



Reproducing Walter Benjamin's The Work of Art in the Age of
Mechanical Reproduction

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The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Walter Benjamin, (b, 1892 - d, 1940) completed *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in 1936, and while it his only truly great work, its influences on postmodern artists and art theorists are vast. My intention is to consider Benjamin's statements with regards to their meaning and also to examine some of their effects on artmaking. Benjamin's gaze is multiple: philosophy, language, art and architecture, photography, Jewish mysticism and Marxism. His works include "A Small History of Photography" and The Arcades Project.

As a youth Benjamin studied in the same class as Martin Heidegger and from 1912 to 1915 he studied under Georg Simmel, from whom he gained a fascination for the modern urban experience. Later in the Frankfurt school he developed a life long relationship with Theodor Adorno. These and other philosophers provided a rich intellectual arena for Benjamin's writing.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin presents several key principles. First, the displacement of a theological foundation; Benjamin believes mechanical reproduction will free works of art from their religious ties. He also presents the concept of *aura* as a means of examining originality; he feels that the concept of aura may only be recognized corresponding to notions of authenticity. Finally, Benjamin praises film as a mechanical process that allies itself with Marxist ideals.

Benjamin begins his preface to the essay with a discussion of Marxist critique of the capitalist mode of production. He says that the concepts he will introduce in his theory of art are useless for the purposes of Fascism but are useful for the formation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art. Benjamin believes that art of a reproducible nature goes against Fascist purposes.

Benjamin praises his essay in a letter to Max Horkheimer in 1935. He states, "These reflections attempt to give the question of aesthetic theory a truly contemporary form, from the inside out, avoiding all unmediated connections to politics." Benjamin recommends the study to Horkheimer on account of its immanent method, which parallels the Frankfurt School's program of immanent critique. Benjamin's friends Adorno and Horkheimer are heads of the so called 'Frankfurt school' a group of intellectuals centered around the Institute at Frankfurt. The Frankfurt School argues for *kultur critique* –an elevation of culture to the base rather than the superstructure. Adorno coins the phrase *immanent critique* to imply a critique 'which remains within what it criticizes.'¹ A 'transcendent' critique is an analysis from the outside; it first establishes its own principles and then applies them to other theories. An immanent critique, on the other hand begins with the principles of the work under discussion – it uses the problems within a body of work to criticize the work on its own terms. Adorno goes on to say in the 1940s that "After Auschwitz, all culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage."

In the essay, Benjamin states that with the woodcut, graphic art becomes mechanically reproducible. During the Middle Ages, engraving and etching appear beside the woodcut. Lithography appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is a much more direct process and enables graphic art to reach a much wider audience. A few decades after its invention, it is surpassed by photography.

¹ Simon Jarvis, Adorno: A Critical Introduction (New York: Routledge 1998), p. 6.

Lithography precedes the illustrated newspaper and photography foreshadows the sound film. Benjamin says that around the turn of the century technical reproduction becomes recognized as its own form of artistic process. This occurs at the same time that it becomes possible to reproduce all forms of art and have a dynamic impact on the public. Benjamin feels strongly that these are positive shifts, and his interest in reaching the masses attests to his Marxist ideals. Benjamin goes on to say that these two artistic manifestations – reproductions of artwork and the art of the film will prove themselves culturally influential.

Benjamin believes that the most perfect reproduction lacks one element: ‘its presence in time and space,’ or its unique existence. It lacks a history in which changes in physical condition and ownership occur. Benjamin feels this perfect reproduction lacks *authenticity* and states, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”² He goes on to say that the *sphere of authenticity* is outside technical reproducibility. It is precisely this lack that Benjamin admires, since the *authentic* preserves elitist and Fascist modes of artmaking. Benjamin tells us that in painting, manual reproduction is usually viewed as forgery, and the original continues to preserve its authority. Technical, or process reproduction, however, is further removed from the original than manual reproduction and is therefore a more perfect reproduction in Benjamin’s view. Technical reproduction can place copies into situations that would be impossible for the original --like classrooms and coffee tables. This again serves Benjamin’s Marxist goals, as the technically reproduced art object is more readily placed in the arena of the masses.

