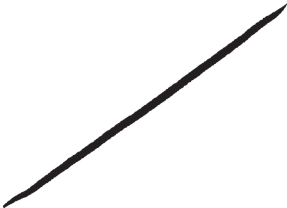


CRUISING CORPOLITERATE ART MEDIATION. REFLECTIONS ON THE MEDIATION PROGRAMME OF ADINA PINTILIE'S "YOU ARE ANOTHER ME. A CATHEDRAL OF THE BODY"

DANIEL NEUGEBAUER



Curator (Cultural Education & Strategic Partnerships), Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Germany
neugebauer@hkw.de

Abstract: The study¹ contextualises Adina Pintilie's recent work within the framework of corpoliteracy. To accomplish this, I introduced the concept of *corpoliteracy* as proposed by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, followed by my own expansion of the term as it applies to educational practices in art institutions. Body-semiotics and body-epistemologies will serve as entry points into a corpoliterate analysis of Pintilie's work. This is a partial analysis that focuses on the body as a site for learning and unlearning but cannot cover all aspects of the multi-year, multi-media research conducted by Pintilie and her team. First, I chose an educational perspective, informed by recent methodologies and practices of museum education and artistic research, which are founded on practices of inclusion. Nevertheless, this perspective intersects with political, aesthetic, social, and institutional factors. Therefore, this approach is effective in terms of describing an artwork that manifests in domains before or beyond language. Second, I explored institutions as "social power plants" in order to examine how Pintilie's practice relates to theories of radical museology. By applying the lens of corpoliteracy to Pintilie's work as well as to the mediation practices of its exhibitions, the artistic quality and societal potency of the work can be addressed. Simultaneously, her artistic vision contributes to the expansion of corpoliteracy as a theoretical framework by continually challenging the institutions the projects manifest in. In the final section, I reflected on the mediation programme for Pintilie's work, "You are another me. A Cathedral of the Body", which attempted to put the aforementioned theory into practice.

Keywords: art education, corporeality, body politics, mediation, engaged art, virtual embodiment, Adina Pintilie, "You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body" Program, 2022 Venice Biennale.

How to cite: Neugebauer, D. (2023) "Cruising Corpoliterate Art Mediation. Reflections on the Mediation Program of Adina Pintilie's 'You are Another me. A Cathedral of the Body'", *Concept* 2(27), pp. 96-106. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/sna58d54>

Introduction: A literacy of the Body

It appears increasingly clear that it is necessary to develop new literacies to describe and understand contemporary realities. Particularly within the humanities, new literacies, such as media literacy, digital literacy, visual literacy, and many more, have been proposed, applied, and proven useful as theoretical tools. These tools are connected to the bigger frameworks aiming to help make sense of contemporary realities, like the cultural turn, the performative, or the postcolonial turn. Following

1 This article reflects the research carried out within the mediation programme of the *You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body* project, which represented Romania at the Venice Biennale in 2022. The main coordinator of the project was Adina Pintilie. The article was written following my participation in the conference of the same name, organised in December 2022 by the Department of Research, Development, and Innovation within CINETIC – International Centre for Research and Education in Innovative and Creative Technologies, I.L. Caragiale UNATC, Bucharest, Romania.

this terminology, I propose to think of corpoliteracy as an intersectional tool that facilitates the navigation of a turned world from a corporeal perspective. In addition, there is no concise theory of body-as-text interpretation in educational contexts. The educational possibilities of corpoliteracy seek to bridge this gap. And bridging this gap is the motivation for my work in cultural institutions, working with diversified audiences, which need to be addressed adequately. In summary, I am interested in combining learnings from theories and artistic practices to point towards educational models that are able to speak on topics like diversity, accessibility, or inclusion in a productive and non-discriminatory way.

