

Westrey Page
Summer 2011
Kent Hooper

Art Museums in the Digital Revolution: Considerations of Technology's Influence on Aesthetic Appreciation

“The impatiently awaited hour of opening arrived and my admiration exceeded all my expectations. That salon turning in on itself, magnificent and so well kept, the freshly gilded frames, the well-waxed parquetry, the profound silence that reigned, created a solemn and unique impression, akin to the emotion experienced upon entering a House of God, and it deepened as one looked at the ornaments on exhibition which, as much as the temple that housed them, were objects of adoration in that place consecrated to the holy ends of art.”

--Goethe, 1768 (retrieved from Duncan p. 14-15)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recorded this shortly after visiting the opening of the Dresden Gallery. Typical of the first art galleries of the late eighteenth century, that in Dresden was a royal collection, extravagantly furnished and organized to promote or indicate the power, prestige, and education of the ruling family. Despite the political or socio-cultural implications of opening an art collection in such a manner however, Goethe's account of the gallery expresses a profoundly personal sentiment, clearly drawing connections both between the physical spaces dedicated to religion and to art, as well as the transcendent experiences of them. This is not to say that the artworks were not effective in relaying concealed messages of status and knowledge, but rather that Goethe was experiencing another layer of the gallery that was fulfilling enough to be comparable to feelings within the House of God.

Goethe's description of his interaction with the art gallery is not unique; individuals spanning from the emergence of public art institutions to the present day provide similar accounts of aesthetic transcendence. Yet how do these layers feed upon one another? How does the authority and space of the museum interact with the aesthetic experience? Furthermore, how does this dynamic change with the shifting function of the art museum with the advent of digital technologies and the widespread accessibility to art?

Since Paleolithic times, the human species has relied upon artistic mediums, intentionally or unintentionally, as a tool for communication and group cohesion. Indeed, many evolutionary psychologists have theorized that these reasons might explain the evolutionary advantage and persistence of art (Aiken). Through the engagement with visual or auditory stimuli, individuals were brought together in moments of awe and wonder: moments in which the unit of the isolated individual could abandon ties to the practical concerns of everyday life and merge with more grand, abstract, and intangible concepts. In this sense, a commitment to ideas and identity is ingrained via the mechanism of awe in each member of the group (Shiota). Throughout prehistory and ancient times, art was inseparable from ritual, having, in the words of Walter Benjamin, a "parasitic dependence" upon it. Although chanting around fires in dimly lit caves might not be a prevalent source of spiritual transcendence for modern man, art museums are laden with ritualistic implications that might work to fulfill that inherent human desire for numinous experience. Paintings, music and architecture, in the emotions they evoke as well as their material environment, retain the ability to elevate the experience of the individual out of the mundane world into something sacred: a process enacted in ritualistic settings.

Despite the ability to experience the aesthetic emotion anywhere, the art museum undeniably stands today as one of the most common providers of numinous experience echoing

that of religious experience. Museums are especially powerful entities in enacting this sort of relationship between spectator and object because of their ritual qualities. As Carol Duncan highlights in her book *Civilizing Rituals*, museums are like “secular ceremonies,” with artworks that are treated as ritual objects, reflecting the attention and reverence typically paid to religious altars or shrines. The space of the gallery is quiet and still. Visitors, slowly sauntering about the stations of text and image, circulate like blood flow through the halls and corners, similar to the ambulatory routes religious pilgrims took through medieval cathedrals. They stop to pause in front of dimly lit canvases, sculptures with large haloes of surrounding space, and, oftentimes, gaze curiously and respectfully. Dirty looks are showered upon those who disturb the serenity, perhaps daring to quickly and quietly answer a phone call. The uniquely emotionally charged space is shared between complete strangers, and, not infrequently, individuals might experience a nebulous feeling of camaraderie with each other, perhaps allowing profoundly emotional reactions to be publicly expressed. Although all visitors might not be moved to tears or even undergo powerful encounters within the gallery, it remains that the art museum is an effective and prevalent source for critical emotions of the human condition that have, through various avenues, been fulfilled since the dawning days of the human species.

This is why it is critical to examine what is occurring within the changing field of art museums today. The site for this sacred emotion is currently adapting to the culture of technological trends and norms of the digital revolution, of our “information society.” As the rest of the world is growing increasingly connected and “smaller,” the art museum is no exception. Most museums, if not having done so already, are publishing their entire collections online. Individuals can access quality reproductions of these artworks from their home or anywhere else they might venture with iphones.

Perhaps the prime example of this is the GoogleArtProject, wherein 17 museums worldwide have agreed to allow Google to enter their doors and photograph specific masterpieces and the inside of their galleries. These high quality, 7000 megapixel versions of artworks can be seen from home or classroom computers, enabling the public to see the hairline cracks on the surface of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. Going beyond these remarkable zooms and pan shots of museums—views likely never available to the common eye-- museum websites are becoming increasingly interactive with Web 2.0 technology. Users of museum websites are able to tag paintings, categorize them how they would like, create their own gallery, open up chats about pieces, and assert their input into the dialogue concerning the object. In other words, not only is the art object becoming more accessible to populations unable or unwilling to visit museums, but art is also becoming more accessible in the sense of its intellectual possession. More than ever, art within the online community is able to be possessed and reconfigured in our own meanings, our own lives.

Whether or not this accessibility and possession is doing a service or a disservice to art is a highly complex question. Of course, these new technologies have a democratizing effect—dispersing art to wider populations in more locations than ever before. Web technologies also foster educational aims within the arts, allowing an increasing amount of detailed images to be accessed and analyzed by students or lovers of art. Although a definite and straightforward answer might not be possible, it is important to take into consideration the implications of art within the digital revolution in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and the sociology of the museum field. On the one hand, the aesthetic emotion of the art museum stands as an experience that deserves protection. What might become increasingly clear however, is that the protection of the aesthetic emotion within the art museum might risk maintaining more boundaries, and

more rigidity in terms of the institution's classical, hierarchical organization. Yet another possibility considered is if this opening of conversation, of mental and pseudo physical obtainment, might not pose a threat to the aesthetic emotion in a general sense, but rather work to create another, equally fulfilling form of aesthetic appreciation. Where will the future of museums lie and how will transcendent experience in front of art change in the digital age?