Benjamin continues his examination of the concept of authenticity: “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”³ He says that what is actually jeopardized when the historical testimony (which rests on the object’s authenticity) is affected, is the *authority of the object*. This authority is lessened as the object becomes more easily reproduced. Benjamin relates this authority to an *aura* and says, “What withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the artwork.”⁴ This is Benjamin’s first mention of the term *aura* in the essay, and he will go on to describe that *aura* as a “unique phenomenon of distance.” It is a “strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of semblance or distance, no matter how close the object may be.”⁵ He says that “If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.”⁶ Benjamin argues that reproduction detaches the object from that realm of tradition in which the *aura* appears. It ‘substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence,’⁷ Benjamin uses film as an example, stating that it acts as a destructive force, liquidating the traditional value of cultural heritage. A ‘shattering of tradition’ takes place.⁸ This explains some of

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), p. 222.

³ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 222.

⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 223.

⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 224.

⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 225.

⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 225- 227.

⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 225-7.

Benjamin's admiration for film; while Benjamin writes in his essay, Hitler attempts to foster a link with Germany's past. Benjamin says that throughout history human modes of sense perception change. He believes that these changes of perception express social transformations. If we can comprehend changes in our contemporary perception as a "decay of the aura" then we may show its social causes. Here again, it is helpful to consider this *decay* a positive shift for Benjamin.

In the next section of the essay, Benjamin argues that notions of authenticity are tied to a history of the modernist tradition; a tradition that *we* today see ending with Clement Greenberg. He has already stated that the uniqueness of a work of art is tied to its tradition. He goes on to state that the earliest artworks originate in the service of ritual - first magical and then 'religious' and that the unique value of the artwork has its basis in ritual. He describes a 'secular cult of beauty' that develops during the Renaissance and comes to a point of crisis with the advent of photography. This hierarchy of beauty is the pictorial history of illusionism that spans three centuries. Photography challenges that tradition, in part because it so easily *re*-presents objects and spaces that dialogues of other kinds become more relevant. Benjamin sees this heroic birth of photography paralleling that of socialism. It is the reproducibility, Benjamin argues, that allows photography to have a political function. He states that at this point art reacts with the 'art for arts sake' doctrine, which he calls a theology of art. The avant-garde response to photography denies any social function for art, focusing on formalism. Benjamin points out that for the first time in history, mechanical reproduction frees the work of art from its dependence on ritual and the work of art reproduced becomes one designed for reproducibility. This forms the central function for a photograph.

Benjamin cements this anti-authentic notion by stating that a photographic negative can produce many prints so it makes no sense to ask for an *authentic* print. This prompts an attempt to force notions of authenticity on photographs via the canceling of negatives plates. We are led to believe that if the negative is destroyed and only a limited number of copies exist than we can identify the authentic items. This is of course a false sense of authenticity. Benjamin praises this destruction by photography and states that when authenticity ceases to be applicable, the total function of art is reversed - it becomes based on politics rather than ritual. The nature of the image's dialogue becomes centered on the larger audience expected to receive it; as Benjamin states, the artwork is now designed for reproducibility. This linking of politics and photography has proven highly influential for many post-modern artists including Barbara Kruger (Figure 1) Martha Rosler (Figure 2) and Cindy Sherman (Figure 3) who have turned from painting and sculpture toward photographically based processes



Figure 1: Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1982, black and white photograph.

plastered stuccoed
rosined shellacked
vulcanized
inebriated
polluted



Benjamin argues that as its technical reproducibility increases, the work of art's fitness for exhibition increases to such an extent that its nature is wholly transformed. The work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions one of which he terms the *artistic function*, a function that allows for artist's intent. Benjamin believes that today photography and film are the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function.