Keeping this in mind, it becomes evident that the body (as text) follows its own logic and requires its own parameters for analysis. From a humanities perspective, it must be stated that the human body and its representation have been the subject of impassioned debate, particularly in relation to gender identities and disability. Body-related taboos are as diverse as the bodies themselves. Therefore, a transcultural perspective on culture must provide a means of addressing corporeal cultures. Adina Pintilie and Viktor Neumann articulated the necessity and urgency of finding new parameters for making sense of contemporary art practices such as Pintilie's in the following paragraph:

Framed by the contradiction of verbalizing the sensations of subject formation before words, Pintilie's methodological and visual propositions emphasize the need for alternative grammars, gestures, and translations within and beyond the fields of the moving image and moving bodies. (...) Pintilie enacts modes of intimacy that are outside the script of heteronormative and able-bodied regimes and that historically lack representation—or rather, non-stigmatizing representation(...). (Neumann, 2024, page 24)

Following this line of reasoning, it becomes clear that the politics of Pintilie's work speak to the politics and policies of (art) institutions or societies at large regarding the inclusion of traditionally underrepresented bodies. This will be illustrated in depth in the following chapter.

Corpoliteracy: A New Word to Create New Worlds

Corpoliteracy, as a practice rather than a consistent theory, was first coined by Elena Agudio and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in April 2016 at SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin during the programme of DJ sets, talks, and performances "Unlearning the Given: Exercises in Demodernity and

Decoloniality of Ideas and Knowledge” as part of Berlin’s annual “Long Night of Ideas” event. The programme emphasized ‘corpoliteracy’ as a form of learning, i.e., corporeal knowledge, experientiality, and performativity as means of unlearning, but also acquiring, enacting, and disseminating knowledge, thereby tying artistic practice to the educational mission of unlearning. As part of documenta 14, Ndikung elaborated on the meaning of the term by concentrating on body semiotics and epistemologies.

With the concept of Corpoliteracy I mean to contextualise the body as a platform and medium of learning, a structure or organ that acquires, stores, and disseminates knowledge. This concept would imply that the body, in sync, but also independent of the brain, has the potential of memorising and passing on/down acquired knowledge through performativity. (Ndikung, 2021, page 22)

In a context of postcolonial theory or decolonial practice, awareness and knowledge, consequently, are insufficient to surmount (colonial or other forms of) suppression; movement and choreography are necessary additions to express and unlearn institutionalised inequalities. The documenta 14 mediation programme titled “aneducation” applied these ideas under the direction of Sepake Angiama and Clare Butcher, who added cooking, community practice, and walking (‘strollology’ by Lucius Burckhardt), and demonstrated that corpoliteracy could take on new meanings when put into practice. The concept of corpoliteracy enables the development of strategies for overcoming corporeal exclusion in gallery spaces, as formed by the traditional structures these institutions represent. Here, liberatory theoretical approaches to cultural artefacts touch on Pintilie’s cinematographic and artistic aspirations. A desire to overcome embodied pain, to engage with that and to find aesthetic strategies for the oppressed and ignored is a common denominator.

I would like to illustrate this by describing the transformative educational practices of a traditional European art institution I know well as I have worked there for six years. This institution could be called proto-corpoliterate because it actively engaged with bodies, but also identities often rendered invisible in mainstream museums. The Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, Netherlands) has been pro-actively involved in accessibility and inclusion programmes, setting standards in the Dutch context and beyond. Activities for people with dementia, blind and deaf people and communities, wheelchair users, people with non-normative sexualities and gender identities (“queering”), and people with aphasia or neurodiverse audiences have been the focus of subsequent programming.

In these programmes, a strategy was required to connect disparate groups, as opposed to fostering further segregation. This resulted in a multisensory approach (adding touch, scent, sound, and movement to the displays), first in mediation and later in exhibition architecture and displays, which I would classify retroactively as corpoliteracy. The aforementioned body semiotics and epistemology could be expanded upon through a multisensory approach that focuses on gender as a constitutive force in corporealities.

Following a majority-minority paradigm, in which a centre is constructed by combining a variety of margins or marginalised groups, corpoliteracy provides a potent framework and methodology for fostering social solidarity among individual groups. In the case of the Van Abbemuseum, it has permitted the institution to transition from an accessibility-focused approach to mediation to a broader concept of inclusion and participatory practices. One could see a similarity to the way Pintilie develops her characters in front of the camera, always working from interpersonal relations instead of casting diversity.

