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Strategies of Irreproducibility

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I focus on the topic of reproducibility (and irreproducibility) of aesthetic experience and effects, distinguishing it from the traditional subject of artifact reproducibility. The main aim is to outline a typology of the various kind of irreproducibility of aesthetic experience and to draw some implications for the aesthetic discussion concerning contemporary art.

Depending on the type of artwork, we can define the difference (or the "ratio") between aesthetic experience in the presence of the artwork and aesthetic experience in its absence, that is, in the presence of its reproductions or documentations. For instance, in an easily reproducible painting the difference between experiencing the real artwork or its reproduction could be considered relatively small, while the difference between real experience and reproduction would be high in a complex room-filling installation. This ratio could depend on ontological, material, or practical reasons and could also depend on the technological means of reproduction and documentation.

In conclusion, following Groys (2017), I will suggest that the application of different "strategies of irreproducibility" testifies the urge to escape the replicability of aesthetic experience and the desire to generate forms of uniqueness and exclusivity in the fruition of art, and could therefore be seen as one of the reasons why art today is strongly based on documentations, installations or performative events. You really need to make the real effort to queue up and attend them, no substitute would be otherwise possible.

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1. Introduction: Are We Really in an Age of Total Accessibility and Reproducibility?

We all know at least since the famous "artwork" essay by Walter Benjamin, that reproducibility made possible to overcome the cult of the unique and original object in favor of its "exhibition value", mass diffusion and circulation, and we know how he celebrated "for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its subservience to ritual." And today, we live in a time of extreme accessibility and extreme reproducibility. Technologies are generators of "presence in absence" and artworks could be enjoyed in absence in an almost limitless way.

Accessibility of reproduction means, on the other side, the end of the "cult value" of the artwork, which also means a less urgent need to experience original artworks in their presence. Tourist visiting Florence, Italy, to make a very trivial but clear example often seem to be completely satisfied to contemplate the replica of Michelangelo's *David* in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, sparing the long entrance queue for the Accademia. Their argument probably goes like this: if we consider the sensorial and aesthetical effects of an object on the viewer (not the originality of the unique work), then we should say that this replica reproduces in a substantial degree its aesthetic effects and experience in the viewer. Moreover, the David's replica was placed a bit more than a century ago

exactly there where the original work was placed more than 500 years ago according also to Michelangelo's wishes, therefore someone could support the provocative claim that we have a more authentic experience of Michelangelo's work by looking at the replica in the original context.

Of course, we are talking here of the reproduction of "aesthetic effects" or of "aesthetic experiences" on the viewer, not of reproduction of the artwork as an object. Even before Benjamin artwork essay, this issue was famously discussed in the so-called "facsimile-debate" at the end of the 1920s in the Hamburg art journal "Der Kreis". This debate was sparked by historian and curator Alexander Dorner, who was a provocative defender of the use of facsimiles in museums and of the importance to recreate in them the real sensorial "atmosphere" of the artwork. According to Dorner, it was more important to give to a museum visitor the feel of the artwork in its original context by setting up the right historical environment, doing complete restorations or even re-creations of the object through facsimiles, and avoiding the cultic display of old fragments.

Notably Erwin Panofsky, without taking sides, touched this point as he distinguished in his essay "Original and Facsimile-Reproduction" (1930) between *Echtheitserlebnis* (experience of being in front of the authentic object) and *Sinnerlebnis* (experience of the sensorial effects conveyed by the object). He acknowledged that taste of the day favored *Echtheitserlebnis* – that is, seeing, experiencing, and maintaining the "unrepeatable organic singularity" of the material artifact - over *Sinnerlebnis*, the experience of sensing what he - interestingly for today's perspective - called the

"conceptual form" of art (that is, art which is not necessarily beholden to its materials). This made clear that the problem of originality and reproductions of artifacts is to be distinguished from the problem of accurate reproduction of the sensorial effects on a person, showing how the shift toward a higher centrality of the sensorial dimension means not only a movement toward "exhibition value" of the artwork (in Benjamin's sense) but also the importance of sensorial accessibility, that is reproducibility and diffusion of the aesthetic experience as such.