Figure 3: Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #3, 1977, black and white photograph.

Benjamin goes on to state that in photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value. He points out that his concept of aura is still present, however, in early photographic portraits. Portraiture, the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. Benjamin feels that the aura emanates for the last time from the early photographs "in the fleeting expression of a human face."⁹ This aura appears here partly in the preciousness of the photograph – its small size, and minimal circulation, but more importantly in the surreal and mist-like expression on the subject's face.

⁹ Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 227-8.



Figure 4: daguerreotype, artist unknown.



Figure 5: Eugene Atget, Pontoise, place du Grand-Martroy, 1902, black and white photograph.

This mist-like appearance occurs equally because of the length of the exposure and the subject's confrontation with a process that appears magical. This manifestation of the aura ends for Benjamin in the early 20th century, particularly with the work of Eugene Atget.

Benjamin finds that "With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences and acquire a hidden political significance. It is their lack of obvious subject that gives these images their political meaning. At the same time Benjamin finds a shift from the privileging of author to subject. The photographs become statements about lack and absence. Benjamin says that "they demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way."¹⁰ Atget's photographs of deserted Paris streets appear to critics and to Benjamin as photographed like crime scenes. Benjamin states that at this point captions become obligatory and all ties to ritual and the concept of aura are severed.

¹⁰ Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 228.

Benjamin continues to discuss how the artwork's aura can fade further. He says that the quality of the original work of art's 'presence' or aura is lessened, depreciated by the varied arenas in which a mechanical reproduction can be placed. Benjamin uses the example of a landscape passing by a viewer in a movie – the landscape begins to lose meaning. This may be equally true for our conception of the *Mona Lisa* or Monet's *Water Lilies* as we view them as reproductions in dormitory rooms and dentist offices. Our notion of the Eiffel tower for example, becomes two-dimensional; a flat rendering whose content is partially lost. The aura disappears in these works, and even when we view the original works, that aura is frequently lost due to our previous over-exposure. Benjamin advocates this process, because it ruptures the elitist structures at work within culture. That the *Mona Lisa* functions as a cultural icon is a Marxist triumph.

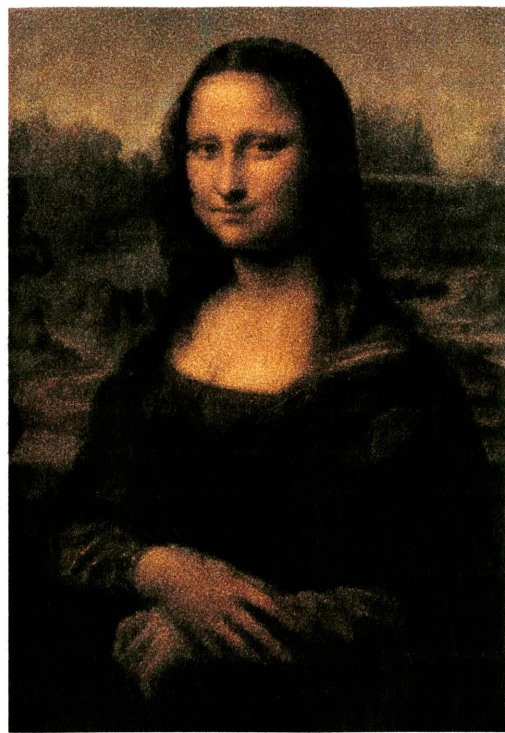


Figure 6: Leonardo Da Vinci, Mona Lisa, circa 1503, oil on canvas.