I obviously see Adina Pintilie's work in this vein: as an artwork that cannot be "simply exhibited" or as an artwork that is appreciative to be shown. The vision and requirements are greater. This type of artwork cannot be displayed in an inaccessible environment. Therefore, to even be considered a host of Pintilie's work, a higher degree of inclusion or accessibility competence at the institutional level is required. The knowledge gained from experiments such as those described by the Van Abbemuseum would need to be transformed into institutional structures in order to prevent the pain and trauma dealt with in the artwork from being repeated, albeit involuntarily. This again places Pintilie's work firmly within the philosophical realm of forward-thinking institutions. Her artistic practice realises what institutions are trying to do. This is best exemplified by the fact that exhibiting an installation by Pintilie already led to the construction of a new ramp within the Romanian pavilion in Venice, to the installation of a lift in Kunsthalle Bega Timisoara, or to the repair of a long-broken wheelchair lift at a conference in Amsterdam. In this context, one could easily say that a corpoliterate practice is when art is practicing what it is preaching.

Collaborating with Ndikung during documenta 14 while still working at the Van Abbe allowed for the fusion of experiences from both institutions. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, where I've been employed since 2018, provided me with the opportunity to investigate additional aspects of this term. Within the HKW's multi-year initiative DNA/The New Alphabet, I initiated research into the potential of corpoliteracy as a new alphabet for navigating the present. From the symposium *Reading Bodies! Cruising Corpoliteracy in Art, Education, and Everyday Life* (September 2019), several key propositions emerged, including

the artist Olave Nduwanje's spoken word performance *Do Not Read This Body*, which made it clear that emancipatory corpoliteracy requires teaching as well as practicing resistance in institutions, shifting power from the observer to the gazed at. When instructing, it is essential to know when to avert the gaze and when to "read a body," in order to have an intersectional, nonjudgmental perception of other humans – the "how" of the reading. To disrupt solely logocentric knowledge production, researcher Jules Sturm and artist Angelo Custódio presented physical exercises such as breathing, movement, and touch. The purpose of these experiments was to integrate somatic knowledge with traditional academic thought and writing. A panel of educational experts, including María do Mar Castro Varela from BildungsLab Berlin, a network of migrant academics of colour working in the field of education, Ed Greve and Tuba Tanyılmaz (as part of the i-Pad – Initiative intersektionale Pädagogik), professor for education Gila Kolb, and activist researcher and pedagogue Ayşe Güleç, reminded the audience that institutional education must be founded on intrinsic values and address multiple senses to start an interaction with the most diverse array of audiences. I am aware that I am referring to many different people and practices here, but it is not meant solely as a name drop. These references hint at the fact that corpoliteracy was an idea of a small text by Ndikung, and a longer practice by everyone at SAVVY Contemporary, which has been generously shared, and in the course picked up, by many people with different interests to explore the possibilities of the concept. Out of these possibilities, I present here only one, which will diversify again during the next iterations of Pintilie's project.

The multisensory approach of museum education can be detected in Pintilie's work, where, particularly in the installation, a symphony of sounds of steps, of breathing, of detectable body temperatures and body odours, of reflections, and of disorientation forms a unique element that allows for a variety of perceptions and connections, depending on the sensory setup of the individual viewer.

Corpoliteracy as a meta-concept for education or an archive of body-based practices enables the discovery of undervalued or neglected aspects of artworks, as well as new audiences and specialists. Most significantly, it can empower and liberate audiences by allowing them to identify with the struggles of others. It must not be forgotten that the dynamics of exclusion from institutions can be perceived as extremely violent. Therefore, we need new institutions for new modes of living together, and to find these modes of living together, we need artists to shape these utopias. As a result of the failure of numerous institutions to serve their respective publics, the desire to maintain the status quo makes corpoliteracy so imperative that it becomes a defence weapon rather than a theory.

