She looks in the mirror, clicks record and begins the interview.

Last week the interviewer/ee attended a session regarding “Aura” in the writing’s of Walter Benjamin. She contemplates her image, the reflection is the interviewer and the “real” embodied self, the interviewee, she thinks.

***Reflection:*** *What were your immediate thoughts on last week’s session?*

**Embodied Self:** The meaning of aura isn’t fixed. We can speculate that what Benjamin meant by ‘aura’ is in part influenced by his own life/situation. As a persecuted German Jew, he was very aware of the way in which culture could be mobilised by political propaganda. This is underlined in his closing statement in the essay whereby he states that when ritual ceases to exist around art it is replaced by politics. Perhaps in this sense, aura relates to preservation of the sanctity of art, he seems to be protecting the potential of art to be a direct communication between artist and viewer, to enlighten, emancipate, educate, culturally empower and uplift.

***Reflection:*** *I sensed from the session last week that you had a problem with the notion of the original can you expand on this?*

**Embodied Self:** I don’t have a problem with the idea of an original per se, or wish to contest the affect that experiencing a piece of artwork in its intended context may have. It is more so the culturally elitist hierarchy that is also sustained when the experience of viewing art is described in these terms.

***Reflection:*** *So do you agree or disagree with Benjamin’s position, that the aura of the art exists in the original?*

It is quite complicated because I think of a personal example, which was seeing the original Vulcan’s Forge, by Velasquez, in the Prado Museum in Madrid, gave me a love of the painting and of Velasquez that would have been hard to create or fix in my mind through a reproduced image of the piece. But, the experience of seeing the Velasquez does not exist in a vacuum. The action of going to the capital of Spain, immersing oneself in the history and culture of the place, being seduced by the architecture of the grandeur of the Prado, hearing about the piece before seeing it, and seeing it in books before seeing it for real, all contribute to the genesis of expectation and anticipation of the original. It sustains the mythology of the original. Benjamin defines this in terms of the ritual that exists around an original work.

The way we understand cultural capital (Pierre Bourdieu) and mechanisms of institutional power (Michel Foucault), render it difficult to think about the agency of an object without taking into consideration the wider social, political, economic and cultural forces at work that generate and sustain a hierarchical, capital driven art market and culture industry.

Art practice migrated into an expanded field in order to subvert traditional power structures that existed within the gallery space, Benjamin would have had to take this migration into consideration. Contemporary art practice problematises Benjamin’s call for the original because artists no longer operate in the same field as when Benjamin was writing.

***Reflection:*** *So you think that engaging with Benjamin’s text reduces the potential for discussing the experience of art. That it colonizes the language for viewing art and (ironically) through a process of cultural reproduction Benjamin’s text has reproduced and fixed the discussion around the wrong questions?*

**Embodied Self:** Benjamin is trying to protect art from perceived threats. Namely, the imminent cultural demise that ensues when people can not experience the aura of the original. In addition reproduced art devoid of ritual and myth is vulnerable to be utilised for a political gain.

Suzi Gablik’s book “The Re-Enchantment of Art” is an interesting text to read in relation to Benjamin’s essay. Whereas Benjamin fixes the debate around copy v’s originality Gablik focuses more on the side of the ritual of experiencing work. Benjamin’s text is a warning to a future that has already passed. However, Gablik is dealing with the same problem, and this is in a sense the crisis of what art is actually for, who stands to gain, who stands to lose. For Gablik art needs to be freed from oppressive modernist assumptions that promote things like originality, purity and the genius of the artist.

The cultural production of art is so subsumed by the culture industry there is no possibility of creating subversive works using traditional modernist models of working. For Gablik the notion of the original artwork containing a transformatory potential is naive. Gablik suggests copying as a form of subterfuge of the art market, the culture industry and elitist practices within it. With relation to Sherrie Levine’s copying work of Walker Evans and Edward Weston, Gablik writes “deconstructivist post-modern art is about stripping away ideological myths that held modernism together…’that mastery position’ (by smilulating mastery we) …undermine the fixation with originality”.

***Reflection:*** *But are you suggesting then that there is no merit in seeing the original, no point in visiting galleries or museums or experiencing site specific work in its original intended location and to do so would in someway be complicit?*

**Embodied Self:** I think intention is a useful word to raise here. It liberates the experience of viewing art from a reductive lexicon.

***Reflection:*** *What do you mean by a reductive lexicon?*

**Embodied Self:** Aura is one of those words that tries to say everything but ends up saying nothing. It corners the discussion of the intension and potential of art in problematic cul-de-sac , as it fixes the relationship between art and audience in a binary of original good and copy bad. I think this is just simply no longer relevant. If Benjamin were to be writing his paper now he would have to take into consideration the crisis of modernism, the expanded field. The place where Gablik and Benjamin collide is in the preservation of a mythic, ritualised and free way of experiencing art. To reduce this to a binary opposition of original good and copy bad hijacks the debate and makes it a question of whether or not one form of art is more culturally worthy than another. A further point for discussion would be Hito Steyerls excellent essay “In Defense of The Poor Image” to further elaborate on contemporary culture’s relationship with copy.

Further Reading:

Gablik, S (1991) The Re-Enchantment Of Art, London: Thames Hudson

Steyerl, H., 2009. “In Defence Of The Poor Image” *e-flux* [e-journal] 10(11). Available through: <http://www.e-flux.com/issues/10-november-2009/> [Accessed 14the February 2013]