This paper shall set out to answer questions concerning technology and the aesthetic experience. The issue must be approached from more than just the empirical standpoint because, as Belfiore & Bennett point out, the scientific method is designed and purposed to deal with “identification and observation of objective fact” whereas the aesthetic experience centers significantly on subjective factors (234). Thus, a variety of fields will be investigated including sociology, psychology, and aesthetic philosophy, centering around the ideas of Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno that examine specifically technology, media and their influence on society's perception of art. The emotion at hand is complicated: dependent upon factors such as environment, social class, historical circumstances, current emotional state, personal memories, the variety of people sitting or standing nearby, the architecture of the room, the snippets of information remembered from past classes, chapters or discussions, or individual biases for shapes and colors. All these factors feed into a subconscious reaction to a visual stimulus, and it therefore comes as no surprise that this emotion and experience is difficult to address on a general basis.

This investigation is therefore of preliminary nature. Due to the scope and the variety of fields included in this paper, there might be a lack of deepness and critique—especially with regard to the philosophical theories. May this work however, serve as a starting point for those curious about the future of art, how this future relates to the advancement of web technologies,

and finally the implications for that inspiring and splendidly unique emotion many experience before breath-taking pieces of art.

The History and Trajectory of Museums

In order to consider the possibilities for where the museum field and our present day technologies will lead societal engagement with the arts, the history of art galleries will be enlightening. Perhaps the most valuable insight gained from inspecting the historical tradition of art museums is that these institutions must not be seen as neutral spaces for holding and displaying art. Rather, art museums stand and have always stood as charged spaces, embodying the great capacity to enforce cultural codes, to write simplified, scripted histories of human society, and to offer secular opportunities for liminal experience. They are, in essence, a medium in themselves: manipulating and controlling the time, space, and, to a great extent, the sensory experience of the viewer (Nakasone). Through an examination of exemplary historical cases, Carol Duncan's assertion of the art museum acting as a partial, "civilizing ritual" will become lucid and convincing. These similarities between ritual and museum experience contribute significantly to aesthetic transcendence.

Art museums essentially adopt ritualistic features in three primary manners. The first is contingent upon the museum's ability to be a space that is separated from everyday experience, characterized by its capacity to take visitors away from concerns associated with their reality. The museum, as mentioned previously, constructs an environment of solemnity, of pause, of contemplation, that is far from the thinking needed in domestic care or occupational matters. The second characteristic of museums that echoes ritual is how the institution is designed to induce a specific enactment on behalf of the visitor. In other words, the arrangement of the

paintings and sculptures, their order and organization amongst others, elicits visitor *performance*. Walking through galleries, visitors are taken from one isolated object to the next, summoned through the atmosphere of the museum to embark on a sort of “mental journey, a stepping out of the present into a universe of timeless values” (Duncan 19). A component of this visitor performance might entail the final association between art museums and ritual: the transcendent aesthetic emotion. Upon examination, this feeling shares commonalities with the religious experience in that, especially historically, the viewing of art objects has traditionally been seen as embodying the capacity to elevate individuals *morally*, to enlighten and educate them in virtue and value (Duncan 20).

Placing objects in a space available for public view emerged in the late 18th century, significantly around the same time that aesthetic theory flourished. Philosophers like Hume, Burke, Rousseau and later Kant reflected a deep concern with subjects like beauty, taste and the experience of viewers before artistic objects (Duncan 14). Scholars have pointed out that this trend in aesthetics is symptomatic of the 18th century’s movement to “furnish the secular with new value” (Duncan 14), perhaps somewhat in result of the growing distance intellectuals were placing between themselves and the church. Aesthetics and art could in part replace the moral structure, ritual function, and transcendent feeling gained from the church.

In addition to these spiritual feelings of elevation and moral enlightenment, art museums might serve as a place to fulfill the human desire to stave off notions of corporeality and transience. Anthropologist Edmond Leach argues this; explaining the function of the museum as being an institution in which a society might experience immortality, and, in a sense, achieve a sense of defying death (Duncan 17). The display of cultural artifacts seems to elude time and ephemerality, encasing objects like shrines and maintaining the cultural code of past

civilizations. Art museums oftentimes adopt the architectural design of Greek and Roman temples, significantly aligning themselves with structures previously dedicated to religious function and serving as the very symbols of respected societies. Employing architecture of past great cultures allows a continuing praise and education of them, as well as a participation in their importance and legacy through visual metaphor. Visitors step through entrances and cross the threshold into a space that is associated with triumphant and virtuous societies, and with a sacred sort of reverence.

Historically, public art museums have carried a bit of a moral agenda, hoping to uphold great societies and the ideal beauty as a way to enlighten citizens. In 1836, Thomas Wyse argued for free admission to London art museums because art was “a language as universal as it was powerful,” in the sense that it could morally elevate the nation, enrich and complete it, and thus stood as a necessity to share with all classes (retrieved from Duncan 44). In 1793 the French revolutionary government opened the King’s royal art collection in the Louvre as a free museum, establishing a symbol of democracy, of the triumph over tyranny. The Louvre, like other antecedents in Germany and Italy, came to adopt an art historical arrangement of works (as opposed to the “gentlemanly hang” of earlier in the 18th century), wherein pieces led to an “epoch of civilization” (Duncan 24). Visitors were therefore intended to reenact the moral progression of past societies and reach the ultimate ideal of beauty and virtue within classical Greek and Roman sculpture or masterpieces of the Renaissance.

