

PERVERSION OF SIGNS

For a Material Theory of Relation



The Perversion of Signs: From the Mediation of the Symbol to the Constitutive Force of Relation

Every society produces its own forms of relation. Before institutions, economies or political systems come into being, human beings produce the material conditions through which bodies encounter one another, recognise one another, cooperate and transform the world together. Language, desire, symbols and every form of social production emerge from this common activity. Relation is therefore not a consequence of society; it is the material process through which society continuously produces itself.

Language is not simply a system of representation. Every word, every gesture and every symbol is the historical sedimentation of collective experience. They condense labour, memory, conflict, emotion and material transformation. No individual produces language alone, just as no individual produces the world in which they live. Both belong to a common process that precedes every subject while continually shaping and transforming it.

Relation is not the result of communication; it is its material condition. Before language there is the body. Before the symbol there is the encounter.

Every relation transforms those who participate in it, modifying perception, desire, memory and the capacity to act. Social cooperation originates in this continuous process of reciprocal transformation, through which human beings simultaneously produce the world and themselves.

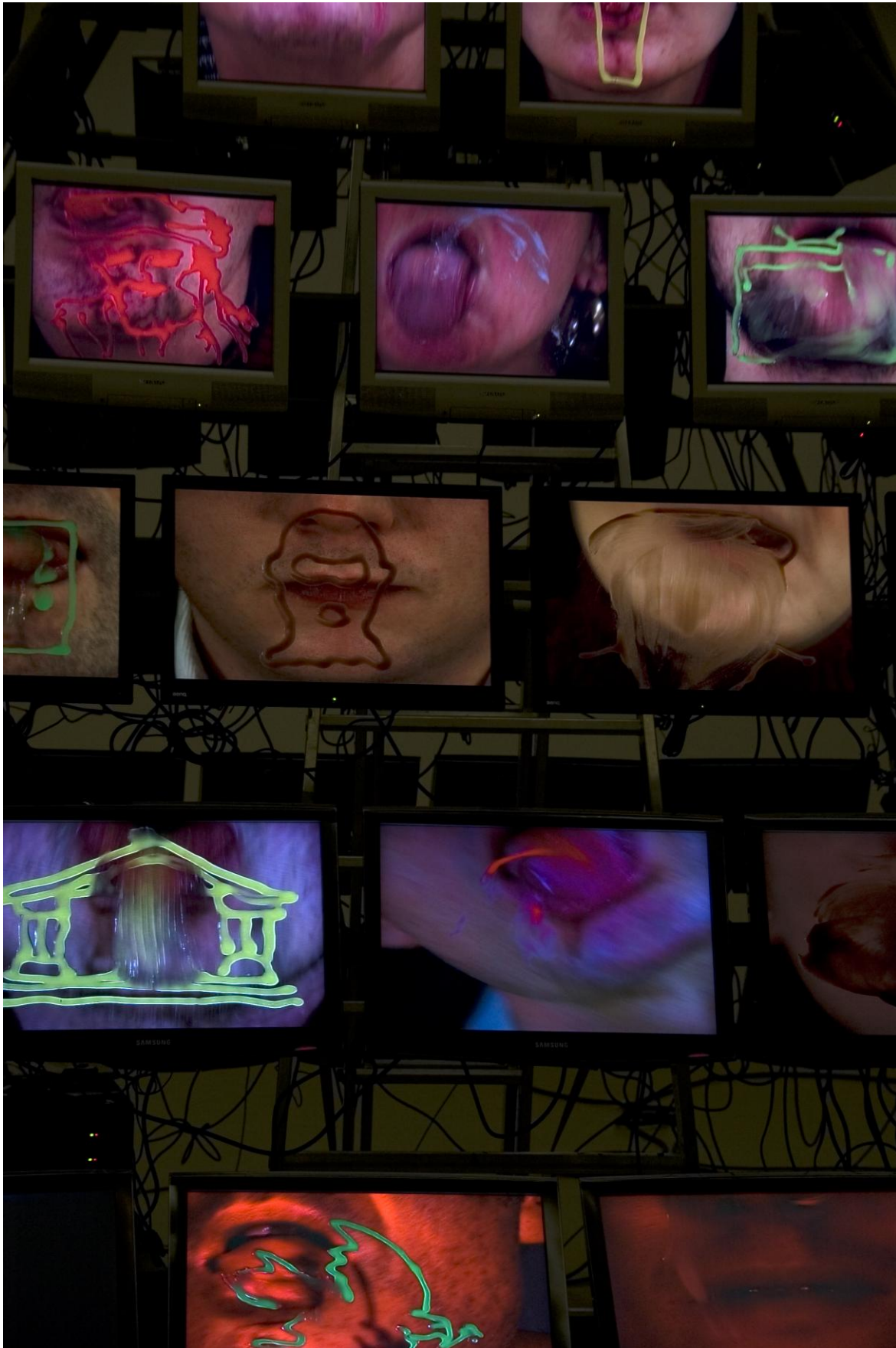
Labour must also be understood from this perspective. It is not simply the transformation of nature but the production of relations. Every human activity changes both the environment in which it takes place and those who perform it. Labour, language and symbols are different expressions of the same material process through which society reproduces and transforms itself.

