentation, conservation and participation function as symbolic media, governed by conventions and practices that articulate them. The medium structures the way in which we attribute meaning to the elements of the work. Similarly, rules structure artistic projects and "provide a framework for understanding particular artistic choices as meaningful."[54] Let's take for instance Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, which consists of a pile of hard candy in different colored wrappers, scattered in a corner, on the floor of the exhibition space. At each presentation, the total weight of the pile must be about 80 kg – possibly the ideal weight of a man – a reference to Torres' partner Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS. Two of the rules that, in Irvin's interpretation, serve as symbolic support, are described as follows: the interaction rule states that the audience can eat the candy, and the conservation rule states that the pile of candy must be refilled from time to time, at the discretion of the institution, to maintain its original weight.[55] Like other media, whether material, symbolic or technical, rules as symbolic support possess expressive qualities in view of the fact that they "make particular elements of the work available for appreciation or highlight their salience."[56] In Irvin's example, rules anchor the aspects that turn the work into a metaphorical representation of Ross's body from which the audience can share.

But what are practices, exactly, and how can we understand them in relation to conventions? Irvin defines them as "established ways of working that may not rise to the level of convention, but nonetheless have enough traction that they systematically structure the artistic projects of a

50. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup,* 19. The Knights defend the specificity of art and challenge the abandonment of its specific space, the white cube, which in Krauss's view guarantees its autonomy.
51. Rațiu, conversation at the National Conference of Aesthetics and Theories of Arts (ETA), 10th edition, 23-24 September 2022, "Babeș-Bolyai" University Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of History and Philosophy, 24 September 2022.
52. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 7.
53. Sherri Irvin, *Immaterial. Rules in Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 145.
54. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 144.
55. Caldarola, *Filosofia,* 44.
56. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 143.

community or, occasionally, an individual artist."[57] Described this way, the concept of practices, in Irvin's sense, seems to be quite close to Krauss's conventions, for whom the latter have a less generalized and established character than for Irvin, conventions being invented by individual artists.

If we accept Irvin's thesis, the current definition of the medium must add conventions *and* practices, both of which articulate and organize rules. The medium thus becomes "a system involving (a) materials and (b) conventions and practices, arising out of artistic traditions, for working with those materials," where materials can be physical (traditional or unconventional/obsolete objects), symbolic or technical.[58] In other words, the rules for display, conservation, and participation function as the symbolic support of the work, while practices and conventions (institutional, for instance) govern the use of supports, including symbolic ones such as rules. For simplicity and bearing in mind the similarity between the concept of practices and conventions, the thesis can be rephrased as follows: the *medium* consists of a system involving (a) a support (material, technical or symbolic), and (b) conventions and/or practices for articulating and understanding the support (a), which may include rules.

As rules are part of the structure of an artwork, changing them also alters the content of the work and what it expresses. According to Irvin, rules can play the role of requirements, as when Saburo Murakami explicitly asks that the series of works *Peeling Pictures* (1957) intended to capture the process of pigment erosion not be restored; of permissions, when Gerald Ferguson allows the owners of the *Maintenance Paintings* series (1979-82) to paint over the works; or they can involve both roles, as in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's piece, in which the artist *requires* that the institution *allow* the public to eat the candy.[59]

b. Expressive resources

Against the background of practices and conventions adopted by institutions for presentation, conservation and participation, some artists outline their choices in the form of rules, often detailed in packages prepared for those who exhibit or collect their work.[60] An expressive tension can form between the rules established by artists as symbolic support for their work and certain established practices. Individual artists' choices are perceived in a context formed by a common repertoire of practices and conventions, which they may respect or transgress, with varying psychological effects on the audience. The conventions and practices specific to the medium "establish what is normal and expected within it. This helps to determine which of the work's features are salient as expressive resources, and also the character of what they express."[61]

At the same time, this helps artists who transgress the practices and conventions of an art to achieve a powerful psychological effect. The idea is inspired by Kendall Walton's theory set out in the essay "Categories of Art," according to which artworks have standard, variable and counter-standard features. Standard features are those by virtue of which works belong to certain categories, variable features have nothing to do with whether the work belongs to that category, and counter-standard features imply the absence of a standard feature in relation to its category.[62]

Walton's "psychological thesis" concerning the effect works have on us includes the idea that standard traits are unifying and help establish feelings of stability, adequacy, and inevitability.[63] Moreover, they can be described as conventional rules in the production of works belonging to certain categories, such as the rules of counterpoint in music.[64] On the other hand, the counter-standard elements may have a striking or even disturbing or shocking effect, but this is precisely the source of their expressiveness, although over time, through frequent exposure, the existing categories expand to include them, thus

57. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 128. Irvin doesn't supply further detail regarding the situations where practices can be identified in the work of a single artist. The idea is reminiscent of an aspect of the Kraussian approach to reconceptualizing the medium, when Krauss argues that the artists "knights of the medium" invent their own mediums. Krauss's idea that a medium can be restricted to the work of a single artist was challenged by Costello in the essay "Automat."
58. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 127.
59. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 139-40.
60. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 142.
61. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 131.
62. Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79, nr. 3 (July 1970): 339, https://doi.org/10.2307/2183933.
63. Walton, "Categories of Art," 348.
64. Walton, "Categories of Art," 351.

diminishing or losing their initial effect.[65] Nevertheless, as Walton points out, the strength of the effect arises not simply from the rarity of the trait, but from the mismatch with the category to which it belongs and from the combination between the counter-standard traits and the standard ones.[66] Building on Walton's thesis, Irvin shows that rules as a medium help determine the expressive qualities of works through the framework they provide "to locate particular choices in the context of a range of practices and possibilities."[67]

In his solo exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York (1989), Robert Gober placed on a plinth a hand-cut and shaped paper bag filled with doughnuts which, in order to preserve their appearance, were subjected to rigorous conservation interventions, including "degreasing through repeated acetone baths and a final coating with a synthetic resin for preservation, followed by cinnamon for aroma and appearance." [68] The result was so good, the artifice so successful, reports curator Megan Fizell, that Ed Brzezinski, critic, curator and artist, hungry as he was, didn't notice that the bag was displayed and marked as a sculpture and ate one of the donuts.[69] The extraordinary effort to preserve the works makes one wonder why the artist didn't opt for making fresh doughnuts instead. Martha Buskirk point out that Gobe's choice makes sense when we consider one of his characteristic tactics, that of creating *ready-made* objects by hand, and the fact that conservation decisions often underlie his choice of materials.[70] Standard conservation practices involving the replacement of biodegradable materials, Irvin argues, create certain expectations, to which Gober opposes – with comical reception (and health-dangerous!) effects – the "stubborn" conservation rule of the *Bag of Donuts*.[71]

The Gober example referred to by Irvin and further detailed here may also be useful in clarifying the distinction between rules and practices, which is not easily drawn sometimes, as the author uses the two notions interchangeably. Elaborating on their relationship, Irvin argues that practices arose to specify rules: "There are now practices of specifying three types of custom rules, those governing display, conservation, and participation, and an artist's choice to participate in the articulation of custom rules in one or more of these areas is meaningful against a background of related choices made by other artists and default practices that have emerged from these choices."[72]

Consequently, the difference lies in the recognizable and relatively generalized aspect of practices, and the individualized and idiosyncratic aspect of rules. Considering these examples, we may safely summarize that the rules-as-medium thesis emphasizes the relationship that forms between the shared repertoire of strategies for presentation, conservation and interaction, on the one hand, and individual artists' choices, on the other. In this sense, both elements are constitutive parts of the medium, with common practices structuring individual choices and the latter gaining expressiveness by testing or transgressing the former.

Conclusion

In this paper I have offered careful analysis of the concept of *medium* and some of the most recent theories that redefine it, as well as earlier (modernist and postmodernist) theories that anticipated or influenced them. As shown, the current notion of the medium active in works of contemporary art implies two fundamental distinctions: first, the (Kraussian) one that separates the technical/symbolic aspects of the medium from the material ones, and second, that between the physical medium and the artistic medium. Detailing the reconceptualization of the medium in Rosalind Krauss's thesis, I examined the notions that make up its theoretical structure: automatism, convention and rule. Some of these notions (or understandings of them) were anticipated by Timothy Binkley and, in particular, by Stanley Cavell, to whom Krauss was to turn for the terms automatism and rules. Moreover, I highlighted the influence of Kraussian thought on current definitions of the concept of *medium*, namely, the idea

65. Walton, "Categories of Art," 352-53.
66. Walton, "Categories of Art," 354.
67. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 144.
68. Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 146.
69. Megan Fizell, "Eating Robert Gober's Bag of Donuts," *art21 magazine*, (January 2014), last access on 31 October 2022. https://magazine.art21.org/2014/01/21/eating-robert-gobers-bag-of-donuts/#.Y1-ztnbMJPY.
70. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object*, 144-146.
71. Irvin, *Immaterial*, 142. Among the rumors that emerged from this legendary incident there was one regarding a visit to the emergency department.
72. Irvin, *Immaterial,* 143.

of "technique" contained in the concept of "technical resource" prefigures the medial profile thesis proposed by Dominic Lopes.

Recent theories of the medium grant a structuring function to symbolic supports. The three main supports identified here are conventions, rules and practices. As shown, Sherri Irvin's proposal to view rules for presentation, conservation and participation as symbolic supports runs on definitions of the medium based on its conventional nature developed by theorists such as Binkley, Krauss and Cavell. Moreover, in the thesis that conceives rules as part of the medial structure of works echoes of earlier conceptions such as Cavell's and Krauss's can be found.

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