In the latter half of the 19th century, when the upper echelons of American society grew fond of attempting to mimic European cities, art museums were intended not only to grant a city prestige and cultured status, but also to lift the souls of the public. Carol Duncan suggests that this widespread effort to inform and civilize was largely fueled by the massive influx of

immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Met founder and lawyer Joseph Hodges Choate explained that “knowledge of art in its higher forms of beauty would tend directly to humanize, to educate, and refine a practical and laborious people” (retrieved from Duncan 54). Essentially then, art museums were critical in the process of transforming the quality of American cities and the American public in such a way as to compete with European standards.

This historical climate of the art museum naturally resembles a kind of indoctrination. Authorities of the museum scripted human history, enacted the advancement towards the highest, ideal society within visitors, and maintained absolute say in how to categorize and explain art. However, after the advent of technologies that could spread the reproductions of artworks, most notably photography, art came more so into the hands of the common people. Naturally, this gave increasing voice and freedom to personal opinions concerning art. Reflecting upon the influence of technologies and media upon art, German philosophers of the 20th century, namely Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, discussed the concept of the authoritative work of art, embodying ties to this dominating hierarchy of artistic tradition and museums: they referred to this concept as the aura.

The Aura

Yvonne Sherrat, discussing and comparing Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno’s notions of the aura, explains that the aura is “characterized as a very specific aesthetic concept, albeit with somewhat nebulous characteristics” (Sherrat 156). In a few phrases, Benjamin refers to the aura as “a strange tissue of space and time,” “the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be,” and the original artwork’s “unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Goldblatt 73). This appearance of distance is tied to the history and tradition specific to the

piece: this distance props the artwork up on a venerated pedestal; it ultimately lends the art *authority* in its sheer *authenticity*, its authenticity being “the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it” (Benjamin retrieved from Young). However, as the artwork is reproduced, no matter how stunning or accurate the copy might be, the “aura” of the original is gradually liquidated. This liquidation is a direct result of the accessibility and the gradual deterioration of the work’s “uniqueness.”

Benjamin’s approach to the status of the artwork in his age of burgeoning technology was inspired from both the demystification movement set in motion by Max Weber’s lecture in 1918 on “disenchantment,” as well as Benjamin’s personal desire to find a productive force coming out of this “ruin” (Pettersson and Steinskog 1). Being a Western Marxist, Benjamin believed in the emancipatory potential of the decay of aura. Auratic art, “with its ritually certified representational strategies, poses no threat to the dominant class,” rather “the sense of authenticity, authority, and permanence projected by the auratic work of art represents an important cultural substantiation of the claims to power of the dominant class” (Pettersson and Steinskog 15). By replacing the “unique existence” with “mass existence” however, art becomes more directly and immediately accessible, satisfying the yearning of the masses to “get closer” to the art, absorbing it into themselves. Within this process of absorption lies the devastation of the authority, the very tradition, of the original. The art object becomes not a potent tool of the elite classes, but an approachable, ingestible object of the masses. This eventually leads to what Benjamin describes as “the reverse side” of his age’s “crisis”: the breaking of the auratic space, that “shattering of tradition”, to produce a “renewal of humanity” (Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” 22). In this renewal, the entire social function of

art is changed from ritual to politics. This is the emancipatory capacity of the reproducibility of artworks: a tool once of the elite, to maintain their status, is disintegrated.

Yet this destruction of aura is not without seemingly alarming consequences. Although Benjamin warned against an elegiac reading of the ruination of the aura, reiterating that it coincides with the decay of dominating political structures, Miriam Hansen argues that Benjamin himself fails to ever completely resolve the tension between the “liberatory potential of mass media and the vulgarity it represents” (Hansen). Specifically, there seems to be slight discrepancies in the voices of Benjamin’s most famous piece on aura and media “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” written in 1935 and “The Storyteller,” written in 1936 and seen as a “companion piece” to the former (Kang 259). “The Storyteller” discusses a shift from “auratic communication,” represented by the storyteller passing along information in the physical presence of another, creating a “face-to-face companionship” between participants, to the “mediated communication” of the novel in which writer and reader are separated (Kang 259).

The isolation of communicative players entails an erosion of shared community, and the advancement of “individualist social relations” (Kang 259). Within the changed system of communication, factual information predominates as opposed to uniqueness, similar to the disintegration of the visual artwork’s uniqueness when the aura is lost. This is due to a fundamental switch from being able to personally judge the story face-to-face, and assess personally the value of what is being relayed, to the system without storyteller that disperses and *imposes* information on the individual “in terms of public opinion” (Kang 260). Additionally, Mike Young argues that the “The Storyteller” expresses lament for a kind of societal degeneration, as experience itself decays. Benjamin explains that “experience has fallen in

value... Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low..." (Benjamin 83-84, retrieved from Young). Benjamin's consideration of auratic media, whether visual art or the art of communication and writing, stands testament to the complexities within the loss of aura.

Reproducing artwork effectively "substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence". As copies reach the recipient in their own situation and environment, the reproduction is actualized. (Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 23). This satisfies the need of the masses to "get closer" to objects, to possess them, and therein reinforces their "sense of sameness in the world." In Benjamin and Adorno's view, the masses will increasingly and ultimately "[extract] sameness even from what is unique," overcoming in fact, "each thing's uniqueness" (retrieved from Young).

This assimilation of artworks and the subsequent collapse of auratic distance between spectator and art piece reveal a switch between Benjamin's two modes of perception: attentive and distracted. With auratic experience, there is individual attention, like the eye of the expert that enters *into* the artwork. The expert concentrates on the "object of devotion" and is "absorbed" by it. Distraction, however, occurs with the decay of aura and stands as the replacement of attention with collective distraction. While the expert "enters into" the work, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves" (Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 39-40).