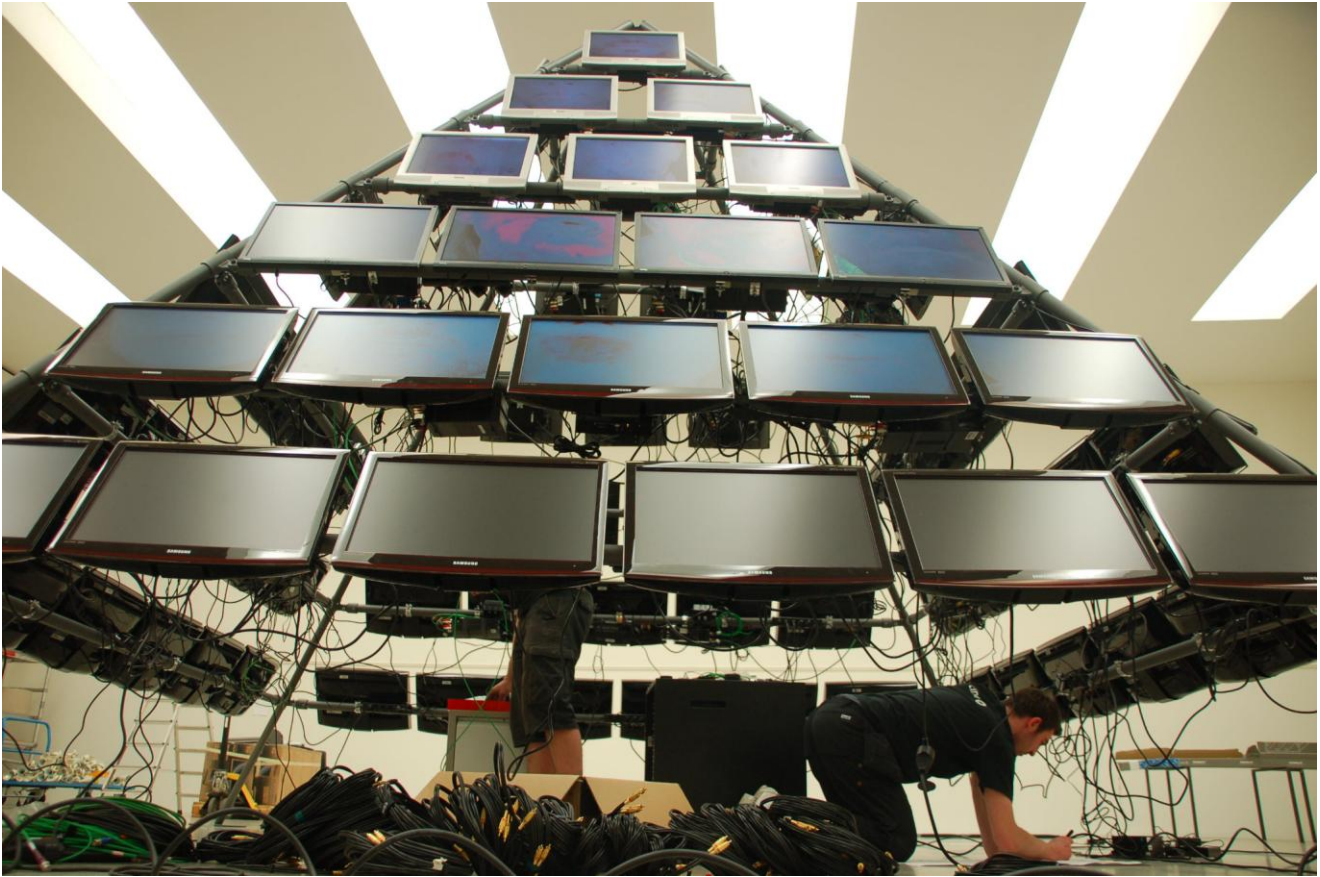
No society exists without mediation. Language mediates relations. Symbols mediate memory. Technology mediates action. Institutions mediate cooperation. Art itself is a form of mediation. Mediation is therefore not an external instrument imposed upon social life but the historical form through which cooperation acquires duration, organisation and transmissibility. Every society produces the mediations it requires in order to reproduce itself.

