

ART IN MOTION – THE ORIGINAL, THE COPY AND THE NETWORK

BY MARC PIESBERGEN

Is art in a crisis? Quite the contrary. Is art in a state of emergence? Yes. But basic coordinates of the art system are changing and shifting. Art is in motion, as studios, galleries, museums, art fairs and collections are increasingly affected by the paradigms and terms of the new (digital) networks and production forms, such as fab labs, barcamps, co-working, open source and open innovation. One look at Modernism shows that this interplay has a precedent, but also that the field of art in society is being redefined.

THE TRICK WITH THE AURA

“Thirty Are Better Than One” is the name Andy Warhol gave to his work from 1963: a reproduction of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa thirty times as a silkscreen print in successive rows. The printing technique is not perfect; it depicts a smeared, saturated, faded and low-contrast Gioconda – the entire image is in black and white. The world’s most well-known painting as a reproduction of a reproduction, its colours stripped down and manufactured in serial technology, is presented by Warhol with an ironical title as a new original. This was an intelligent chess move and direct intrusion into the reference system of the arts, which turned its author as copyist into a leading figure within precisely this system. Warhol blithely attacked what was classically considered the aura of an artwork. This aura is based on the uniqueness, the major individual achievement, the genius, momentum and master workmanship of the artist expressing himself beyond the actual work of art. The aura is generally considered the origin, distinctiveness and meaning at the centre of the work of art. From the chaos of random chance, possibilities, constellations and moments, the artist’s personality creates an original, forming it into an organic unit, which is ultimately more than the sum of its parts. This approach was described by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, which had a decisive effect on modern art theory: “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence – and nothing else – that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. (...) The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity. (...) The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological – and of course not only technological – reproduction.”¹ Painting, whether figural or not, is still considered to be most closely connected with this idea of originality and uniqueness. However, Warhol’s serigraphs, produced “on the assembly line”, consciously nullify this pathos of authenticity and aura. His factory produced art, instead of the artist creating art from his own hand. Available materials were used, employees manufactured the works to supply the market; they were communicated via media for reception by the consumer. In the undisguised logic of utilisation, along with a skilful ironic citation of the original, the work could only be called “Thirty Are Better Than One”.

THE OPEN WORK OF ART

But positing a simple confrontation between the classical concept of genius and the propagated consumer aesthetics of Pop Art does not go far enough. After all, art had already resolved itself of such dichotomies long before Warhol. Through contextualisation and an expanded concept of art, it had made an issue of the artist and his work, the conditions and locations of its perception, along with the recipient as the individual perceiver. Thus the white

¹ Walter Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Stuttgart 2011 (New York 1936), p. 13

cube, by its very definition, raises the artefacts shown in it to the status of art – and by the time Duchamp's ready-mades came about, at the very latest, entire genres of art could not be differentiated from articles of everyday use without such contextualisation. Instead, the (critical) work in and with this variance and at its transitions has become the essence of a range of decisive contemporary positions, including the highly diverse work of Monica Bonvicini, Heimo Zobernig and John M. Armleder. An expanded aesthetic, which Umberto Eco defined in his 1962 collection of essays "Opera Aperta"² on the theory of the open artwork, assigned coincidence, ambiguity and the individual viewer the role of continually recreating the work of art. Art thereby becomes everything that is declared and experienced as art. And as declaration and experience are free for anyone to make, the expanded concept of the work only sets limits where art is limited to a function and is robbed of its ambiguity, i.e. reduced to a cult, or where the intention of its declaration and experience does not exist as such, i.e. in ignorance or arbitrariness. Thus Warhol's strategy of art production on the basis of serial access to existing motifs is legitimised as much as the intentional absurdity of the Dadaists or the declaration by Futurists that factories, airplanes and automobiles were actual works of art. This difference, which distinguishes between art and non-art, is most rigorously defined by Niklas Luhmann, whose art theory postulates a similar range to that of Benjamin and Eco. In this theory, the descriptions of the expanded concept of art are matter-of-factly posited as successful or unsuccessful follow-up communication. In other words, art is a communication medium, the intention of which is to cause a reaction (which is not necessarily successful). Between these factors lies the selection of a coded communication process, the parameters of which are crucial: "It is not the qualities of the works of art that affect the viewer, but their selectivity; not the distinctiveness of the quality, their elevation on a scale of perfection that constitutes beauty, but the control of the selection regarding its own selection parameters."³ To stretch these parameters, not only between the artists and the work, but also between the artist, the work and the viewer, is the postulation of an expanded concept of art. Although Luhmann adds that in order to be effective, all three must also produce a successfully mediated moment of communication between themselves in order to transform a mere work into a work of art. The range of these abstractly formulated models appears as soon as one breaks them down into their concrete causes. Institutional Critique rightfully asks which social structures and mechanisms enable the existence of a white cube – with its certificate and its authentication for follow-up communication – thus hitting the nerve of discussion about increasingly scarce state budgets, and public vs. private space. In parallel, the continuous discussion on art and commerce culminates in the pointed question as to whether art determines the price, or whether price determines the art. This is brought to a point by the art historian Wolfgang Ullrich in his essay "Ikonen des Kapitalismus" ("Icons of Capitalism"): "The price (...) functions (...) as postulate of value. (...) It suggests that the work must be great art. Instead of being merely the indicator of a value, it also increases appreciation. Paradoxically, the price becomes the basis for an even better price; it can even constitute the work as art. (...) The pathos, which often characterised art commentary, has thus been replaced by the grandeur of multi-digit figures. Rankings, price databases and indexes replace (...) criticism."⁴ Under these conditions, the contemporary recipient obtains the impression that everything is art that asserts itself as such. This is not necessarily a conclusion which should be alienating, but from a cultural and historical perspective, it is both the essence of reflection and the basis of differentiation. It carries a social function and represents the autonomy of modern art.