While Walter Benjamin explains the two forms of perception brought about in the age of technological reproduction, Theodor Adorno adopts an alternative approach to the decay of aura and the impact of mass media on the standards and values of art in society. Influenced from his

deep fascination and knowledge of modern, atonal music (he studied under Alban Berg in Vienna from 1925 to 1926), Adorno focuses upon the “infantilization” of the masses exposed to mass media music. In his *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*, written in 1938, Adorno comments on how the aura is, in a sense, strengthened by mass media music insofar that the mass audiences are put in a spell over mediocre music, becoming, in the words of Zuiverbaat, “addicted to the baby food of the latest hit tunes” (Zuiverbaat, 30). These listeners are additionally regressive in that they do not listen critically; they cut out ten minutes of Beethoven’s ninth to become lost and elated, when in reality the symphony deserves contemplation and true evaluation. These listeners are essentially arrested at the “infantile stage” of artistic reception, failing to engage with works of art, while the “culture industry” spits out mass mediated artistic products to be consumed (Wilson 153). While Benjamin seemed to praise the distracted consumption of art, seeing a revolutionary potential in it, Adorno vehemently disagreed with that defense. He claimed that distracted consumption of art and music bred a mode of perception that had a limited attention span, and an inability to conceive of the whole or total work of art (Hammermeister 200). In other words, Adorno saw the distracted mode of perception, promoted by Benjamin, as nothing but leading to “infantilization” and a reception of pure amusement that marked the death of critical thought and contemplation of art objects (Hammerstein 200).

The presence of a slight, hesitant, question of society without aura in Benjamin’s “Storyteller” and Adorno’s vehement critique influenced aesthetic philosophers later in the 20th century, like Jean Baudrillard, and continues to exist as a highly influential presence in media studies today. Examining the aura and its philosophical origin significantly relates to the position art museums and media culture is in today, where digital technology is spreading larger

amounts of art with increasing detail to wider populations. Until recently, artworks were displayed with relatively limited availability in time and space, its presence and image enshrined on a museum wall, not carried around in pocket mobile devices. Does this mean that the GoogleArtProject and museum catalogues are gradually going to teach the masses to adopt a distracted mode of perception? Will the aesthetic experience be further broken down into a superficial interaction, wherein the artwork is absorbed in fragments into an infant observer? Before answering this question, let us examine the technologies as they stand today and the way in which museums maintain ritualistic aspects to keep the elevated status and reverence for art objects strong.

Today: Technologies and Museums

Premodernity was not equipped with the reproducing technologies that have been in use during the 20th century and continue to be advanced upon in the 21st. However, while the advancement of such media signals the disintegration of the aura according to Benjamin and Adorno, art museums during the late 20th century and even today maintain many of the ritualistic aspects of museums in the 18th and 19th centuries as discussed by Carol Duncan. This implies that even with if only traces of aura survived, the material environment of the art objects might still have the capacity to host liminal experiences through ties to the ritual and ceremony that Benjamin wanted to break free from.

Following the emergence of Benjamin's media technologies as well as the impressive digital technologies of today, museums continue to enact ritual within visitors and impose ideology. In recent decades modern art wings continue to be organized, in Carol Duncan's words, according to an "orthodox plot," which varies little from museum to museum. This plot

not only ingrains a simplified notion of the progression of modernism, but also takes visitors along a journey through a type of spiritual cleansing through the increasing abstraction. Typically, within a modern art wing, Cezanne marks the first significant step towards modernism. Taking the MoMa as her example, Duncan explains that Cezanne's *Walking Man* is even what greets visitors as they enter the modern galleries (104). Following Cezanne are other post-impressionists, with Fauvism making a slight appearance. Taking a front and center role in the advancement of art is then Cubism, followed by the various avant-garde movements of Futurism, Surrealism and Dada. After World War II Abstract Expressionism then makes its appearance, incorporating other European artists like Francis Bacon, and finally Minimal and Pop Art are presented. Artists within expressionism, or artists like Rivera, Orozco, and Hopper—those not so easily accommodated into the scheme of modernity--- are given alcoves or hallways within the MoMA (Duncan 104-106).

The pattern that thus emerges within the traditional plot of modernism is one of *progression*, an idea of each generation overcoming the limitations and short sightedness of previous artists. This trajectory progresses until abstraction reaches its climax and artists like Pollock and Rothko are elevated to a spiritual purity in alignment with their unmediated emotional expression. Carol Duncan describes this as “a recurrent narrative pattern that identifies artistic invention with moral achievement”, and visitors are taken along for the ride, enacting a ritual of increasing rectitude amongst modern struggle (108). This history of art museums, leading from their emergence at the end of the 18th century until the present day, sheds light on how this institution has presented art with an inevitable aim of its own, has never been neutral, and continues to serve as a place of “ritual.”

Another feature of art museums that mimics the structure and feeling of religious institutions is the hierarchy of knowledge and power inherent to the visiting process. However, recent years in the museum field have witnessed significant advances in quelling the dominant and authoritative voice of the museum or individual curator to the audience. Coinciding with the “democratizing” power of technologically reproduced images in society, the movement within museums to open the artistic dialogue up to the public contributes to the disintegration of hierarchy behind the artworks. Digital technology plays a part in the weakening of the unitary, authoritarian voice of the museum, communicating what the viewer should think and experience before an art object. As Marisa Nakasone explains: “new media experimentation challenge and destabilize the power inherent in the museum’s physical manipulation of space by dematerializing the museum altogether”. Indeed, museums in the early 21st century have experienced what has been labeled as the “Second Wave” or new museology, focusing ever more intently upon the voice of art novice.

New Museology: The Second Wave

“We envision participatory catalogs, built according to community interests and standards of intellectual property rights management, where ownership of cultural heritage resources – objects, descriptions, the essence of what makes these objects meaningful – is set squarely in the hands of the source communities, outside of the collecting institution's control. Participatory Web 2.0 technologies are offering very interesting possibilities as far as *how* this can be done...” (Srinivan 17).