Every time an important artwork is reproduced, its aura decreases. Benjamin returns to a discussion of photographic images, praising Atget for “disinfecting the stifling atmosphere”¹¹ generated by conventional portrait photography. Benjamin states that Atget cleanses this atmosphere and dispels it altogether. He considers Atget a pioneer who forges new ground as he breaks apart traditional depictive systems. Benjamin feels that Atget initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which he believes is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography: “The stripping bare of the object, the destruction of the aura, is the mark of a perception whose sense of the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness – by means of its reproduction.”¹² Benjamin's Marxist viewpoint suggests that we should disregard that which is unique or original in art and praise that which is applicable to mass consumption.



Figure 7: Claude Monet, Water Lilies, 1907, oil on canvas.

¹¹ Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 229.

¹² Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 229.

In this way, all canonized and unconventional art becomes reproducible and the proliferation of the aura is therefore threatened. There are three reasons for the Benjamin's destruction of the aura. First we should be opposed to an artwork's aesthetic authenticity because that suggestion of authenticity promotes a ritually based hierarchy. Our ethics dictate that such artwork is problematic politically, because it dictates privilege. When you have the same image circulated widely in varied arenas, that image is functioning across economic and cultural lines. Finally, we should cease the proliferation of the aura because that destruction implies an appropriate cultural shift. What is relevant in culture changes and our perspectives shift. These shifts dictate an art that is more about daily life than ritual. The decline of Benjamin's aura is linked to the Hegelian idea of the "end of art." Benjamin evokes such a perspective, in a tone that alternates between manifest satisfaction, despair and nostalgia. He is convinced that art will be replaced by technology. The arts of mechanical reproduction are now interpreted as degraded forms of confrontation between an isolated individual and a mechanism. It is easy for us to relate to these confused feelings of exaltation and terror in the face digital media. For Benjamin technology is both beneficial and frightening and many of us hold parallel views as our society becomes increasingly more technologically reliant. Benjamin's tone is also frequently sarcastic, showing frustration in the face of an imperfect solution to societal flaws in mechanical reproduction.

Benjamin begins in the next section a comparison between painting and photography. He states that the nineteenth century debate between photography and painting seems today 'devious and confused.' Benjamin suggests that the dispute is actually a symptom of a historical transformation whose universal impact is not realized by either rival. When the age of mechanical reproduction severs art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappears forever. This is a critique of modern, formalist art theory, in which art remains autonomous and has no social responsibilities. Benjamin feels that the success of photography will displace this 'modern' formalist art.

Benjamin notes that before the twentieth century much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. This debate also takes place with the emergence of film. Benjamin finds that the desire to place film within an art realm leads to attachments of ritual characteristics, but those cult values cannot be exposed, because they are in reality absent. The audience, however, takes the position of camera; its approach is that of testing and all audience members are equally qualified to judge, again aligning with Benjamin's Marxist views. Benjamin looks to Pirandello, a film critic, for an examination of the relationship between actor and audience. Pirandello says that the film actor "feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about..." Benjamin believes that Pirandello inadvertently touches on the very crisis in which we see the theater, that it has left the realm of the "beautiful semblance." The actor knows that while facing the camera he will ultimately face the public. Here again Benjamin finds a shift in privilege from author to spectator. Spectators are experienced in analyzing chopped up, edited films. Benjamin believes that the cult of the movie star, fostered by industry capital, preserves not the unique aura of the person but a "spell of the personality." Because everyone who witnesses film is an expert, they

collectively decide how well the actor is functioning, not vice versa. Benjamin argues that the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to arise from passerby to movie extra. As such, any man might even find himself part of the work of art. As the art is made for mass consumption, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character - the difference between them becomes merely functional. As individuals gain equal ground they are functioning in an anti-fascist mode; a post-modern shift in privilege takes place from artist to spectator.

Benjamin argues that the film's equipment free reality has become the height of artifice. The sight of immediate reality in this age of technology has become rare. Benjamin begins an examination of the relationship between painting and film using an analogy of ritual versus practical medicine. The surgeon is the magician's opposite: The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands while the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains a natural distance; the surgeon diminishes the distance between himself and patient by penetrating into the patient's body.