The political problem does not lie in the existence of mediation but in its separation from the relations that generated it. As long as mediation evolves together with the collective life that produced it, it remains part of the cooperative process. It becomes a mechanism of domination when it acquires autonomy and begins to organise social relations according to principles that no longer arise from the cooperation itself. Language continues to exist, yet it is directed. Desire continues to emerge, yet it is organised. Cooperation continues to produce wealth, yet the conditions of its production increasingly escape those who generate it.

Contemporary capitalism operates precisely at this level. It does not create language, desire or collective intelligence. Nor does it create cooperation itself. Rather, it appropriates the mediations through which cooperation becomes socially effective, separating them from the collective activity that continually reproduces them. Digital infrastructures, algorithms and communication networks do not generate social life; they organise the conditions under which social life can be translated into economic value. The problem is therefore not technology itself but the capitalist social relation that transforms historically produced mediations into autonomous mechanisms of accumulation.

The Perversion of Signs begins from this point. The work does not seek to illustrate a theory of language or to denounce contemporary consumer culture. It investigates the historical moment at which the symbol ceases to function as an expression of social cooperation and begins to operate as an autonomous mediation. The monumental sculpture and the performance constitute two configurations of the same artistic process. The first makes visible the separation of mediation from the relations that produced it. The second explores the possibility that this separation, precisely because it is historically produced, can also become the object of collective reappropriation.





Installation in progress

The Monumental Sculpture

The monumental sculpture takes the form of a pyramid composed of eighty-four monitors. Among the oldest architectural structures created by human societies, the pyramid embodies a principle of organisation in which multiplicity is gathered into a hierarchical order. It is not simply a geometric form but a material arrangement of relations. Within the work, this ancient structure is neither celebrated nor quoted. It is reactivated as a device through which the historical organisation of symbolic production becomes visible.

Each monitor presents the same elementary action. A person slowly licks symbols and pictograms made of coloured sugar until they dissolve and disappear. Democracy, religion, money, communication, security, war, peace, family and the market are all subjected to the same gesture. The symbols are not spoken, interpreted or contested. They are consumed.

The action is deliberately simple because its significance lies in the body rather than in representation. The mouth is the place where nourishment,

language, breathing and the kiss converge. It is one of the primary sites in which biological existence and symbolic life become inseparable. Yet within the work this plurality of functions is progressively reduced to a single operation: assimilation. Instead of circulating between bodies as a medium of relation, the symbol is absorbed into the body as an object of consumption.

Sugar is not merely a material chosen for its visual qualities. Its sweetness reveals a fundamental transformation in the way domination operates. Contemporary capitalism no longer depends primarily upon coercion. It increasingly organises desire itself, presenting the forms through which social life is governed as pleasurable, voluntary and natural. Consumption becomes the privileged mode through which mediation is internalised. What appears to satisfy desire simultaneously reproduces the conditions that organise it.

The work therefore does not suggest that symbols have lost their meaning. On the contrary, every symbol retains within itself the sedimentation of innumerable acts of cooperation through which it came into existence. Symbols condense shared labour, historical conflicts, collective memory and accumulated forms of experience. Their meaning cannot be reduced to the intentions of those who use them because they emerge from a social process that always exceeds individual consciousness.

The problem begins when symbols become detached from the relations that produced them. Once separated from the cooperative processes through which they acquired meaning, they cease to function primarily as expressions of collective life and begin to operate as autonomous mediations. The symbol no longer reflects social cooperation; it organises it. What originated as the product of shared activity returns as an external structure that appears to govern the very relations from which it emerged.

The pyramid gives material form to this inversion. The eighty-four individual actions do not simply accumulate. They are organised within a single architectural structure that transforms dispersed gestures into the image of an ordered system. The work does not represent domination as an abstract concept. It materialises the process through which historically produced mediations acquire the appearance of necessity and autonomy.