The 1970’s witnessed a revolution in the way the museum field conceived of itself and its

role among society. In this “new museology”, Ramesh Srinivasan describes the museum as “neither a center of research nor primarily a collecting institution, but... in fact an educational instrument” (3). Srinivasan continues to describe that early in the 21st century, the museum field experienced a “second wave” of new museology, a wave that had the advantage of digital tools and web 2.0 technologies to spread its educational potential to a greater portion of the public than ever before. This second wave was again characterized by an increased concentration placed upon the object and role of the expert, however the *definition* of the expert was expanded with the acknowledgment that expertise must be continuously reexamined to protect against narrowly confined perspectives. For instance, with art collections of more indigenous background (Oceanic and African art), the movement advocated and continues to advocate the voices and original intentions behind those art objects. “A return to the object, and the infusion of new models of representation and outreach, can enable this [the reinsertion of objects as being more than edifying images) to occur, particularly in the context of emerging digital museums.” (5) The increasing application of “Museum 2.0” creates more public space and might allow this balance to occur. The museum is now to become more of a “contact zone” between different communities that have different perspectives of expertise (archaeologists, indigenous peoples, anthropologists, etc) and then to extend this collected information to the audience itself.

This second wave of new museology thus envisions online museum catalogues as a critical and effective way to include “outsiders” to create “multiple ontologies” of the object, to surpass the restricted and all too narrow perspective of the sole museum expert. It is a way to usher in other voices and to come closer to the complexity of the object itself. In this way, online catalogues are not only potentially tools to inform the public of what is inside the walls of the museum institution, but are tools to better serve the art object itself and the very way the museum

is conducting the mediating role of exposing the public to these objects.

Also within this second wave of New Museology, visitors are given increasing authority to speak their minds, provide input, and experience a larger command over art objects. The Brooklyn Museum is just one of many museum websites with extensive visitor blogspots, podcasts, and new abilities to “tag” art items

(<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/>).

Beyond websites that accompany museums, Internet projects now exist that allow similar visitor interactions *across* museums. The “Steve Museum,” for instance, is a website and ongoing research project founded by a group of museum professionals who believe that social tagging might provide “profound new ways to describe and access cultural heritage collections and encourage visitor engagement with collection objects” (<http://www.steve.museum/>). On the “Steve Tagger” page, the website informs visitors that they have found “a place where you can help museums describe their collections by applying keywords, or tags, to objects”

(<http://tagger.steve.museum/>). For those less technologically familiar, “social tagging” here means that any of the digital images of art works that the Steve Museum has, anything from an elephant-shaped divination board from the Kuba people to a painting by Georgia O’Keefe, will be open for users to attach their own vocabulary terms to it, describing the object with words like “animal”, “white”, “bamboo”, “musical”, and “tranquil” to name just a few. According to their website, the Steve Project is in cooperation with many large museums, including over a dozen institutions for their two-year research project that investigated the best formatting methods and general tagging “environment” for users. The research project, entitled "Researching Social Tagging and Folksonomy in the Art Museum" began in 2006, and was successful enough to have museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and the Walker

Art Center to adopt similar tagging environments. Clearly then, many leading institutions have adopted social tagging technologies in the hopes of sponsoring a sort of virtual dialogue and increased engagement with the public.

Ultimately, however, the question is brought back to the polemics of how aesthetic engagement might be influenced by this loss of hierarchical organization, increasing accessibility of artworks to the masses, and greater senses of possession and authority over art objects. Will the visitors' feelings of increased authority take away a ritualistic aesthetic emotion that should not be praised in the first place? Is the dispersal of images or interactive technologies enough to significantly deconstruct the liminality of the aesthetic experience within an art museum? Can other sufficient forms of the aesthetic emotion persist? Finally, are these answers affected when considering that modern society is in what philosophers like J Sage Elwell have articulated as an environment growing increasingly starved for transcendence?

The Issue of Transcendence

Although our digitally obsessed society harkening a “crisis of transcendence” might seem extreme, this is exactly what J. Sage Elwell contends. As digital technologies continue to replace analog, a certain “physical correspondence” will give way to “abstract representation” (Elwell 2). Elwell describes modern society as having a digital fetish that will lead to the ultimate prevalence of cyberspace, digital codes and other digital technological features over physical, tangible reality. The death of God is no novel idea to philosophy, nor is the death of art, however in *Crisis of Transcendence* the difficulty and inability to transcend relates to the obsolete nature of the human among digital worlds and creations. Essentially, the world is no longer defined by separated levels of existence or knowledge wherein humans look to a fixed and mysterious realm that holds power over our limited domains. Rather, the modern world and

digitization allows us to create and manipulate species, generate information at faster speeds than ever before and communicate ideas or data across the globe nearly instantaneously. These capabilities, enabled by digital technology, are nearly god-like. Additionally, they provide humanity with answers to some of the deepest questions concerning man's brain, his world, and his life. There is no need for God anymore. Whether this conclusion seems too radical, it does seem in the modern world that science and technology are gradually providing additional answers or evidence that might challenge tenets of religion. Perhaps religion will continue to morph and transform, adopting new scientific discoveries along the way, or perhaps more individuals will classify themselves as agnostic, atheist or "spiritual." This is not to say this paper asserts that society will certainly witness the gradual breakdown of religion until science solely reigns, but perhaps it is crucial to consider how the art museum is able to provide those feelings of liminality as other societal institutions fade in their transcendent influence.

Today's Mode of Perception

"Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."

---(Paul Valéry, retrieved from Goldblatt 73)

"Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception"

–Walter Benjamin, Work of Art quote retrieved from Jennings' "The Production, Reproduction and Reception of the Work of Art")

Benjamin was greatly influenced by Alois Riegl, arguably the most salient art historian around the turn of the century, who had recently developed his idea of *kunstwollen*. This term

was Riegl's answer to his quest to discover how formalistic properties of art, like the forms, contours and colors, changed over time in response to a society's specific mode of perception in that particular time and place (Jennings 9). Benjamin similarly adopted a perspective on art interpretation and aesthetic commentary that acknowledged art's ability to reveal the historical and political situation of the artwork. Benjamin additionally believed, however, that details of artworks not only convey a significant amount concerning the population and environment from which they emerged; they also *act* to shape the perception of those individuals. Art has a dual process of revealing and shaping. In fact, Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay focuses intensely upon the reciprocal relationship between technology and the functioning of the human senses. In effect, the "conceptual spine" of the essay rests upon new technologies providing "polytechnic training" in the "organizing and regulating" of responses to the lived environment (Petersson and Steinskog 13). The power of technology to influence the capacity of the human senses is also found in artists active during Benjamin's lifetime, especially a member of his close circle, Moholy-Nagy, who desired to harness photography to change the perceptual mode of his time (Petersson and Steinskog 11).

