

The Significance of the Aura in Digital Art:  
Reproduction and Shifting Manifestations

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In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin explains that the qualities of an “aura” of an artwork, which he believes is an inherent characteristic of authentic, unique artworks. He claims that the “aura” can only exist in original works of art and is constructed by the work’s irreproducibility. He argues that works of art that are mechanically reproduced, like coins or pottery, are absent of the attributes that create an “aura”. However, in the new age of digital reproduction and art, Benjamin’s notion is challenged through expanding and differentiating the constructs of reproductions. The advent and popularity of digital art necessitates a reconsideration of the qualities of reproduced artworks.

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, Douglas Davis asserts that the distinctions between an original work and its reproduction have disappeared. He postulates that the location of the aura in digital works and multiples lie in the ephemeral existence of temporally based originality. Digital artworks such as Davis's *The World's First Collaborative Sentence* support such a shifting conception of the aura by addressing issues of multiple digital realities. These numerous manifestations of digital media and their effects on the

sensibilities of artworks also prompt changes in the notions of collaborative authorship and subsequently created digital communities.

In the year 1935, Walter Benjamin authored an essay entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where he asserts that a man-made work of art is technically reproducible by the mere fact that it is a man-made thing and therefore can be re-created by man. He postulates that there are intrinsic characteristics that a reproduction of an artwork is lacking; a “presence in time and space” is one of such qualities (Benjamin, 3). Citing that authentic, original works have a unique existence and a tradition that cannot be mimicked or replaced, Benjamin arrives at the main point of his argument, stating, “That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (Benjamin, 4). He elaborates that an audience perceives reproductions as if they have the qualities of an original lead to a shift in the “mode of human sense perception” and ultimately cause a “decay of the aura” in contemporary art and visual culture (Benjamin, 5). Benjamin’s theory can be transmuted to apply to current digital works of art and media despite the fact that he wrote *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* almost fifty years before computers became widely available to the public.

Beginning in the year 1991, Douglas Davis starts to write *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)* in which he describes the developments and implications of the digital reproduction of art, film and literature. He opens the essay with the assertion that the distinctions between an original work and its reproduction have disappeared:

The work of art in the age of digital reproduction is physically and formally chameleon. There is no clear conceptual distinction now between original and reproduction in virtually any medium based in film, electronics, or telecommunications. As for the fine arts, the distinction is eroding, if not finally collapsed. The fictions of ‘master’ and ‘copy’ are now so entwined with each other that it is impossible to say where one begins and the other ends (Davis, 381).

Davis’s assertion nullifies the commonly accepted notion that works in both fine art and other mediums are imbued with uniqueness or some aspect of irreproducibility. He proclaims that the flexibility and mutability of new digital media creates a need to reconsider how digital artworks are received and deconstructed. He directly addresses Benjamin’s theory about the “aura” of original works:

Walter Benjamin saw accurately the logical implications of mechanical reproduction. He ignored antilogic. He erred in assuming that the world would bow to logic, that the endless reproduction of a painting or a photograph would diminish what he called the ‘aura’ of the original” (Davis, 384).

Davis cites Benjamin’s disregard for shifts in the development of new mediums and their implications as Benjamin’s misstep in his theory about the aura. Davis would continue in the mid 1990’s, to address issues of the aura in digital media through his own creation of a collaborative, digital artwork.

In the year 1994, Douglas Davis began a digital “performance” entitled *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence*. The “performance” took form as an interactive webpage with an

unending sentence to which public users were allowed to contribute additional text, images, or links. By the year 2000, there were more than two hundred thousand individual contributions that were organized into twenty-one “chapters” (“Whitney Museum”). The text appeared in many languages and contained a broad spectrum of imagery and links. There were no limitations placed on content but no single contribution was allowed to end with a period. This rule permitted the sentence to grow infinitely without imposition by any one person. Davis originally announced that, “when the sentence reached 3 miles in length or February 15, 1995 (whichever came first) we would stop it, temporarily, by typing in a period” (Davis, 382). When the sentence finally reached such a point, Davis reconsidered his initial proposal stating, “I knew it was wrong to stop the world, only God might take so final a step” (Davis, 382). It seems that Davis is suggesting that only a power greater than one single individual could act upon the *Sentence* as a disembodied meta-force. This notion suggests that the *Sentence* was created in the spirit of true democratic collaboration.

The webpage that displayed the *Sentence* was commissioned by the Lehman College Art Gallery in Brooklyn, New York and was shown in a survey of Davis’s work in 1994 titled *InterActions*. The *Sentence* was hosted on the website of Lehman College Art Gallery from 1994 until 2005 when broken links (obsolete links which point to moved or deleted pages or files) rendered the website functionless (“Whitney Museum”).