Semiotics and Epistemologies of the Body

I cannot provide an overview of all theories and concepts pertaining to the body but will instead concentrate on two defining characteristics that are most pertinent to an educational application of the concept of corpoliteracy. First, corpoliteracy as the semiotics of the body means that when a human gaze descends upon a human body, the body is subsequently constructed by the gaze. The body's voluntary and involuntary signals are read and interpreted predominantly subconsciously. In addition to skin colour, age, disability, fashion, hairstyles, and posture also influence first impressions and judgements of a person. This can be extended to smells and odours as well as sounds, e.g., the voice, of course. Corpoliterate education means breaking the automated judgement by creating knowledge, facilitating the perception of one's own prejudice, and opening up to new and different interpretations of the perceived – in one's own self and in the other person. In this context, corpoliteracy can be a tool for an anti-racist, non-discriminatory reading of the body.

Before one can truly “see” a body differently, it is necessary to comprehend how bodies are read and evaluated, as well as where these evaluations originated and how they are learned. This undermines the notion that individual perception is connected to reality. By learning about exclusion mechanisms, it becomes clear that the majority of individuals experience at least one of these. This encourages solidarity through empathy, a form of social agency that is a superior navigator to prejudice. Again, socially engaged art in socially engaged institutions necessitates engaged pedagogies to surmount an antiquated institutionalism that desires to maintain the status quo. Scholar Clare Bishop refers to radical museology when institutions mediate engaged art practices through radical pedagogies. Specifically, cultural institutions should recognise that cultural processes (understood as interactions in analogue or digital cultural zones) always involve evaluating and categorising bodies, avatars, and identities for signs of gender, class, digital filters, fakes, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, age, etc. Consequently, this indicates that these processes can and should be strategically managed. Digital and analogue body literacy could profoundly alter cultural processes. To be corpoliterate, then, means to be able to perform a complex, intersectional analysis of bodies and their relationships, as well as to perceive corpoliteracy as a collective act involving a variety of actors. Institutions, in my opinion, are usually the vessel to disseminate these ideas and practices into society. Of course, that means focusing on different intersecting elements at different times, so institutions can adapt this open concept of corpoliteracy to the needs of the society they are located in as well as to the audiences they interact with.

This is precisely what Pintilie's work accomplishes: it directs the viewer's gaze back onto themselves and presents bodies in a context of equality and minimal power dynamics. Here, Pintilie does not replicate reality but rather constructs a world with her camera's trained eye. This is significant, as reviews of Pintilie's work tend to emphasise a certain similarity to documentary techniques. The actuality, however, is more apparent in the effects of bringing this artwork into institutions: by requiring ramps so that all interested parties may enter, by constructing and repairing elevators, and by mandating special training for project participants.

Equally essential is the archive of lived experiences stored in the human body. Michel Foucault famously conceptualised the body as an archive, but the activation of archived knowledge, of remembered experiences, trauma, and conditioning, is still underrepresented, despite the decolonial wave of the last decade placing greater emphasis on this aspect, particularly in cultural institutions. In his article on corpoliteracy, Ndikung uses the dances and rituals of African peoples like the Nguemba of Cameroon as an illustration of how storytelling and the dissemination of knowledge can be linked to movement, performance, or ritual traditions. Together with Adina Pintilie, the Augmented Space Agency from Bucharest is conducting research on the VR element of the "A Cathedral of the Body." This is a major focus of the research. To be explicit, what effects can the virtual reality experience of "being in the body" of some of Pintilie's protagonists have? Recent research indicates that virtual reality experiences can promote empathy and reduce racism. This is very encouraging, as data and user testimonials from various exhibition contexts are currently being compiled.

Moreover, the ethical dilemma of virtual reality becomes clear: Even though it may cultivate empathy, it cannot be considered an embodied experience because a VR device cannot transfer the knowledge of a lived experience. Since it would be immoral to even imply such a thing, it is crucial to examine the mechanisms at play, defining the precise qualities of entertainment, experience, empathy, and embodiment in the use of VR on a practical level, as well as in didactics and pedagogical strategies on a theoretical level. As evidenced by the development of the "A Cathedral of the Body", artistic research, such as Adina Pintilie's, is very useful for highlighting problems by visualising or making them experiential.