Photography, like that of Moholy-Nagy, and cinema were relatively novel mediums in Benjamin's time, with Chaplin cinema hitting its peak only a couple decades before. The massive accessibility and reproduction of artworks was an exciting prospect for Western Marxists, feeling that this could precipitate radical politics. However, the possible "aura" at risk today, must now be considered in the modern technological and cultural climate. Generally speaking, the information society is accustomed to an environment that is saturated by images and sounds, an overwhelming influx of stimuli at high speeds. According to Benjamin and Riegl, this system of viewing and accessing art stimuli contributes to shaping our mode of perception.

Therefore, it is critical to refrain from directly applying the historical concept of aura to the present because aura was conceived in a time of different technologies suited for different needs and ultimately a different mode of perception. Additionally, Dag Petersson argues that applying aura to today would be against the closest reading of Benjamin's essays, highlighting that Benjamin warns readers that text and art likely do not remain constant or "true to its word" over time and the search for truth must be found at the historical source (Petersson 53). Petersson explains additionally that this thinking equally applies to the philosophical theories of Benjamin himself: "When the aura declines, so does the power of historical authenticity and originality, and that certainly does not exclude the philosophical writings of Benjamin" (52). What this reading of Benjamin has led to is a growing proportion of Benjamin scholars, still prescribing to the tenets of his theory, who question the relevancy and applicability of aura to the modern period at all: "A critical dilemma for Benjamin scholars is then how, if at all, we can read his philosophy truthfully, and from what common grounds can we agree to judge or evaluate our readings, when the philosophy itself has invalidated any stable and determinable truth-value, both at its source and at its destination" (Petersson 53).

To cut the theory of aura out of its cultural atmosphere, without regard to the entirety of its philosophical base, seems flawed. The aura in Benjamin's conception should not be expected to hold the same potency or relevancy for the present. Accordingly, time might necessitate new theories or ideals that are current and relevant now: aware of the state we exist in currently. Perhaps we are indeed continuing to destroy the aura, or whatever trace is left of it, but perhaps the aura is irrelevant. Certainly when it comes to the practical considerations of where the museum field is heading, the potential negative effects of the aura would not hold back the technologies continuing to be adopted and advanced by art websites and institutions. There are

significant benefits to the widespread accessibility to artworks, benefits that museum professionals and educators cannot ignore. It is essential to move forward from the point we are at now: with the current mode of perception in mind rather than the mode of the perception of the early 20th century, or of a sort of romanticized mode of perception. I contend that our conception of the way in which technology must be influencing our aesthetic engagement with original artworks must incorporate the recent advances in the psychology of art appreciation and perception. This does not mean that the social sciences will be able to provide a thorough and complete answer to the investigation of this paper, but rather that any consideration of aesthetics should take these findings into account as foundational or even supplementary information.

The Psychology of the Aesthetic Experience

“Aesthetic experiences are, first, experiences. They are complex: having to do with things as tidy as the formal qualities of the object under consideration and with things as messy as whether one had enough sleep the night before, whether one just had a fight with his roommate, whether one is carrying psychological baggage that is brought to consciousness by this particular aesthetic object.” (Fenner, retrieved from Belfiore 41).

In consideration of Fenner’s quote above, it becomes no wonder why academia strays from seriously addressing emotions and especially the aesthetic emotion. However, in the recent decades, psychologists and social psychologists have increasingly devoted time and energy into investigating the ambiguous and daunting task of articulating more clearly the mental processes within and influences upon the aesthetic emotion. In 2004, Leder et al developed a model of the

aesthetic emotion based upon recent studies that provides the most complete picture thus found in this investigation (for reference, the model is attached in the appendix). A large component of the aesthetic experience, as seen in this model, appears to depend upon past experiences and the earliest stages of stimuli classification.

In 2004, Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman suggested that the dynamics of processing a sensory stimulus was component to the affective evaluation and experience of that stimulus. As the “fluency” with which a visual or auditory stimulus is increased, the ratings of preference, likability, or aesthetic pleasure should also increase. Seen from another perspective, these researchers determined that aesthetic pleasure was not dependent as much upon the stimulus itself, as it was dependent upon the processing *experience* of the viewer. Factors such as repetition, figure ground contrast, clarity, presentation length, and perceptual priming are all ways in which “processing fluency” might be enhanced or increased, leading to greater general responses to stimuli. “Processing fluency” is itself hedonically marked, as it is believed that during cognitive and perceptual evaluation of a stimulus, advancing towards a goal of “interpretation” or of “solving” the perceptual or conceptual puzzle, there is continual affective feedback. If the viewer is advancing successfully and nearing mastery of the stimulus, this produces positive affect and creates further motivation to process more (Winkielman and Cacioppo).

To provide support for this hedonic fluency model, Winkielman and Cacioppo produced results from facial electromyography of participants who viewed easily discernible line drawings versus participants who viewed more drawings with more difficult visibility. The zygomaticus major, a region of the brain known to be activated during positive affective experience, was activated among those who perceived the easier to process line drawings whereas the region of

the brain activated during frowning exhibited activity amongst those exposed to the more complex drawings. Although this experiment was conducted using very simplistic visual stimuli in comparison to artworks, results from this experiment has encouraged other psychologists to follow in similar aesthetic processing directions and support the fluency model.