This becomes more relevant since we live in a time of extreme accessibility and reproducibility, that is, we mostly become acquainted with cultural products (specifically artworks, but basically with most facts in the world) through media, that is through reproduction and documentations. Even though one visits lots of exhibitions and sees thousands of artworks in his lifetime, nevertheless he probably comes in contact with most artworks in absence, through documentations and reproductions. One would think that this lead to a further consequence, namely that we probably produce and create cultural artifacts following reproducibility, that art would be made to be highly accessible, documentable and to be diffused and circulated.

The aim of this paper is to offer a different perspective on this assumption, arguing that a drive to resist reproducibility is consistent with many currents within contemporary art innovations. This drive is similar to the traditional Romantic aspiration to authenticity and uniqueness, but manifests itself also through a particular combination in which artworks

don't renounce to their aesthetic impact, to their circulation through the production of documents and text around them, but at the same time resisting the possibility to be consumed in absence through reproductions.

Ideally, in fact, we could replicate anything (that is, have a reproduction) with a high-level degree of similarity, but in reality this rarely happens: we don't have real-size copies of the David of Michelangelo in every school, we don't even have real-size reproductions of paintings in our textbooks or on our screens. And if we take examples of other contemporary art forms, like performances, things get even worse. If a teacher talks to his students about Viennese Actionism or Fluxus, he doesn't call a group of actors in the classroom in order to perform or re-enact some performance, I can only show them pictures or videos. So, we actually live in an age of wide documentability, not necessarily of reproducibility. A very good replica of the David is also not easy, it is necessary to travel to see the one in Florence, while, for example, a good reproduction in original size of a two-dimensional painting like the Mona Lisa is not difficult to get.

Already this example shows a difference in effort and complexity on how artistic medium could be reproduced. In other words, between original and reproduction there is not the same degree of transfer of aesthetic experience. A painting could be easily reproduced in a catalogue, an art-history book, a poster or a website. By contrast, the difference between looking at a sculpture and looking at its two-dimensional picture on a page is more significant (in this case we would need a material replica like in the David's example). This difference in aesthetic impact becomes bigger if a

medium-sized image of a book is not depicting a medium-sized object, but a huge canvas or an installation like Anish Kapoor's Leviathan. We can write about it, we can document it with pictures, but how much of the aesthetic experience of being in front of it are we able to convey through the usual means of reproduction?

2. The Presence/Absence Ratio of Aesthetic Experience

These differences in degree of experience's reproducibility, and its dependence on the art medium, becomes a relevant point considering that today most people are acquainted with artworks mostly indirectly through documentation and visual reproductions. We could therefore formulate a "ratio" (or a proportion) between the aesthetic effect in presence of the original artwork and the effects conveyed through its usual reproductions in absence.

The presence/absence ratio of a classical painting like the Mona Lisa is low, since its aesthetic qualities could be satisfactorily obtained with a high-quality reproduction. Someone could even suggest that observing a high-resolution reproduction (like in Google Art Project) guarantees a superior aesthetic impact than trying to look at the small original painting behind the thick bullet-proof case, the protective railing and the wall of selfie-taking tourists. Bringing to light what Benjamin called the optical unconscious means enhancing the aesthetic experience through means of

reproduction, the ratio would be even smaller as the experience in presence would be poorer than in absence. If people want to make a trip to see the Mona Lisa is because they desire to be in presence of the original. That's why people do selfies when they are in front of it, turning their back to the painting: there is no real interest in closely observing the painting, which is already well known. Being in presence and testimony this fact is the real point: the selfie-stick, so to say, is the present-time tool of choice in the preservation of the "cult-value", not in its deep and contemplative meaning, but rather in the impulse to pay tribute to an object possessing a magical aura.