Like the magician, the painter maintains an actual distance in his work. The cameraman, like the surgeon penetrates deeply into its web. The cameraman interacts with the audience then, functioning as part of society, rather than an elitist entity off in the distance. The painter obtains a total picture, the cameraman a fragmentary one. For contemporary man, the cameraman's representation is more significant than that of the painter-because it offers an aspect of reality free of all equipment. Benjamin feels we are entitled to ask this of art. He finds that mechanical reproduction changes the public's response. Benjamin argues that our response to Picasso changes as we view a Chaplin film. As audiences grow accustomed to the edited, chopped up nature of film they can learn to appreciate the broken up perspectives of time and space of Picasso's cubist works. Picasso however remains distant, cut off from the masses unlike the film for whom audience access denotes great social significance. Benjamin writes "The greater the decrease in social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public." What is conventional is uncritically enjoyed and the truly new is treated with aversion. The viewing of paintings by a large public is a symptom of the crisis of painting – occasioned by the appeal of artwork to the masses.

Benjamin states that mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. He finds that for the entire spectrum of optical and acoustical perception, the film has brought about a deepening of perception. Filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis, because of (in contrast to

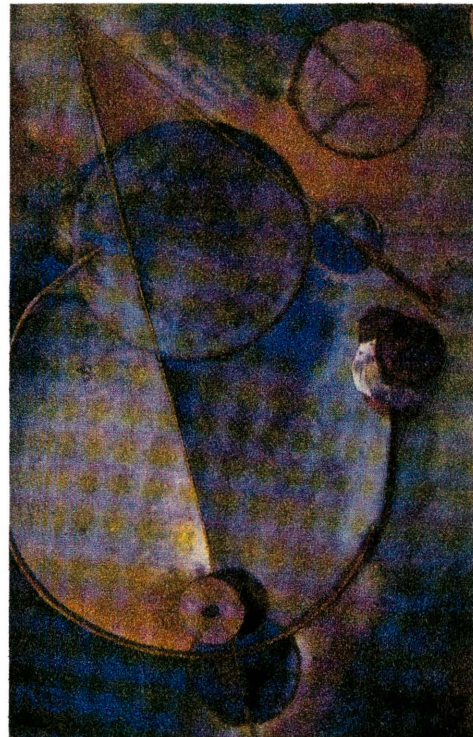


Figure 8: Kurt Schwitters, Weltenkreise, 1919, Collage and oil.

painting) its more precise statements of the situation. Benjamin believes that through the film we go traveling and space expands. For him, the camera introduces us to unconscious optics.

Painting is not prepared to present a “simultaneous collective experience”, unlike architecture and film. Although painting was exhibited in galleries and salons in the nineteenth century, there was no way for the masses “to organize and control themselves in their reception.” The same public that responds positively to a grotesque film will respond negatively to surrealism, because the film is present and

analyzable, while the surrealist artwork remains elite and crafted for a privileged audience.

Benjamin approaches the end of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by praising the Dadaists in their attempts to initiate the destruction of the aura. He says that histories of art show time periods in which certain effects could only be achieved later, with technological advancement. Such barbarisms, Benjamin feels, are abundant in Dadaism: Dadaism attempts to create the effects that the public seeks today in film. Dadaism sacrifices the market values characteristic of film in favor of higher ambitions – they attach less importance to the sales value of their work than to its “uselessness for contemplative immersion.” The art almost becomes social.