In 1995, the work was donated to the Whitney Museum of American Art and then in the year 2012, the Whitney started a project to preserve and reconstruct *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence* webpage. The results of the preservation efforts were two separate versions of the webpage. The first version is a newly created, live manifestation of the website; it

has full functionality and allows users to add to the ongoing sentence. The data or “code” in the new version has been updated to current programming conditions. The second version is, in essence, a snapshot of the website as it appeared in 2005. This “historical” version cannot be contributed to and the code used to structure the website remains mostly intact (“Whitney Museum”).

The digital *Sentence* websites’ existence in these two formats is compounded by a tertiary manifestation. The ability of any one “user” to access the *Sentence* from their own personal computer allows the webpage to exist in almost infinite repetitions. Davis comments on this situation, exemplifying the way libraries currently provide the opportunity of authorship to a user, “libraries increasingly offer not stolid, imperious texts but fields of knowledge on a terminal with which the user can interact, revising and extending the central text. Potentially, the reader is now... the author” (Davis, 383). Along with the transference of authorship to the reader, the *Sentence* website creates a transformation of the dissemination of information. The website exists in countless temporal modes because it is constantly being amended and viewed by a number of users. It is constantly generating new forms and content in a variable digital realm. The occurrence of this phenomenon creates a distinct, “real time” metamorphosis of the artwork. The multiple digital realities created are distinctly a product of the cyber existence of the work. Davis addresses this multiplicity, referencing Benjamin’s idea of the “aura”:

In one sense, Walter Benjamin's proclamation of doom for the aura of originality, authored early in this century, is finally confirmed... In another sense, the aura, supple and elastic, has stretched far beyond the boundaries of Benjamin's prophecy into the rich realm of reproduction itself (Davis, 381).

Davis suggests that the locus of the aura has moved. This movement speaks to the ever changing, multifariousness of digital reproductions and artworks. The mutability of the digital is compounded by a website's ability to have multiple existences in physical space (a computer screen) and space-less places (the internet), through the availability of the medium to different users. Digital media has created, through its unique presence, a new location for the aura to exist. Davis confirms, "in an age when copying is high art, when the simple physical availability of vintage masterpieces is dwindling, when postmodern theories of assemblage and collage inform our sensibility, the concept of aura (if not of its material realization) persists" (Davis, 384).

Contrarily, regarding the existence of the "aura", Benjamin would suggest, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin, 3). It seems Benjamin, although writing fifty-six years earlier than Davis is addressing the same issues of digital artworks and their manifestations. However, digital mediums and artworks clearly have different characteristics than the replicated prints and photographs to which Benjamin was alluding. Unlike photographic reproductions, digital works can exist uniquely through having fluctuating existences. Referring to his project *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, Davis elucidates, "You'll have to look hard in this collage of images, sounds, and words at any time, now or in the next century to find a single universality. Each fragment, each image, each sound is unique, personal, quivering with the sense of self (Davis, 382). Davis postulates that, though the uniqueness and multiple realities of a digital work, the "aura" can exist. This uniqueness is borne through the ability of any person to have his or her own experience of the digital artwork.

Concerning the authenticity of an artifact, Benjamin would suggest that it is the provenance

of the artwork and its inimitability that constitutes an existence of an aura. “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition... In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value... [M]echanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (Benjamin, 6). To Benjamin, the reproduction of an artwork changes its entire sensibility. This concept is contrary to Davis’s idea of the distinguished existence of digital works and the computer as the medium. Davis explains, “Without hesitation, artist, audience, and publisher... embraced the individuating mark, not the erasure of presence that accompanies replication (the ‘copy’). It seems to me a reversal of Benjamin... to find digital technology so accomplished at providing that individuating mark” (Davis, 385). The authority of digital artwork is still evolving and its sensibility, like other works of art, is conditioned by the discourse surrounding it. New forms of digital production and reproduction insist that the individual, as user, author, reader, or participant, contend with web based interface and consequently the social climate surrounding it.

The Internet has become a thriving social network. Available to anyone with an Internet connection, the World Wide Web has a democratic sensibility. It is this precise phenomenon that allows for Davis to create such collaborative, communal digital artworks like the *Sentence*. The availability of an open, almost boundless arena where users can virtually experience any number of “real life” scenarios, has created complex virtual societies and consequent societal issues. In their essay *The Coming of Cyberspacetime and the End of Polity*, Dan Thu Nguyen and Jon Alexander address the implications of the social space that the Internet provides and discuss the effects of a social existence in a space-less, time-bending place. Nguyen and Alexander,