Differently, the reproduction through a small replica or the photographic documentation of the 45 feet inflatable ballerina by Jeff Koons (2017) gives only in part the looming experience of the huge figure seated among New York's skyscrapers: the presence/absence ratio tend to be necessarily higher. This ratio could become even higher when artworks are defined not only by things, but by processes. On one hand, for traditionally time-based works this would not be problematic, since they are per definition reproducible artifacts and events per definition (like movies, music pieces, books, theatre plays). Among material objects, we have unique artifacts like traditional artworks (painting, sculptures), and reproducible artifacts, like books but also all industrial design's products. Art based on processes and events, on the contrary, have been traditionally defined by reproducible things (theatre plays, music scores). Not-reproducible events have rather been considered a feature of historical

events, that could not be reproduced, but only, at most, re-enacted, like people staging the siege of the Bastille during the French Revolution. But contemporary art has since the 60s ventured exactly in this realm of not-reproducible one-off events, like performances and activities that are meant to be spatio-temporally unique, and could therefore only be re-enacted or documented in texts, video excerpts and pictures.

This fact is particularly relevant today: on one side, almost anything in contemporary art can be an artwork, but, on the other side, only a small subset of things is used to represent and document artworks (namely, multimedia objects, pictures, videos, texts, semiotic entities). We receive most of our cultural awareness from this small subset of things. This constitutes an interesting cultural bottleneck in which artworks can be conveyed (in their absence) through reproductions with a different degree of loss of aesthetic experience.

In the history of avant-garde artists often attempt to escape mass reproduction and commodification of their artworks through a refusal of objecthood and a negation of aesthetic value, which means also to escape a "low" presence/absence ratio. An example of this tension are all cases of "Dematerialization" (as defined by Lucy Lippard at the end of the 60s) and also of conceptualization. They all could be read as an effort to depart from the idea of art-making as production of objects and to subtract the artwork to its material reproducibility in an age of rising image consumption. However, de-materialized art and conceptual art still have a "low" presence/absence ratio, not because they are easily reproducible (it is difficult to reproduce a

conceptual or ephemeral artwork), but because also their aesthetic effect in presence (the numerator of the presence/absence ratio) is low. In order to escape easy reproducibility, conceptual, minimal or de-materialized art sacrifice also aesthetic experience in presence.

This intentional withdrawal from the visible and the aesthetical consisted in the abandonment of art's aesthetic dimension and its "reduction to nothing", to a "zero point" (quoting Lucy Lippard 1968), an "aesthetics of silence" (Susan Sontag 1969).

3. Strategies of Irreproducibility

While dematerialization and conceptualization aimed a withdrawal from the aesthetic dimension, the so-called post-conceptual turn (Osborne 2017) witnesses on the contrary a return to its centrality, in some cases in form of a marked spectacularization. Nevertheless, the need of escaping reproducibility is in many cases still present. But, then, how could a return to the aesthetic dimension also avoid a return to a reproducibility in absentia of the aesthetic experience, namely to a low presence/absence ratio as in classical artworks? My hypothesis is that there are possible ways to produce artworks that need to be experienced directly and whose aesthetic effect can only be indirectly documented. What we then have is unreproducible aesthetic experience, which is given when aesthetic engagement in presence is maximized, but at the same time reproducibility of this engagement is

minimized. In other words: visibility without reproducibility. But how is this done? As an answer, we could interpret wide areas of contemporary art practices as the implementation of various "strategies of irreproducibility" of aesthetic experience. In other word, we could draft a typology of all kind of aesthetics practices that are characterized by a "high presence/absence ratio", such as:

1) Focus on unique events and performativity, that is, temporal unicity. Performance is a time-based art and, contrary to other performing arts, such as theatre or music concerts, is often irreproducible, not being the execution of a repeatable script, but leaving only memories in the viewers and a trail of documents in form of critical texts, videos and pictures. It is possible to re-enact a performance, but still this would not only meet substantial difficulties (as for having the same performers or artist doing it), but in some case this is practically not possible: Anne Imhof's performance Faust (winner at the Venice Biennale in 2017), was a one-off event with specific performers in a specific place. Either a person had the possibility to attend it, or that experience is lost for her.