Benjamin refers to their poems as word salad, containing

obscurities and waste products of language. Benjamin believes the Dadaists intend the relentless destruction of the aura and their creations – which they brand as reproductions. Benjamin is describing the work of artists such as Duchamp and Schwitters, who appropriate objects and make them their own form of art. Contemplation becomes a “school for asocial behavior,” countered by distraction as an alternative. Benjamin finds that the foremost requirement for Dadaists is to outrage the public. Their art becomes affecting, hitting the spectator like a bullet, it “happens to him,” acquiring a tactile quality. It promotes a demand for the film. Benjamin believes that painting invites the spectator to contemplation, before it he can “abandon himself to his associations” However, before the movie frame he cannot do so; as soon as his eye has grasped a scene, it has changed. It cannot be arrested. This constitutes for Benjamin the *shock effect* of the film. Dadaism restrains/constrains this physical shock; film takes it a step further and lets it loose. For Benjamin, Dadaism will remain imperfect though, because it never leaves its elitist background. Benjamin closes the essay with a

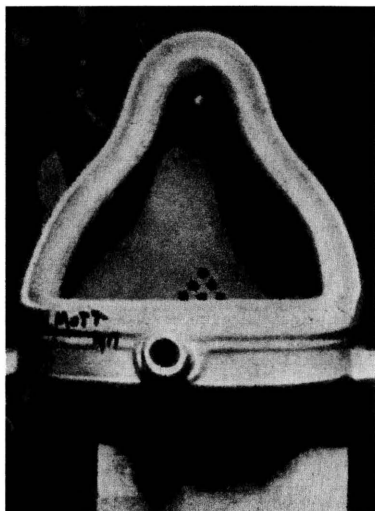


Figure 9: Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1915, ready-made.



Figure 10: Marcel Duchamp, L.H.O.O.Q., 1919, mixed media.



Figure 11: Ullstein Bilderienst, Hitler in Paris, date unknown, photograph.

reference to current negative response to film. He says that art's new form dictates that quality has become quantity. He cites Duhammel, an advocate of fascist ideals. Duhammel calls the movie a "pastime for helots, a diversion for the uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries; a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence...which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a "star" in Los Angeles."¹³ Benjamin identifies Duhammel's statement as the same lament that the masses seek distraction whereas "art," demands concentration from the spectator. Benjamin gives no credit to such statements. He finds that "a man who concentrates before a

work of art is absorbed by it."¹⁴ In contrast, the masses absorb the artwork. Benjamin argues that film is the truest form in which reaction occurs in a state of distraction. He believes that the "public is an examiner, but an absent-minded" one. This public, as it grows accustomed to cubist perspectives, is quite capable of learning as long as the material communicated is aimed correctly. In his epilogue, Benjamin returns to a political stance that speaks to the contemporary events taking place in his life. By the spring of 1932, Benjamin can no longer rule out the possibility that Fascists will seize power in Germany. As a leftist, Marxist Jew he is under constant threat of persecution. He returns to Berlin in November of 1932 and becomes a victim, afraid to leave his home. The majorities of his friends take flight and disappear on the night of February 27th during the Reichstag fire. Benjamin's inability to write and broadcast forces him into exile. He lives in Paris in March, and composes this poem directly after his escape.

SAD POEM

You sit in your chair and write.
 You grow more and more and more tired.
 You go to bed at the right time.
 You have money,
 A gift from dear Lord.
 Life is wonderful (sarcastic)
 Your heart beats louder and louder and louder,
 The sea grows quieter and quieter and quieter
 To the very depths.

In the epilogue Benjamin says that the "logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life." He feels that the Fascists abuse mechanical reproductive techniques for their propaganda. This is something he experiences personally, as his radio broadcasts for children are censored. He finds that all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in war. Benjamin recognizes this war as a necessity, as a motivating force. He believes it alone can set a goal for mass movements. Benjamin defends

¹³Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 241.

¹⁴Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 241.

an alternate aesthetic view to that of Fascism, by saying that Communism responds to Fascism by politicizing art, which Benjamin finds an appropriate course of action.