For this reason, the sculpture cannot be understood as a closed object. Its meaning remains incomplete as long as the symbols continue to be consumed without resistance. The apparent stability of the pyramid conceals an unresolved tension. If mediation has been historically produced, then its autonomy cannot be absolute. The sculpture therefore prepares the question that the performance will subsequently develop: whether the separation between relation and mediation can itself become the object of collective transformation.



Performance



Breaking the glass

The Performance

The performance constitutes the second configuration of the work. Twenty-one pairs sit facing one another, separated by a transparent sheet of glass on which the same sugar symbols appear. Each participant begins to lick the symbol from opposite sides of the glass. As the action unfolds, their movements gradually synchronise. Their tongues seem almost to meet. For a brief moment the gesture evokes the intimacy of a kiss, yet the encounter never takes place.

The glass is not simply a physical support for the symbols. It is the material manifestation of mediation itself. Its transparency is essential because it does not interrupt vision, desire or proximity. The participants remain fully aware of one another throughout the performance. What the glass prevents is not relation but contact. It organises the conditions under which relation takes place while concealing its own operative function. The encounter appears immediate, although every aspect of it is structured by an invisible mediation.

The performance therefore does not stage separation but a particular form of organised proximity. Desire is neither denied nor repressed. It is sustained precisely through the impossibility of fulfilment. The bodies remain close enough to intensify one another's presence, yet every possibility of direct encounter is continuously deferred. What appears to be an intimate relation is already organised by a mediation that neither participant has produced nor controls.

This mechanism extends beyond the work itself. Contemporary capitalism increasingly governs social life not by suppressing cooperation but by organising the mediations through which cooperation becomes possible. Communication expands, interaction accelerates and technological infrastructures multiply the possibilities of connection, yet the forms through which these relations are organised become progressively detached from those who continually produce them. The problem is therefore not the existence of mediation but its historical separation from the cooperative processes that generate it.

The conclusion of the performance transforms the meaning of the entire work. Once the sugar symbols have dissolved, the participants collectively lift the sheets of glass and shatter them. The gesture does not reject language, symbols or technology, nor does it invoke the illusion of an unmediated human condition. Every society necessarily produces mediations through which collective life acquires continuity and historical duration. What the gesture calls into question is the autonomy of those mediations once they become separated from the relations that produced them.

Breaking the glass does not abolish mediation; it restores mediation to history. It reveals that every form through which society organises itself is the result of collective activity and therefore remains open to collective transformation. What appears immutable is recognised as historically produced. What appears natural is revealed as the effect of a specific social relation.

The trajectory initiated by the sculpture therefore reaches its conclusion in the performance. The pyramid materialises the historical process through which mediation separates itself from social cooperation and acquires the appearance of an autonomous order. The performance demonstrates that this autonomy is never complete because mediation continues to depend upon the living relations from which it emerged. The possibility of transformation does not arise from the rejection of mediation but from its collective reappropriation.

This process of reappropriation should not be understood as the extension of private ownership to a greater number of individuals, nor as the replacement of one administrative structure by another. Its horizon is Aneignung in the Marxian sense: the collective reappropriation of the conditions through which society produces its own forms of life. What is reclaimed is not the possession of things but the collective capacity to determine the mediations through which language, symbols, knowledge, technology and cooperation are continuously produced and transformed. The political question is therefore no longer one of ownership but of collective disposition (*gemeinsame Verfügung*) over the conditions of common existence.

Such a transformation cannot begin as an abstract political programme. It emerges from lived experience, when bodies recognise that cooperation expands their capacity to act more effectively than competition and that the production of the common is not the consequence of a moral imperative but the material condition through which individual and collective freedom become mutually reinforcing. Political consciousness is therefore not transmitted through ideology; it develops through the practical experience of participating in forms of life that reveal cooperation to be materially more productive than separation.

The Perversion of Signs does not propose such a transformation as a political doctrine. It constructs a material situation in which spectators experience the contingency of the mediations that organise their own relations. The work neither prescribes conclusions nor offers models of emancipation. It invites viewers to recognise that what appears natural is historically produced and that what has been historically produced can also become the object of collective reappropriation. In this sense, the work functions less as a representation of political transformation than as a material experiment in the conditions through which such a transformation may become historically conceivable.