2) Spatial uniqueness, for instance concerning site-specificity of artworks. In a similar fashion to installations, these works are conceived to be enjoyed in a specific place and context with which they interact. Copies or replicas are basically impossible since they would need to be placed in the very same natural or urban context

3) Experience complexity: Installations, which are works situated in museum or exhibition spaces could a) present complex display of objects,

documents, or performances, b) envelop the visitors in an immersive audio-visual environment and in a sensorial atmosphere (like Dan Flavin's or Olafur Eliasson's works), c) actively interact with them (all cases of "relational" and participatory art). All these factors make possible for installations to be only partially documentable through recordings, pictures and texts, and deny the possibility to reproduce the original aesthetic effects to those who were not able to attend.

4) Multisensoriality: Inclusion of non-optical and non-acoustic sensorial element, for instance use of multimodality in atmosphere creation: smell, touch, taste. We could consider this also a specific case of immersive creation of an installation where the exhibition space is transformed in a sensory landscape, like in Hicham Berrada's *Mesk-ellik* (2015-2019), a series of glass terrariums in which artificial half-light alters the circadian rhythm of exotic flowers and make them release their fragrance during the opening hours. Since olfactory reproduction is not a usual alternative in documentation, the aesthetic experience also in this case is basically limited to the attending public.

5) Material factors could also constitute a pragmatic limit to usual means of reproduction, such as scale. While the Mona Lisa could be reproduced in its true dimensions, more difficult would be to have a similar reproduction of a huge over 5 meters wide Barnett Newman's canvas. Gigantism in modern sculptures and installations (as in works by Anish Kapoor, Richard Serra, and many other contemporary artists following the trend of "scaling up" artworks for spectacular effects) makes their aesthetic

impact partially irreproducible, allowing to be contemplated only in presence.

6) Imposed or legal limitations to reproduction. Not allowing to record or take pictures during an exhibition – as in the case of some Tino Sehgal's performances - could be seen as an artistic strategy to give value to the actual experience (or to the limited edition of its official documentations). Similarly, many contemporary video-art works can mostly be experienced only during official viewings and are only documented by photographic stills or short excerpts. You can buy or rent a movie, but you can't do the same if you want to fully watch, for instance, Pierre Huyghe's 20-minute film *Untitled* (*Human Mask*), 2014: it is necessary to attend an official screening. As is the case of many recent video-artworks, not only it is impossible to buy a commercial copy of a video-artwork (you would only be allowed to acquire the very expensive artwork rights to own a limited copy), but bootleg copies, YouTube reproductions or illegal download are basically non-existent. Video artists like Huyghe and many others are interesting cases of artists that are very much obsessed in controlling every instance of full screening and exhibition of their work (see Balsom 2017).

7) We could include in this list also some uses of the traditional domain of art documentation, in particular in all art practices in which something actually has already happened outside the exhibition space, in a difference place and time, such as an ethnographic research, a reportage, a project of social engagement and also performances that were never meant to be exhibited (E.g. Simon Starling's, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros*, 2006). All

what we have are traces in form of documentations presented as installation, archive or learning spaces for the public. In this case, art is even irreproducible for the primary exhibition space, documents and archive are only a metonymy, a trace of something which could have been experienced only by the subjects involved in the artistic activity, if at all. Documentations and archival installation in the museum are only a part of the artwork, they are a trace that indexically points to a transient event that happened out there.