Benjamin moves frequently during the period that he writes the essay. He moves from Spain to Ibiza. His brother Georg is imprisoned in April of 1933 for leftist activity. Upon release, Georg resumes his illegal work for the Communist regional committee in Berlin. He dies in August 1942, officially committing suicide by touching the power line connected to the fence surrounding the prison, but in reality driven to death by his Fascist torturers. As Benjamin faces this environment, he is forced to embrace an alternate way of life. Benjamin begins to sell his books for money and returns to Paris (with malaria he catches in Ibiza) in the fall of 1933. The book burnings in Germany take place in 1933 as well. In 1934 Benjamin goes to stay with Bertolt Brecht, another supporter of art produced for the masses. In September of 1939, Benjamin is bussed and transported to the Gare d'Austerlitz and then to improvised internment camps in Paris. In these camps, armbands are worn as markers of special privileges, and allow for temporary release. A peer in the camp remembers an attempt at temporary release made by Benjamin:

“One day Benjamin took me aside. ‘Its about the armband,’ he whispered. ‘No, don’t laugh, I have a plan.’ He wanted to propose to the commanding officer the publication of a literary journal – a camp journal for intellectuals that was to show the country exactly who they had locked up as the enemies of France.”¹⁵

Benjamin is released from the camp in November 1939 and considers emigrating to the United States. In 1940, Fascism appears to have triumphed all along the line. In May 1940 refugees form a caravan heading for the south of France, and Benjamin marches in this procession with his sister. In September 1940 he attempts to cross the Pyrenees to Spain. When they arrive at the border, announcing themselves to the Spanish police, his party finds that their visas have become null and void overnight. Walter Benjamin dies at 10pm on the 26th of September, and it is generally accepted that he takes his own life. The next day, officials waive regulations and allow his companions to pass through. Benjamin’s life ends in the fulfillment of Fascist rule.

The impact of Benjamin’s statements in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* are immense. They act as a defense for a mode of artmaking that proves extremely relevant in our contemporary culture. Benjamin’s good friend Adorno, who also champions the Frankfurt immanent critique, responds to the essay in a letter to Benjamin. Adorno defends the critical function of the autonomous work of art while questioning whether technical change is really likely to result in progressive popular art. In some ways Adorno has proven himself correct, as for the most part, post-modern photographically based works still remain in gallery settings. If Benjamin’s goals reach fulfillment at any point, art will adhere to truly Marxist ideals in which an elite spectator is not privileged and the art work is made readily available to the masses.

Adorno’s letter presents one main theme, the approval of Benjamin’s theme of the disenchantment of art, or the self-dissolution of myth. He starts by following the Frankfurt method of immanent criticism. Adorno sees in Benjamin’s writings the idea of a work of art as a structure from the symbol of theology and

¹⁵ Broderson, Momme, Walter Benjamin: A Biography (London: Verso, 1996) p. 245.

from the taboo of magic. He sees Benjamin equating the concept of ‘magical aura’ with that of the ‘autonomous work of art’ and assigning autonomous works of art a counter-revolutionary function. He states that the center of the autonomous work of art does not belong on the side of myth. He finds that Benjamin’s essay disregards an elementary experience – “the utmost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made.” Adorno feels that



Figure 12: Allan McCullom, *Plaster Surrogates*, 1983, enamel on solid cast hydrastone.

and art market systems, as seen in the work of Allan McCullom, are increasingly relevant. These rectangles are casts of paintings, painted over in black. Produced in the hundreds, they are each unique but with slight variation in size and proportion.¹⁶ They speak to a need for a constant reexamination of a formalist hierarchy of artmaking.

Benjamin may defend the kitsch film against the quality film, but *l’art pour l’art* is just as much in need of defense. He feels that the united front against it is enough reason for a rescue. His opposing views in this matter are the views of an earnestly critiquing admirer. For Adorno and Benjamin remain friends, and Benjamin’s theories influence Adorno as much as the myriad of art makers and theorists who come after him.

Although *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* was written in the thirties its ramifications have not lost their weight. Questions of authenticity and uniqueness as they relate to museum

¹⁶ *The 20th Century Art Book* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996)

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