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The Aura of Profane Enlightenment

One of the central questions of modern art is whether or not all things are equally reproducible. Consequently, this question has been directly or indirectly treated by most artists and theorists of modern times. Undoubtedly the most famous essay discussing this question was written by Walter Benjamin. It bears the title "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Benjamin uses the term 'aura' in his essay to mark the limits of reproduction. In Benjamin's opinion, the aura is the limit of reproduction, as the aura is the only thing which is not reproducible. In his essay, Benjamin first assumes that it is possible to reproduce all things in a perfect way – in such a perfect manner that there is no discernible physical distinction between the original and the copy. The question Benjamin is asking is the following: Does the erasure of the physical distinction between the original and the copy also mean the erasure of the distinction as such?

Benjamin answers this question with a 'No'. The - at least potential - disappearance of any physical distinction between the original and the copy does not obliterate another invisible but no less real distinction between them: the original has an aura which the copy does not have. Benjamin sees the aura as the connection a piece of art has with its location - with its historical context.

Benjamin views the distinction between original and copy solely as a topological distinction and as such completely separate from the physical existence of the piece of art itself. The original has a specific location and it is due to this particular location that the original finds its place as a unique object in history. Benjamin's formulation in this context is well known: "There is one thing missing even in the most perfect reproduction: the 'here' and 'now' of the piece of art - its unique presence in its location". On the contrary, the copy is virtual, without location, without history. From the beginning, the copy seems to be a potential multiplicity. The reproduction is a de-location, a de-territorialisation - it carries the piece of art into the net of topologically uncertain circulation. If the distinction between original and copy is solely topological, then this distinction is determined by the topologically defined movement of the observer alone. If one moves toward a piece of art, then it is an original. If you force a piece of art to come to you, then it is a copy.

In this way, Benjamin's new interpretation of the distinction between original and copy not only offers the possibility of making a copy from an original but also of making an original from a copy. In fact, provided there is only a topological, contextual difference between original and copy, it is not only possible to de-locate and de-territorialise a work of art, but also re-territorialise a copy. Benjamin himself talks about 'profane enlightenment' in this context and writes at this point: "The reader, the thinker, the waiting person and the flâneur are as much characters of enlightenment as the opium consumer, the dreamer and the intoxicated person". It is noteworthy that these characters of profane enlightenment are all figures of motion. This applies to the figure of the flâneur above all. The flâneur does not expect that things come to him but he himself approaches them. In this sense, the flâneur does not destroy the aura of things, he observes it - or rather - creates it.

It can then be said that Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani are, as part of their 'Aura' research project, embarking on their search for the aura of profane enlightenment. They seek to discover invisible traces of former, original life in deserted and empty places which remain relatively intact. One can even say that artists create the aura by visiting such places, instead of demanding their portrayal. Ghosts, as it is known, do not like to return to deserted rooms as long as these rooms remain unoccupied. Ghosts especially enjoy haunting when the living visit these deserted rooms for a short or long period of time. One can certainly assume that artists reproduce in their photographs, the aura created in these rooms, thus refuting Benjamin's assertion that the aura is entirely unreproducible. Fischer and el Sani do in fact explicitly connect their project to a earlier, theosophical interpretation of aura, which, to a certain degree, Benjamin withheld in his essay. It is the aura as a visible combination of quasi-abstract colours and forms which surround the human body and reflect the internal state of the soul. A vocabulary of such forms relating to aura was widely used in esoteric circles at the beginning of the 20th Century and was used by artists such as Wassili Kandinsky in an artistic context. Many believed then that the aura could be captured using the so-called Kirlian-Photography process, which was developed by the Russian photographer Kirlian and his wife at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The 'Aura Research' project also explicitly refers to Kirlian-Photography. At this point, however, we cannot talk about a portrayal or reproduction of the aura, because in this case it is only created by the photographic process - the aura is not being captured as it cannot be presented other than through the photograph. The aura pictures of Fischer and el Sani are therefore no duplicates, no reproductions of an aura that has been there and visible all the time. Rather, they are the documentation of a journey by the artists looking for profane enlightenment, a journey which resulted in the 'aura' pictures being created in the first place.

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[Extract Translation]

These aura pictures derive their allure not least from the fact that they are incorporated into the overall context of the documentation of a journey and thereby obtain documentary value. This is exactly what abstract pictures are commonly said to be missing. Following a long history of the ideologically motivated dispute between “autonomous” abstract painting and “documentarist” photography, the abstract picture itself turns out to be documentary, due to the concept of “aura”. It appears as a photographic document of profane enlightenment which has occurred at a certain place at a certain time.

In the last few decades, a migration of interest has taken place within the world of art, moving away from the work of art itself and towards the documentation of it. A work of art is traditionally considered to be something which incorporates art, something that instantly presents art, makes it perceptible, thus illustrating what art actually *is*. Obviously, works of art can, in one way or another, also point to something which they are not, eg. to objects of reality or certain political issues. But they do not point to art, because they *are* art themselves. Nowadays the traditional notion of going to an exhibition or a museum is becoming more and more misleading. In contemporary art halls, in addition to works of art we are increasingly confronted with art documentations. These appear in the form of pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts and installations, ie. the same forms and media in which traditional art presents itself. Yet in this case it is not art itself that is presented by these media, merely a documentation of it. Art documentation is by definition *not* art. It just points to art and thus makes it obvious that art itself is not present and instantly perceptible, but rather removed and out of sight. The abstract painting was long seen as the incorporation of art itself, an immediate manifestation of the aura of art as such. For a long time the abstract painting seemed to have been deserted by its spirit. It was no longer viewed as a real revelation of the unseen but as superficial decoration. Fischer and el Sani return to the abstract picture as a real place and a real document of the aura. This too is a journey in search of profane enlightenment.

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