² Umberto Eco. *The Open Work*. Frankfurt 1977

³ Niklas Luhmann, *Ist Kunst codierbar?* In: Niklas Luhmann, *Aufsätze und Reden*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 165

⁴ Wolfgang Ullrich. *Ikonen des Kapitalismus*. <http://www.artnet.de/magazine/art-price-value-uber-denwert-der-kunst-teil-i>, 08.08.2011

THE ADVENT OF MEDIA

This becomes interesting when one doesn't regard the situation as the end point, but rather as the status quo. If one turns the tables, and as antithesis to Benjamin, does not search for the aura in the uniqueness of the original, but removes it completely from the work. This topic takes on relevance when the role of modern technical media is regarded as a factor and element in the constitution of art. After all, historically speaking, photography, with its possibility of creating the perfect reproduction, led to the fetishisation of the original, as Wolfgang Ullrich examines in his highly discussed 2009 book "Raffinierte Kunst. Übung vor Reproduktionen" ("Refined Art. Practice Before Reproductions")⁵. In modern times, people attempt to identify themselves as connoisseurs for having viewed the original. Previously, this absolute claim to authenticity did not exist. For art enthusiasts of the 19th century, it was much more important to discover new works than to see works that were already well-known through traditional reproductions, including copperplate engravings, lithographs, woodcuts or plaster casts. Only since the advent of photography, which allows a work to be faithfully experienced beyond its "here and now", has the distinction of having seen the original developed in a widespread context. According to this theory, the loss of aura connected with mechanical reproduction, as posited by Benjamin, is a fallacy. Instead, through duplication and media presence, the original actually gains an aura. In this sense, Warhol, with his "Thirty are better than one" strategy, could be seen as a pioneering artist under the auspices of global digital reproduction: The original aura of the Mona Lisa is heightened even further with every photograph, reproduction, citation and variation. At the same time, with his appropriation of subject matter, copy and alienation effects, Warhol produced a new original that itself gains in aura with every reprint. And exactly this historical position of the work of Warhol could be seen as a key moment for the change of coordinates in production, distribution, reception and communication of art here and today. Because it brings a fundamental quality into play that was not distinguished by Benjamin: In addition to technically reproduced images, as enabled by photography and film in the early 20th century, the art in the second half of the 20th century encompasses works of art whose originals are already designed for technological reproducibility. These are works whose aura can only fully develop when they are multiplied, disseminated and recognised by the media. Art thus reacts with feedback on its embedding in the media system, by already orienting its originals on media dissemination. That is, in addition to production and reception, the suitability for reproduction also becomes a substantial work criterion. Warhol added the incunabula: In terms of communicative connectivity, public acceptance and economic relevance, modern art can only be considered successful if its media reproducibility is also an immanent component of the work. In addition to the creative intention of the artist, the imageability and recognition of the work of art have become natural grounds for critical reception. Or using Warhol as an example: "The Mona Lisa is not famous for Warhol because it is brilliant, but is brilliant because it is famous."⁶

THE NEW WILD ONES

The movement in the early 21st century, however, is going a decisive step further. It is no longer merely the originality of contents – regardless of whether works of literature, music or art, but also the originality of their transmission that is being appropriated, copied, varied, alienated and autonomously projected in terms of sequence and structure. Whereas previously it was the media that snatched the original from its actual here and now, and availed itself of its aura in order to enrich itself and subdue the rules of the game, it is now the artists, in