regarding the experience of the Internet user, explain, “Jacked into the matrix they find a lateral world of people cooperatively connecting to play roles, share ideas and experiences, and live fantasies” (Nguyen et al. 103). Their description of the Internet space as a “matrix” or “lateral world” addresses the space-less locale that the Internet provides. The Internet user experiences a world not limited by his corporeal physicality, instead he is only constrained by the capabilities of the cyber realm. Speaking to this construct, Nguyen and Alexander assert, “Technology abstracts us from our existence as physical beings in the world. We ignore the boundedness of experience that leads to knowledge. Without limits we have just information and data. This alters the old relationship between knowledge and power.” (99) The notion of the relationship between knowledge and power has changed necessitates a restructuring of social relationships. On the Internet, it seems that knowledge can be disseminated through an open source and the supposedly widespread dissemination that functions as a leveler of power. However, the Internet is structured through a hierarchy that is not often considered. Behind the interfaces that users interact with is a hidden code. Nguyen and Alexander explain, “The mechanisms of computer operations are hidden works. Always beyond human sensory perception” (Nguyen et al. 112). Information or knowledge is made available through the structure of the interface that the user deals with; the user rarely if ever considers the power structure of such dispersion. In the new realm of “cyberspacetime”, those who create code have the power. It is important to consider the dispersion of information and knowledge through the medium of digital art. Its existence in an alternate realm, along with its power to connect people creates a powerful tool of dissemination.

Along with a restructuring of knowledge and power, there is an implicit change in the systems of social interaction. Through the use of particular interfaces such as chat rooms and

social networking websites, users are able to create an online presence or identity for themselves. Heather Bromberg in her essay *Are MUDs Communities? Identity, Belonging and Consciousness in Virtual Worlds*, explains the effects of interacting through “text-based multi-user dungeons/dimensions (MUDs)” and chat groups or “rooms” on the Internet. She postulates that the “multi-sensory virtual reality” of the Internet and other similar networks affect the construction of an individual’s identity within that cyber space. Bromberg elucidates:

References to a ‘disembodied’ consciousness as well as to the human-machine body of the cyborg are indicators of the sense of alteration of both the physical and mental self as a result of virtual reality technology. Both perspectives recognize that this technology alters the perception of an objective reality and allude to the erotic appeal of transcending the physical world. The ‘self’ is transformed and the implications run deep (Bromberg, 144).

There is a distinct reconstruction of the individual through the incorporeal manifestation of an online presence. Notions of the “self” and personal identity aren’t the only concepts altered by the effects of a virtual realm; the subsequent digital communities that exist within it are also changed by their existence in cyberspace. It is through the use of a digital interface that an individual’s online persona is created. This sort of interaction with an interface simultaneously closes the gaps in physical distance between users and brings individuals closer together cerebrally. The convolution of compounded physical place and interior mental spaces creates a unique atmosphere in Internet communities.

Davis’s performance work *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence* addresses both the constructs of an individual’s online identity and the social environment surrounding digital

communities. By allowing the *Sentence* to be altered or expanded by any Internet user, power and control are given to the individual. Additionally, through the efforts of collaborative authorship and the contribution of many individuals to a single artwork creates a community. A potent example of the response to these conditions can be seen in the first line of Davis's *Sentence*, "I did not feel separated I felt very close even though we were thousands of miles apart and I was surrounded by people here I felt close" ("The World's First"). The anonymous writer speaks about the conditions of interacting through a digital medium, much like a MUD, positing that there is some sort of connection felt by users despite their physical distance from each other. Davis addresses this in his essay, "No one could have imagined this fanciful personal exchange occurring over the authoritarian computer as recently as 1984... Separated from each other by space and time, people find themselves able to say what often cannot be said face to face" (Davis, 385). Perhaps this phenomenon is partially due to the ability of the computer as a digital environment that can create replicas and disseminate endless numbers of reproductions. The reproductions effectively alter the experience for the user or viewer. In his essay, Benjamin addresses how, through the existence of a mass audience and the mode of reproduction, affects the way that a mass audience perceives and interacts with art and media:

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art...

The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of

participation. The fact that the new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form must not confuse the spectator (Benjamin, 14-17).

Benjamin's view, similar to the opinions of Davis and Bromberg, speaks to the resulting effects of a mass audience contending with a work of art. The digital dissemination of information and artworks to the masses affect the way the "aura" is formed and perceived. Nguyen and Alexander would recognize the Sentence's power over a mass audience, in its ability to create a space that allows the user to disconnect from their physical form and shift their persona into the "lateral" world of which Bromberg speaks. Both Benjamin and Davis are aware of the implications of reproduction and community on the reading of art and new media. Digital art and media creates multiple realities by disseminating through fluctuating interfaces. The constant viewing and consequent reproduction of such interfaces has mutated the sensibility of digital artworks by making them accessible to the masses. Implications of this shift can be seen in the perception of the idea of the "aura". Despite the fact that Benjamin and Davis disagree on the locus and manifestation of the "aura", it is clear that they both recognize the aura as a shifting, mutable phenomenon that should be carefully considered when attempting to discern qualities of a work of art of any medium.

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