Ramachandran and Hirstein as well as Semir Zeki additionally explain the fluency with which stimuli are processed as being hedonically marked, seeing the advantages of this skill in terms of human evolutionary history. Assimilating visual information into existing schemas, and deciphering what object lies before the visual field clearly would have advantages. Although the psychological studies assessing artistic appreciation and the influence of such variables such as previous exposure on this appraisal are debatable, many researchers have found a general correlation between familiarity and liking (Newell and Shanks; Unkelbach). Most research has centered on simple stimuli such as noise fragments, names, or shapes, however it remains unclear whether perceptual priming might increase or in some way effect the aesthetic experience in complex stimuli such as art works.

While it seems that researchers are still largely attempting to come to a consensus regarding the complex visual stimuli and the hedonic fluency model, there might be a social psychological term that supports a notion of visual “practice” yielding increased pleasure. The concept of flow, developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, describes the emotion athletes, artists, mathematicians, musicians and many other professionals describe when they hit their peak performance, get lost in the “flow” (Battani). Flow is met when the perceived challenge is near equilibrium with skill set, very similar to the interpretative struggle Adorno describes as being essential to the ultimate engagement with an artwork. As opposed to feeling mastery or significant hardship, a state of flow consumes nearly all reserves of attention, so that external

stimuli become rather unnoticeable. Relating back to the psychological studies on processing fluency, approaching a state of flow might be an advantage to increasing the accessibility and even briefest exposure of visual stimuli. As long as the stimulus is not habituated to the senses, being below the skill set, then increasing exposure might promote the skill set of individuals. For instance, it appears safe to say that listening to a live symphony in a symphonic hall seems less engaging if the listener has not been exposed to the symphony before whether through a digital medium, music class, or other such avenues. From such previous experiences it is possible to gain knowledge of what movements will sound like and what to expect next. The same might be said for pieces of visual art. Becoming a more active perceiver might be an outcome of having previous exposure, or experience with works of art.

Thus, gleaned the most recent theories from the psychology field, the digital dispersal of images of artworks might not be destroying all hopes of an aesthetic experience. Although the experience of processing fluency or “flow” might not be equal to that transcendent emotion associated with aura or with highly venerated works of art, these experiences are not worthless. Rather, they might just lend a greater feeling of accessibility and intimacy with artworks amongst populations that would hypothetically not be able to approach (mentally or physically) auratic art objects.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is time to seek transcendence in avenues previously untapped, or, in the least, poorly defined. For instance, the feeling of unity and connectedness that might be possible through use of the web, through communicating with people across the world about one artwork and sharing deep seated interpretations or perceptions of that piece. Perhaps the evolutionary

communicative and binding function of art remains but with different scales. As opposed to solidifying communities or physical groups of neighboring peoples, nations or cultural spaces, today witnesses the strengthening bond between discrete individuals, forming new common spaces of identity across borders and cyberspace: in effect, a globalized function of art. Perhaps the widespread exposure to art reproductions will even enhance individuals' processing of them, and increase their preference for them. Perhaps, in this way, technologies like the GoogleArtProject will lend itself well the development of new communities of art lovers.

While it might be true that the dispersal of these digital reproductions contributes to the destruction of the auratic original, to the uniqueness of the original, there are well-founded doubts as to whether the concept of aura is even applicable to the present day. Benjamin and Riegl believed in the power of technology to shape the mode of popular perception, and this would be no exception to the modern, image-saturated society of today. The impact of the additional destruction of auratic traces upon the mass infantilization of reception is debatable: namely because the masses could be significantly advanced on this route already. Additionally, just as the mode of perception is irreversible, so is the advancement of the technologies that the art historical and museum field are employing. Thus, with these trajectories in mind, it is important to inspect the potential gains from web technologies and enhance the fruitfulness of these. It is important to realize that aesthetic transcendence might still be available in museum environments to a certain extent, and that there might be alternate modes of aesthetic transcendence besides the kind that is dependent upon the hierarchical, almost religious reverence of physically and intellectually distant objects.

“It is often said that without a sense of the past, we cannot envisage a future. The reverse is also true: without a vision of the future, we cannot construct and access a usable past. Art museums are at the center of this process, in which past and future intersect. Above all, they are spaces in which communities can work out the values that identify them as communities. Whatever their limitations, however large or small, and however peripheral they often seem, art museum space is space worth fighting for.”

--Carol Duncan from *Civilizing Rituals* 133-134

Works Cited

- Aiken, Nancy E. *The Biological Origins of Art*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. Print.
- Battani, Marshall. "Aura, Self and the Aesthetic Experience." *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 13 Jan. 2011. Web.
<<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=613>>.
- Belfiore, Eleonora, and Oliver Bennett. "Determinants of Impact: Towards a Better Understanding of Encounters with the Arts." *Cultural Trends* 16.3 (2007): 225-75. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, and E. F. N. Jephcott. "Editor's Introduction." Introduction. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2008. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, and E. F. N. Jephcott. "The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art." *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2008. Print.
- Dekel, Gil. "The Shift in the Role of Museums following the Mass-reproduction of Images of Artworks." *Poetic Mind*. June-July 2011. Web. June-July 2011.
<<http://www.poeticmind.co.uk/research/the-shift-in-the-role-of-museums-following-the-mass-reproduction-of-images-of-artworks/>>.
- Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: inside Public Art Museums*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Elwell, J. Sage. *Crisis of Transcendence: a Theology of Digital Art and Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011. Print.
- Gilloch, Graeme. "Fabricating Aura: The Face in Film." *Actualities of Aura*. Comp. Dag Petersson and Erik Steinskog. Svanesund: Sweden, 2005. Print.
- Goldblatt, David, and Lee Brown. *Aesthetics: a Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996. Print.
- Hammermeister, Kai. *The German Aesthetic Tradition*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" *New German Critique*, 40 (1987): 179-224.
- Higgins, Charlotte. "Museums' Future Lies on the Internet, Say Serota and MacGregor." *Guardian* 8 July 2009. Web. 20 July 2011.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/jul/08/museums-future-lies-online>>.
- Kang, Jae-Ho. "The Phantasmagoria of the Spectacle." *Actualities of Aura*. Comp. Dag Petersson and Erik Steinskog. Svanesund: Sweden, 2005. Web.
- Leder, Helmut, Benno Belke, Andries Oeberst, and Dorothee Augustin. "A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments." *British Journal of Psychology* 95.4 (2004): 489-508. Print.
-