An analysis of the different kind of aesthetic irreproducibility could be further extended. My suggestion is that the presence/absence ratio correlates with a crucial mechanism of contemporary art practices and also with the acceptance of those practices in the most experimental domain of today's artworld. Maybe this is also the reason why we do not see many paintings in contemporary art exhibitions (and if so, only if inserted in an installative context). Moreover, it is not a coincidence if in this decade the first prize at the Venice Art Biennale went mostly to performances that where in some case site-specific works: Tino Sehgal in 2013, Adrian Piper in 2015, 2017 Anne Imhof, 2019 the performance Sun&Sea (Marina) at the Lithuanian Pavillon. Anne Imhof's Faust was unrepeatable and at the same time enjoyed vast diffusion through social media (mostly Instagram), which shows how highly involving aesthetic experience in presence could go side by side with vast indirect documentation, generating a high presence/absence ratio. All traces, texts, and documents that are produced by critics, curators and the public itself not only testimony of the difficulty

to reproduce and convey the aesthetic experience, but they have a crucial role in the cultural diffusion of the artworks itself. Media and documents don't weaken the value of the unique artwork, in this case, they enhance it. This becomes a strategy in which information and documentation on print media, television, online etc. could only hint to the kind of aesthetic experience that has been produced in an exhibition, but cannot really reproduce it. High documentability with low reproducibility (of aesthetic effect) or, in other words, highly involving aesthetic experience in presence and vast indirect documentation, assure again the aura of unicity of the artwork.

4. Conclusion: Documentation without Reproduction

The analysis of the varieties of divergence between experience in presence and experience in absence should be mapped out in a more systematic way. Beside all hypothesis concerning the reasons behind irreproducibility, the interesting theoretical point is the philosophical question of the varieties of irreproducibility, the analysis of how much of the direct aesthetic experience is left out in the network of reproduction and documentations.

  If we accept the idea that there is a strive toward irreproducibility and that there are strategies to do that, a further point concerns the reasons of all this. What are the motivations behind this effort to non-reproducibility? And why, on the other side, documentation and circulation of information about

art events and exhibition are so important? I suggested that a reason see irreproducibility as form of resistance against commodification. Reproduction wound not be a way of liberation or democratization of aesthetic experience (according to Benjamin's suggestion), but rather, along the Adornian critique, a tool of the culture industry. On the other side, culture industry, according to Adorno, could also be at the hearth of the strive for uniqueness and authenticity of aesthetic experience, as a way to create value through scarcity and exclusivity. A similar interpretation is the sociological view popularized by Pierre Bourdieu. According to this view, strategies of irreproducibility could be seen as a manifestation of cultural distinction, where artworks could only be again the object of contemplation by relatively few individuals that have the cultural and financial capital that is necessary to have in order to be able to enjoy events, performance, travel for screenings and vernissages and so on. Nothing you could do by buying a magazine or searching the web. Moreover, museums and biennials need attendance, and focusing on irreproducible art could stimulate this kind of "art pilgrimage" compared to art that can be easily documented and reproduced.

We could see here a development in the artworld of what in the 90s economists called the "experience economy", the shift of the market from product to experiences, events, spectacles.

A more sympathetic view is the one expressed by Boris Groys (2017), according to which artists became less and less concerned with the productions of things and shifted toward processes and documentation

around those processes. As Groys wrote, the shift toward documentations, installations and processes in contemporary art shows the need to present art as close to "real life", but it is something that is happening right there ("museum has ceased to be a space for contemplating non-moving things. Instead, the museum has become a place where things happen") What we have is a fusion of art and life, which shows how contemporary developments follow an aspiration that was present since the origins of avant-garde in the early 20th century, which is at the same time an overturning of Benjamin's argument of reproducibility as transforming art in a vehicle of political communication: not the work of art should move toward its spectator, but the spectator should be mobilized to go toward the art event. Contemporary "participatory" and activist art is exactly about this direct inclusion of the public in types of experiences that are not to be consumed passively at a distance, but require total involvement of one's own cognitive, emotional and perceptual resources.

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