This immediately propels us into the material aspect of Pintilie's artistic work, the manner in which the concepts manifest in different mediums. I've already mentioned that the fluidity of the subject matter (call it queerness if you will) settles into various mediums with consequences – means of accessibility in institutions, an expansion and inversion of the screen when it comes to cinema, a more conscious way of gazing when it comes to visitors – which, for me, is the

greatest quality in Pintilie's work. It is persuasive because it operates on each of these levels. Again, the emphasis on education or the importance of education is a result of my positionality and institutional background. Pintilie does not see herself as a social educator, and I have no intention of reducing her to that position.

Choosing the right words for matters in a state of becoming is tricky, but it is important. When using "challenging" rather than "teaching," the social impact or activist aspect can be emphasised, whereas when using "development," one could speak from the perspective of the cinematic experience. Nonetheless, the conclusion remains the same: Pintilie's artistic practice triumphs on multiple levels in challenging the status quo. Therefore, we could refer to art after the pedagogical turn as engaged art or art with an impact. Even though all of these relate to education, evaluating art based on its impact is a more recent practice in art criticism and places Pintilie's work more firmly in the art world than in the film industry.

Pintilie's artistic productions correspond to corpoliteracy as a concept connecting concepts, a vessel for practices and theories, while emphasising the complexity and inexplicability of the human condition she explores.

Corpoliteracy on the Floor

Being interested in practice just as much as in theory, I want to argue that corpoliterate art mediation is a crucial element to create impact with a corpoliterate artwork, as in the case of Adina Pintilie's work with "A Cathedral of the Body". In a way, this echoes the idea of the bodymind, which Ndikung is concluding his text on corpoliteracy with. Together with curator and educator Larisa Oancea, I was invited to train the students responsible for mediating Pintilie's work in the context of the Venice Biennale as well as the subsequent exhibition for the European Capital of Culture 2023 in Timisoara, and for another edition of the project at the Wuerttembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart in the fall of 2023.

The training programme involved engaging with theories on body politics and philosophies, from Bataille to Kristeva to Preciado, and, of course, Ndikung's (and others) ideas on corpoliteracy. It also involved reflections on political discourses around disability and queerness, debating the usefulness of categories like normative and non-normative, combined with very practical exchanges on how to best approach visitors with all kinds of abilities or anywhere on the gender spectrum. This was combined with a deep dive into the exhibition history of the Venice Biennale at large and the Romanian participation in particular to anchor and contrast contemporary politics with a politicised history of the institution.

Of course, how to use the body in educational practices was a key element as well, which aimed at enabling students to make the exhibition space “their own” by exploring materiality, architecture, space, and distances with their own bodies and voices, as a part of their mediating bodies.

The students brought immense knowledge into the project, which is now partly accessible to the public via an online platform, as they reflected on their approaches, best practices, and the reactions of the audiences. This material can be used as a tool for mediation programmes for projects with a comparable scope.

I already mentioned the practical infrastructural effects the project could deliver in terms of accessibility infrastructures. Additionally, the training, monitoring, and practice of the mediators on the exhibition floors formed a specific layer of the project, located at the intersection of education, activism, and hospitality. According to the feedback we received, we can state that the mediation of the project was important for many visitors, while it was also an empowering experience for many of the student mediators. By representing an artistic and political pluriverse more than a nation-state, they had the opportunity to bring topics that might be considered niche by a mainstream art audience as in Venice, into the centre of the art world’s attention, often driven by personal experiences and interests. To make a strong statement, emancipated bodies have been produced by the projects, because exactly these bodies invested their personal stories into the project.

For the next iteration of the “A Cathedral of the Body,” planned to be staged in Stuttgart later this year, the material and instructions gathered by Oancea and myself, as well as the key learnings and reflections of the mediators, can be accessed via the online platform. Further theoretical reflections by international scholars and participants of the mediation programme have been presented during a conference at UNATC in Bucharest in December 2022.

Discussing the body and body politics in contemporary discourses cannot be limited to the analogue body. Corpoliterate art mediation must have a digital component as well, just like Pintilie’s project included a digital element in the form of a VR experience. The implications of the VR part of the project are so rich that they need to be discussed in a separate article, as presented in this volume by Ciprian Facaeru, which I consider intensely important for a full picture of how Pintilie’s work penetrates into the art world.

Finally, some of the participants in the programmes will themselves be invited to train the next generation of mediators for this project, with the intention to expand the network and knowledge around corpoliterate art mediation. This way, a living corporeal archive is continually developing.

References:

1. Bishop, C. (2014) *Radical Museology—or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* London: Koenig Books.
2. Dörner, A. (1947) *The Way Beyond Art*. New York: Wittenborn.
3. Krämer, S. (2008) *Medium, Bote, Übertragung: Kleine Metaphysik der Medialität*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
4. Ndikung, B. Soh Bejeng (2018) „Corpoliteracy“. In: Sepake Angiama/Clare Butcher (Ed.). *eine Erfahrung*. documenta 14, Berlin, 89-96.
5. Neugebauer, D. (2021) *Counter_Readings of the Body*. Leipzig: Spector Books.
6. Neugebauer, D. (2021) *Skin and Code*. Leipzig: Spector Books.
7. Neugebauer, D. (2022) *Re_Visioning Bodies*. Leipzig, Spector Books.
8. Neugebauer, D. (2024) *Clothed Conflicts*. Leipzig, Spector Books.
9. Nichols, S. (2023) *Traversing Old and New Literacies. The Undead Book and Other Assemblages*. New York City: Springer
10. Rensma, A., Lundin, O., Neugebauer, D. (2020) „«A Museum Can Never Be Queer Enough»: The Van Abbemuseum as a Testing Ground for Institutional Queering“ in *Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism*. Routledge, pp.278-287.
11. Stalder, F. (2017) *Kultur der Digitalität*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
12. Sternfeld, N. (2018) *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
13. Sturm, J. (2014) *Bodies We Fail*. Bielefeld: transcript.
14. Tyradellis, D. (2014) *Müde Museen, Oder: Wie Ausstellungen unser Denken verändern könnten*. Hamburg: Edition Körber.
15. Wekker, G. (2016) *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Durham (NC): Duke University Press Books.

Online references:

1. Aikes, N./Zola Zoli van der Heide, Y. (2022) “I Think My Body Feels, I Feel My Body Thinks: On Corpoliteracy,” Van Abbemuseum [Online] Available at: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/collection-research/research/search-in-research/i-think-my-body-feels-i-feel-my-body-thinks-on-corpoliteracy> (Accessed: 9 March 2024)
2. Nduwanje, O. (2019) “Do Not Read This Body” Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) [Online] Available at: <https://mediathek.hkw.de/en/audio/olave-nduwanje--do-not-read-this-body--englisch-> (Accessed: 9 March 2024)
3. Vogel, J./Neugebauer, D. (2018) „Das wache Museum. Soziale Kraftzentralen in einer müden Demokratie“ in: *Kulturpolitische Mitteilungen* Nr. 160: [Online] Available at: https://www.kupoge.de/kumi/pdf/kumi160/kumi160_068-070.pdf (Accessed: 9 March 2024)

Daniel Neugebauer is an educator and curator living in Berlin. He worked as head of communications and cultural education at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) from 2018 to 2022. In 2023, he joined the curatorial team of HKW under Bonaventure Ndikung. Neugebauer was the first Connected World Senior Fellow at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2022-2023, working on the relationship between the university and the bodies of students. He edited four volumes in the HKW's series *Das Neue Alphabet* (2020-2023) on body politics and their poetics. Previous positions include: education coordinator of the Romanian Pavilion, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022 for Adina Pintilie; head of marketing, mediation, and fundraising at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2012-2018. He coordinated the marketing activities of documenta 14 (Kassel/Athes) in 2016-2017. He was trained at Kunsthalle Bielefeld, where he worked from 2006 to 2012, and obtained a degree in cultural geragogy in 2012. Since 2018, he has been active as a member of Berlin's Council for the Arts on a voluntary basis.