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REVISITING BENJAMIN'S ARTWORK ESSAY AFTER SEVENTY FIVE YEARS

AN INTRODUCTION

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It is now 75 years ago that Walter Benjamin's artwork essay first appeared, an essay that has become as famous as it has remained inscrutable – or if one prefers, inexhaustible.<sup>1</sup> Probably its two most central, and most celebrated, notions are those of the 'aura' and of 'montage'. The aura, we might say, is the thing about the artwork that resists being reproduced. Even if we can reproduce an original work of art – and in modern times this is no longer an exceptional feat, as technology has made many works of art eminently reproducible – its aura will irretrievably be lost in reproduction. That is to say, it will lose its uniqueness, its authenticity, and its unapproachability or *Unnahbarkeit*.

In line with this analysis, the concept of 'montage' indicates how the artwork is no longer directly connected to, and thus controlled by, its place of production and its immediate audience, as it was in the traditional stage play. Now dislocated, production has become montage – both in the film studio, and in the factory assembly line. Montage implies the almost limitless possibility of cutting up and realigning parts in the productive process, unmooring the (art)work from its fixed place of production and reconfiguring it so as to make it amenable to mass consumption. The work is thus 'emancipated' from its auratic-ritual productive origin.

Simultaneously, the new, reproducible work of art is subject to managerial supervision and commercial imperatives. The spectator is being 'disempowered', because his gaze, and his perspective, are now being 'directed' by the montage of the artwork, by the way the film is being cut; he is no longer autonomous in his contemplation of the artwork. Moreover, we tend to remain unaware of this loss because of the 'transparency' of the new technology: when we are immersed in a movie, we do not literally perceive the machinery that 'produces' our experience.

But the work of art and its perception are also politicized. Lacking an immediate audience, the movie-actor must now struggle to retain his humanity literally in the face of technology: the camera. In this struggle, he is ultimately the representative of the masses, with whom he can be 'united' once the process of (film) production is released from the bonds of capitalism. And famously, in both the *Vorwort* and the *Nachwort* – sections that were either stricken or modified on account of Horkheimer and Adorno when the essay was first published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936 – Benjamin claimed that the conceptual framework he had developed in his essay was resistant to 'fascist purposes', while being eminently suited to the purposes of communism, or 'revolutionary demands in the politics of art'.

These are some of the transformations that, for Benjamin, were inherent in the era of the 'reproducibility' of the work of art. His essay seems to derive its compelling force from its idiosyncratic combination of an apodictic pronouncement on the contemporary condition of art, its cavalier reduction of the concept of art to visual arts, the reckless way in which it connects artistic transformation to political radicalism, or communism, and the disharmony between the melancholic loss of artistic aura and the revolutionary possibilities opened up by art that has become mechanically reproducible.

On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Benjamin's artwork essay, we invited a number of authors to reflect on questions such as: how should we describe the 'era' which now shapes, or directs, the production, reception, and experience of the work of art? What implications does this have for the work of art, for politics, and for society? While taking Benjaminian

themes as reference points, we expressly did *not* ask authors to interpret, or comment upon, Benjamin’s text. Rather, we invited them to present their own assessment of the contemporary condition of the artwork, deriving inspiration from Benjamin’s questions in as far as these may be relevant to our economic, political, and cultural condition.

The four essays that made their way into this issue are remarkably united in their focus on the political dimension of Benjamin’s essay. Pascal Gielen argues that the ‘post-auratic’ status of the contemporary work of art implies that artists are necessitated to collectively engage in a social praxis of discussion, argumentation, and debate; the contemporary work of art is therefore by nature ‘political’. And if this debate is practiced in an ‘agonistic’ style, artistic practice can even be called democratic, as it constructs a ‘democratic space’ in which it is shown that ‘things can always also be otherwise’. Thijs Lijster, in turn, points out that the technology and practice of new social media may open up a new space of ‘the common’, in which capitalist property rights are contested or negated, creating an ‘artistic common’, or perhaps we should say a kind of artistically grounded communism.

James Martel directs our attention to the ability of the work of art to resist the fetishism through which we, captured by capitalist logic, tend to perceive it. As fetishism distorts or subverts representation and is thus inherently political, the Benjaminian challenge of ‘politicizing art’ involves ‘enhancing the power of the objects to interfere with representation, to visibly fail to represent’ – a power of which Martel presents several examples from contemporary art. Lorey and Raunig, finally, latch on to Benjamin’s ambiguous valuation of *Zerstreuung* as the modern form of perception art to highlight a new form of political participation that they see materializing in the practices of the Occupy movement. In the present political and economic context, ‘dispersion’ takes on a new political meaning as signifying ‘precarious singularity’, and the ‘zerstreute Versammlung’ that characterizes Occupy is able to constitute itself as a new kind of ‘public’.

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<sup>i</sup> For those of you who would like, on this occasion, to (re)read Benjamin’s essay itself, we recommend the version with comments and other documents, published a few years ago by Suhrkamp in its new *Studienbibliothek* series: Walter Benjamin (2007) *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Kommentar von Detlev Schöttker. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.