⁵ Wolfgang Ullrich, *Raffinierte Kunst – Übung vor Reproduktionen*, Berlin 2009

⁶ Tobias Lander. *Das reproduzierte Kunstwerk*. <http://www.deubner-preis.info/lander.pdf>, 08.08.2011

connection with the recipients themselves, who are making these very media their own. Whereas Nam June Paik manipulated the medium of television in the 1960s by using magnets to distort the running images of analogue TVs, thereby turning them into artworks, contemporary works either digitally intervene into universal program codes and hardware, or process the terms studio, gallery, museum, art fair and collection as institutionalised carrier media themselves. With their 2010 project "Newstweek"⁷, for example, the artists Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev developed a device that logs into open networks and allows websites accessed by other users to be manipulated in a targeted manner. Those so inclined can thus alter the front pages of Spiegel, FAZ and Co., producing beads of sweat on the faces of those surfing nearby. Naturally, the blueprint for Newstweek is freely available on the web. In a similarly striking manner, Julius von Bismarck examines the authenticity of information with the "Image Fulgurator" (2007/08)⁸. His "apparatus for the minimally invasive manipulation of photographs" projects arbitrary motifs into digital photographs taken in public places. For example, von Bismarck has used his projector to insert flames into photos taken by tourists of the Reichstag building in Berlin. What the photographer sees suddenly becomes something different than what has been recorded as a digital motif. The work of Oliver Laric is more reflexive than manipulative. His piece "Versions" (2010)⁹ positions Institutional Critique in the context of the infinite manipulability of images in the digital age, while simultaneously questioning every concept of originality and authenticity. In his works, official channels are suddenly faced with practices whose cultural production of techniques, symbols, genres, styles and codes are deprived of ritualised roles and formulas. The organisational forms designed for permanence are thereby replaced with work formats in which analysis, tests, changes and samples are conducted in project format. Art does not retreat into the narrow segment and oligarchic biotope of the original, but rather plays with reproduction technologies and media dissemination, as well as the defined strategies of representation, authentication and auratisation. If the Neue Wilde expressively celebrated the impulsive subjectivity of the genial artist in the 1980s, then contemporary positions, inevitably connected to the reality, ubiquity and virtuality of the Internet, are making clear that something new is underway that needs to operate under the changing requirements of information, production and reception. But only cultural pessimists see this as a deficiency. For the loss of strictly assigned roles, as they exist within a classically subsidised art system, by no means represents a loss of significance for art and artists. Instead, it can also be understood as liberation from the standardised practice of the artist that enables new traction between creativity and society.

THE UNUSUAL COOPERATIONS

The increased attention that has been devoted internationally to the cultural and creative economy, above all for strong economic reasons, nevertheless lies at interfaces resulting from that what has meanwhile become the obligation of post-industrial societies toward permanent innovation, resulting in a permanent emancipatory potential for the arts. For art, as the core of the cultural and creative economy, takes on a pilot function in the current knowledge economy that it can actively seize upon: "By investigating unexplored terrain, by working with realms of possibility channelling utopian material, it helps to develop unorthodox solutions."¹⁰ And associated new forms of work that arise with co-working, barcamps and fab labs, on web-based platforms for crowd funding and crowdsourcing, in interdisciplinary processes such as design thinking and open innovation, or in collaborative open source developments all

⁷ Julian Oliver / Danja Vasiliev. Newstweek. <http://newstweek.com>

⁸ Julius von Bismarck. Image Fulgurator. <http://www.juliusvonbismarck.com/fulgurator>

⁹ Oliver Laric. Versions (2010). <http://www.oliverlaric.com/vvversions.htm>

¹⁰ Holm Friebe / Bastian Lange. Innovationsökologien,

http://www.creative.nrw.de/fileadmin/files_ch/pdfs/Innovationsoekologien.pdf, 08.08.2011

constitute a foundational counter-model to the increasing event-based packaging of art and culture. For they operate at precisely those points where institutionalised cultural facilities, equipped with ever scarcer budgets, are forced into competition with commercial formats that do not promote the unorthodox, but rather the conventional and the expected – which naturally gain higher public acceptance and generate larger incomes. However, this trajectory only rarely bestows art with new qualities – instead placing it in such a strange and unequal competition. Cooperations and formats that are still considered to be unusual, and are currently being developed at artistic interfaces to science, research, design, online communities and rediscovered crafts, represent an emerging alternative: The studio as a co-working space, the gallery as a crowd funding platform, the art fair as a fab lab and think tank, the museum as a centre for social innovation and the collection as an open source library. Why not? This is Warhol's Factory reloaded.

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