- Lewis-Williams, J. David., and D. G. Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Cosmos and the Realm of the Gods*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005. Print.
- Lopes, Dominic. *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Massey, Irving. *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts*. Austin: University of Texas, 2009. Print.
- Nakasone, Marisa. "Museum « The Chicago School of Media Theory." *Museum*. University of Chicago. Web. 16 Aug. 2011.
<http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/museum/>.
- Newell, Ben, and David Shanks. "Recognising What You Like: Examining the Relation between the Mere-exposure Effect and Recognition." *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 19.1 (2007): 103-18. Print.
- Petersson, Dag, and Erik Steinskog. "Collecting Twelve Studies of Walter Benjamin." Introduction. *Actualities of Aura*. Svanesund: Sweden, 2005. Print.
- Shiota, Michelle N., Dacher Keltner, and Amanda Mossman. "The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-concept." *Cognition & Emotion* 21.5 (2007): 944-63. Print.
- Shull, Kristina K. "Is the Magic Gone? Weber's "Disenchantment of the World" and Its Implications for Art in Today's World." *Anamesa* 3.2 (2005): 61-73. *Anamesa*. NYU. Web. 18 July 2011. <http://www.nyu.edu/pubs/anamesa/archive/fall_2005_culture.htm>.
- Srinivasan, Ramesh, Robin Boast, Jonathan Furner, and Katherine Becvar. "Digital Museums and Diverse Cultural Knowledges: Moving Past the Traditional Catalog." *The Information Society* 25.4 (2009): 265-78. Print.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Echo Objects: the Cognitive Work of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007. Print.
- Steinskog, Erik. "The Decay of Aura/ The Aura of Decay." *Actualities of Aura*. Comp. Dag Petersson and Erik Steinskog. Svanesund: Sweden, 2005. Print.
- Unkelbach, Christian. "The Learned Interpretation of Cognitive Fluency." *Psychological Science* 17.4 (2006): 339-45. Print.
- Watson, David, and Anna Lee Clark. "PANAS-X: Manual for the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule - Expanded Form." University of Iowa, 1994. Web. 1 July 2011.
- Willems, Sylvie, Martial Van Der Linden, and Christine Bastin. "The Contribution of Processing Fluency to Preference: A Comparison with Familiarity-based Recognition." *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 19.1 (2007): 119-40. Print.
- Wilson, Ross. *Theodor Adorno*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Young, Mike. "Aura." *Theories of Media: Keyword Glossary*. University of Chicago. Web. 15 Aug. 2011. <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/aura.htm>>.
-

Appendix

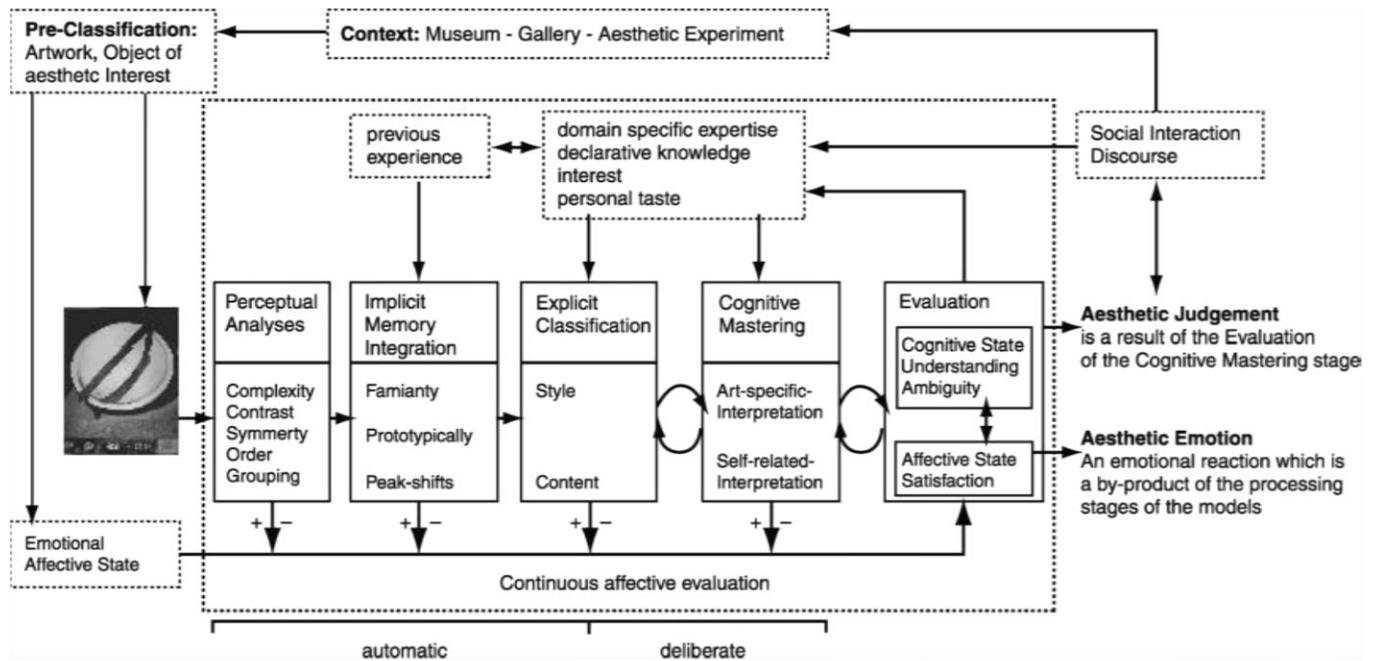


Figure 1. A model of aesthetic experience.

Figure taken from Leder, Belke, Oeberst and Augustin in "A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments"