

After Aura: Re-reading Benjamin's *Kunstwerk*

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I.

Art and mass culture were irreconcilable, or so it appeared to Walter Benjamin when he penned his now canonical essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (Benjamin 2002). It was first of all a question of media, and in the case of this essay, painting in particular. But painting was not in and of itself the culprit: it was not simply a matter of old and new. Painting was surely a remnant (repository, even) of the most decorous and frivolous machinations of bourgeois life, but other such objects were, for Benjamin, collusive as well; yet these artifacts somehow harnessed a kind of counter-intuitive history of the very class they once adorned. What made painting different from, say, fashion, or the Parisian Arcades, was the very medium through which it communicated. Painting kept its own history under wraps. Even when viewed in a gallery or exhibition hall, the static work of art enforced an unbreachable distance that even the most radical alterations in perceptibility could not overcome. Seeing a painting was like looking at a carefully guarded tomb whose chilly marble exterior and reflective surfaces effectively concealed the moldering corpse within.

For Benjamin, this entombment, the formal remoteness of works of art, was equivalent to their *aura*. The fact that works of art were seemingly recalcitrant to mass audiences was in part what made them entrancing – and auratic. The density of Benjamin's notion of aura is that it refers simultaneously to a perceptual/visual distance and the *sui generis* nature of artworks. The work of art's uniqueness was therefore understood both as a record of a certain historical moment and as an impediment to genuine experience in the present. It was Benjamin's wish to find a productive space in the fissure between the modern audience and artwork, to politicize both art and the viewing public by bringing the parameters of exhibition and presentation closer to one another than they had ever been before. Therefore, aura, which articulated and maintained this distance, had to be overcome.

This much is clear from the many rehearsals of Benjamin's essay, but the genealogy of the concept of aura has garnered significantly less critical attention. It is a curious fact considering how this essay seems in part to have been adopted by those movements and critics who first welcomed the dissolution of aura. Where does the term come from, and why did overcoming aura become such a galvanizing force in the discourses on art and culture? Perhaps by reconsidering Benjamin's treatment of aura in the light of its shifting evolution and meanings for contemporary praxis and theory, the history of this essay's reception and the methodological and ideological shifts baptized in its name will in turn come into high relief.

In the 1970s and 1980s, aura's destruction became a kind of golden calf for art history, around which both Anglophone and German movements celebrated the political and intellectual freedom granted by the study of cultural representations or "images" as opposed to what had been institutionally referred to as "works of art." Much has transpired since the publication of Benjamin's essay in the field of visual production, not the least of which concerns the manic proliferation of movable and transportable image technologies equally effective in the spheres of art and capital alike. In such a situation, how would we understand the trajectory of aura today? Has aura's destruction unwittingly engendered the specter of a new and more insidious aura of aura-less-ness? If so, what would that look like, and what kind of cultural response could be imagined?

This line of questioning is meant to exert some pressure on the finality of the judgments that have been passed in the name of aura's eradication. For example, does the move from artwork to image mean that art has now evaporated into pure self-consciousness, or into a culture of digital media? Does it even make sense to speak of art anymore in the wake of *Bildwissenschaft* and its anthropological science of the image,¹ or after Visual Culture and its emphasis on the apparatuses of power, which repositions art as merely one component in a much larger account of the history of representations?

¹ For an excellent summary of this movement see Horst Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as *Bildwissenschaft*." *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Spring 2003): 418-428. See also, Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich, 2001).

In order to suggest a possible answer to these questions, it is first necessary to parse the manifestations of aura within Benjamin's argument.² One way of approaching this problem is to reconceive of aura not as a singular concept, but rather as shifting code for several crucial terms within Benjamin's investigation. In particular, aura stands in for concepts such as tradition, myth, singularity or uniqueness, and beauty, which crop up throughout Benjamin's writings. Thus, it is crucial to trace how aura is developed in this essay with respect to these related concerns so that it becomes possible to re-read this essay in light of the last 70 years of artistic and political history.

II.

In his discussion of aura, Benjamin begins by establishing an opposition between what he calls "cult value" on the one hand, and "exhibition value" on the other. Cult value refers to the kinds of ritualistic behaviors that works of art [*viz.* painting] occasion *vis-à-vis* their relationship to an established history. Because the medium of painting is itself the product of a much larger continuum of rarefied objects, it maintains a connection to its own medial traditions that are ultimately impenetrable to the modern observer. This is equivalent to the artwork's aura, what Benjamin calls "the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition", which describes both the artwork's uniqueness and the effects of its aesthetic distantiation (Benjamin 2002: 103).

Exhibition value is Benjamin's term for the newer manifestations of ritual defined by the presentation of reproducible media like photography and film, where there is no singular object and therefore no seamless link to the object's self-contained conventions. As Benjamin writes: "In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts" (Benjamin 2002: 108). For Benjamin, the revolutionary force of the photograph's exhibition value was its dislodging of the more traditional "free-floating contemplations" carried out in the singular work of art (Benjamin 2002: 108).

² Note that I am strictly limiting myself to the discussion of aura developed in this essay, though I am aware that Benjamin uses this term quite differently with respect to Freud and trauma in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), 155-200. For the purposes of this paper, however, and the issue of the reception of aura within the broader community of those who work on visual material, the conclusions I am drawing could only relate to the treatment in this essay.

Aura thus highlights the forced distance preserved in the ineradicable divide between object and observer. Aura surrounds the work because it is the product of an otherwise uninterrupted link between the work's existence in the here and now of a certain exhibition space, and the more permanent, mythical time that locks that object in the grip of a historical tradition. In the case of reproducibility, Benjamin argues that the very fact of the artwork's existence and physical character, its singularity, is challenged by the lack of an original. This is the essence of what Benjamin calls the "mass existence" of the object, which stands in for an auratic and "unique existence" in the era of reproduction (Benjamin 2002: 104).

Under this rubric, the reproducible work exists simultaneously as a thing unto itself and a thing to be experienced. The temporal divide between the work's specific moment of emergence and its presentation to a certain audience is now unified as a condition of exhibition value. The specific character of the work moves from a purely physical or material medium, to one based on a certain image-making capacity that allows the work in question to exist in a time and space co-extensive with the time and space of its audience.

In the case of film in particular in the essay, exhibition value signals a new ontological condition for the artwork/image where the temporal instantaneity of the medium effectively transforms the material world into a communicable optical display. Due to its immediacy, film can also effectively address itself to a larger public outside of the privileged spaces of the art museum, and more importantly for Benjamin's argument, film also has the capacity to provide its viewers with a kind of visual instruction manual for aligning experience with the speed of the present moment. It is film's unique mediumistic conditions that allow the distance enforced through the artwork's aura to be momentarily overcome, to be brought to a verge [*Schwelle*] where awakening becomes possible. Film thus trains an observer's faculties to be able to recognize images as potential awakenings, where one can wrest each experience into the construction of a collective present history.

In terms of the nature of visual comprehension, Benjamin links the specific kinds of attention elicited through film to a fundamental shift in the nature of experience, that is, the shift from an experience grounded in ritual to one governed by a certain lived or embodied relationship to the world [*Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*]. However, for Benjamin this passage is only ever dialectical, embodying both a loss of experience tied to a pre-existing tradition and the recovery of a newfound consciousness. Benjamin's verdict with respect to painting and the reproducible image seems rather straightforward on this issue: "[...] painting has become enmeshed by the technological reproducibility of the image. And while efforts have been made to present paintings to the masses in galleries and salons, this mode of reception gives the masses no means of organizing and regulating their response" (Benjamin 2002: 116-7).

The comparison between film and painting is thus established on the basis of their relationship to tradition, their potential for empowering a mass audience, and their connection to a unique material existence. The development of media on these terms establishes painting as a harbinger of the mythic slumber of modernity, which had to be ruptured and restructured in order for true collective experience to re-emerge. Photography and film therefore effectively provided for an abrogation of the more traditional, temporally static, materially-determined media in order to generate a politically-relevant art for the present.

Winfried Menninghaus maintains that Benjamin's flirtation with aura is related to a more systemic concern with fracturing and diagnosing the structures of mythic production that prevent the emergence of new forms of collective experience. According to Menninghaus, Benjamin investigates those forms (both literal and figural) in particular whose liminal configurations somehow allow mythic structures to be at once caricatured and temporally passed through. Menninghaus calls this a science of thresholds [*Schwelkenkunde*], where in Benjamin's writing each critical conjunction of time and space is charged with the possibility of inducing a decisive step toward messianic time [*Jetztzeit*] (Menninghaus 1986). Aura, like myth, is a rhetorical device that

simultaneously prevents and provokes this threshold operation, where a representational medium such as painting is broken apart and reconnected (through film) with the lived experience of its audience. These threshold spaces are examined most methodically in Benjamin's unfinished work on the Arcades of Paris, and although both film and architecture organize and control their respective spaces differently in these works, they are joined in their ability to concretize myth as a particular form.

Benjamin associates architecture with the earliest forms of mythic space, in particular in the contemporary iterations of the Arcades, which served as containers for the commodities and contents of the mythically-charged modernity of 19th-century Paris. Through their very structure, Benjamin saw the Arcades as carving space itself into an arrangement of thresholds (Menninghaus 1986: 26-58). The very existence, indeed the afterlife of such a structure and its decaying contents experienced in the early part of the 20th century, provided Benjamin with a critical topography of Paris that allowed mythic structures to be scrutinized and simultaneously broken apart. Menninghaus thus argues that in the case of the 'Artwork' essay, aura should itself be understood as just such a mythic construction, where reproducibility effectively frames and disrupts the artwork's mythic character. Rather than pure destruction, Menninghaus contends that aura's dissolution should also be understood as a means for "honing critical consciousness [*Schärfung kritischen Bewußtseins*]" aimed at blasting apart myth (Menninghaus 1986: 72).

According to this model, the matrix for disrupting mythic structure is therefore both spatial and visual. One of the potential revolutions carried out by the introduction of reproductive technology is the mobility of the image, where spatiality and visuality occur simultaneously. This has the effect of equalizing or homologizing the relationship between, for example, the subject *in* the film and the subject *before* the film. The image has "become detachable from the person mirrored, and is transportable. And where is it transported? To a site in front of the masses" (Benjamin 2002: 113). So, the image as a product and component of the filmic work is effectively disaggregated from any material existence distinct from the space of its exhibition. The implication of this dematerialized

and movable nature of the image is that it grants a certain authority to the audience, to place them in control of the performance they bear witness to on the flickering screen. Film provides the conditions for a truly collective reception, the terms of which are brought closer to, and under a greater degree of control by, those individuals who constitute these audiences. What is essential, then, for the breaking apart of aura is the unique disposition of the modern observer – experience is now a formal condition of the work itself.

What we glimpse, then, at the moment of aura's detonation at the hands of reproducibility, are those two prevailing issues in contemporary art historical discourse: vision and experience (for Benjamin's essay the more appropriate terms would be *Blick* and *Erlebnis*). Since the terms of this comparison are established on the basis of vision and subjectivity, painting becomes an obvious site of traditional modes and dispositions, a static, unique entity irrevocably distanced from the space of the masses. Given the ubiquity of these models within art criticism and theory, perhaps it is necessary to read this essay against the grain by attempting to determine the preconditions for aura's dependence on a predominantly spectatorial relationship to art. Does Benjamin mean to make experience – better yet, subjectivity – the new medium of art?

III.

As I stated at the begin of this essay, aura in this essay functions on many levels for Benjamin, and one of those levels concerns the concept of beauty (Menninghaus 1986: 71). The blasting apart of aura brought about by the mass existence of the reproducible image is meant to overcome or undo the purely optical relationship to beauty, which is mirrored in Benjamin's understanding of the transition to lived experience [*Erlebnis*] that acknowledges the inherent contingency and differentiation of modernity as mediated by a subject in the world. Film is thus the primary instantiation of such a theory, where the encounter with an external reality is brought in close proximity to the experience of a mass subjectivity.

The image theorists and film historians have by and large taken this essay as embodying just such a paradigm shift within the study of visual art and related technological media. The various methods and schools that emphasize the irrevocable impact of reproductive media have offered serious and important critiques of the more traditional media like painting and sculpture. However, with the time that has elapsed since the publication of Benjamin's essay, we now witness just how immanent the logic of the reproducible image is. What I want to suggest is the possibility that rather than a series of epistemological ruptures or breaks, the centrality of the image is a logical extension of a much larger development that occurred in the late 18th century with the emergence of the human sciences and their anthropological focus. This is what Martin Heidegger, writing just a few years after the publication of Benjamin's 'Artwork' essay, called "the Age of the World Picture," the *Weltbild*, which today might be more aptly translated as the "world image" (Heidegger 1977: 115-154).

The "age of the world picture" is Heidegger's way of naming the process that establishes phenomena as a reserve of so much research material, where the world itself is now experienced as an image. Heidegger argues that following Descartes' binarism of the subjective *cogito* and the objective world, the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] developed the principle of scientific research based on the establishment of the world as an object, as a picture prepared for analysis by a conscious subject. Far from a simple process of alienation, Heidegger maintains that this subject/object model defines and restricts the matrix through which we interact with the world.

The question is, then, does Benjamin's model of the dialectical image partake of this Cartesian division of the world, or does his essay posit a way to overcome those distinctions? The popular reception of this essay, in particular its adoption by Visual Culture in the U.S., and *Bildwissenschaft* in the German-speaking world, would appear more symptomatic of, rather than resistant to, the condition of the "world image" [*Weltbild*]. But we may just as well ask if Heidegger's verdict should remain so totalizing. Is there a challenge in his essay, too, that points away from its rather bleak

outlook on the possibility for art to be more than an effect of the world understood as an image?

Heidegger himself proposed such a challenge in his contemporaneous account in “The Origin of the Work of Art” [*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*], which also first appeared in France in the same year as Benjamin’s essay. This long treatment of the artwork is motivated by Heidegger’s conviction that philosophical interpretation has insufficiently dealt with the traditional categories of the thing. A van Gogh painting in particular provides a strategic derailment within the structure of Heidegger’s hermeneutics, which opens the possibility for encountering the kinds of disclosure common to all objects. Painting is suited to this process because in its very nature the work shuttles between both displaying a likeness in representation, and re-presenting the “earth,” as Heidegger calls it, in the form of matter.

But for Heidegger, even the idea of art understood as a way, as a means of discovering an essence of truth, can at best serve to remind us of what has been lost to us, it cannot overcome our fate of having been born into the age of the *Weltbild*. Heidegger’s use of the specific formal properties of painting as a vehicle for hermeneutics points to a certain restlessness and potential in materiality itself, but is the price paid for such insight a certain atavistic outlook on culture, what Meyer Schapiro called Heidegger’s “heavy pathos of the primordial” (Schapiro 1998: 429)?

Under Benjamin’s concept of the outmoded, objects betray a very different relationship to the past. The discarded wares of the 19th century are not directed nostalgically toward a forgotten tradition, but are instead stimulated by a revolutionary obsolescence where past and present erupt into a dialectical image that trains our eyes for the time and space of each present history (Menninghaus 1986: 16). In a remarkable passage in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin brings together this theory of an impossible temporality, but warns us: “That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a *not-yet-conscious* knowledge of what has been” (Benjamin 1999: 458; emphasis added). Just before this startling construction, Benjamin, quoting Rudolf Borchardt, writes:

“Pedagogic side of this undertaking: ‘To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows’” (Benjamin 1999: 458). But how can the prospects for these two successive fragments be reconciled? Is the not-yet-conscious in the object, which awakens itself in us the observer, or are we the not-yet-conscious that is aroused to awakening by the “has been” of the historical object? The futurity of Benjamin’s gesture is promising, but does this “image-making medium within us” imply a displacement of the object into a kind of mass aura?

The Not-Yet-Conscious [*das Noch-Nicht-Bewusste*] that Benjamin raises in the *Arcades Project* is no doubt a reference to the term developed by Ernst Bloch as early as 1907, and fully explored in his magnum opus *The Principle of Hope (Das Prinzip Hoffnung)* (Bloch 1993). Bloch developed this concept as means to offer a way out of the deterministic pastness of Freud’s theory of the unconscious. The Not-Yet-Conscious became a way of conceiving of cultural works in terms of a future use that had yet to be determined. Benjamin took advantage of this observation in his concept of the outmoded, where the very existence of antiquated wares in the present testified to the future uses that awaited them.³ For Bloch, the Not-Yet-Conscious denoted the unfinished, excessive, and unused historical matter that could never be entirely absorbed into the conscious understanding of a single individual, and therefore could not effectively provide for Benjamin’s passage to the messianic time [*Jetztzeit*] of the present.

As a result, the concept provided Bloch with a means to construct a model of utopia that differed from Benjamin’s in that it did not rely on the wish to overcome the distance (aura) enforced between experience and the temporally-static artwork. In a rather unorthodox move, Bloch acknowledges that works of art were not born purely of self-alienation, nor could they ever hope to correct that alienation permanently. What artworks could do is gesture toward the openness of past time as objects whose very

³ Despite the shared theoretical ground here, the relationship between Bloch and Benjamin was often quite contentious. For a discussion of this aspect, as well as Bloch’s related notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, see Frederic J. Schwartz’s important essay “Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder: Out of Sync.” (Schwartz 2001).

continuation in the present moment made such negotiations possible. For Bloch, though, there were no promises of eruption, no guarantees of premature restitution. Instead, Bloch echoed Hannah Arendt's corrective to Marxism from a year earlier in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt writes:

The greatness of Max Weber's discovery about the origins of capitalism lay precisely in his demonstration that an enormous, strictly mundane activity is possible without any care for or enjoyment of the world whatever, an activity whose deepest motivation, on the contrary, is worry and care about the self. *World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age* (Arendt 1958: 254; emphasis added).

Benjamin acknowledged such a loss in his discussions of 19th-century Paris, where the edifices of bourgeois consumerism had tried to compensate for the structure of family, oral history, and genuine community. Somehow, though, the reception of aura within art and film history told a different story, and the burning issue of world alienation was forgotten in the revelry around photography and film as messengers of the artwork's eventual dissolution. This was what Heidegger too warned of in his concept of the *Weltbild*, where the anthropological focus of the human sciences would not only transform the world itself into so much material for calculation and research, but that we would ultimately fail to remember that the self was not in reality a victory for humanity.

The centrality of the self to modern experience was also of great concern to Arendt. In particular, Arendt's concept of world and world alienation was surely influenced by Heidegger, but it also borrows from Benjamin's idiosyncratic brand of historical materialism (Benhabib 1996). Unlike Benjamin, however, Arendt does not look to the experiential content of media as a way to overcome alienation. On this point Arendt concludes:

[...] modern man at any rate did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; he was thrust back upon it, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself (Arendt 1958: 320).

Benjamin knew like Arendt that *Erlebnis*, the only form of experience that the thoroughly modern subject could endure, embodied this loss. Rather than lament this condition, as others like Heidegger had, Benjamin looked to the reproducibility of artworks and images as a way to shake art out of its own complacency.

The dissolution of aura meant that what was previously contained within the domain of art could now be brought into an almost tactile proximity to the modern observer. What is less clear is whether overcoming aura was equivalent to establishing a connection to the world in optical terms, or if the optical itself was the site where the abolition of aura had to take place in order to make such a world loss – what is really meant by the frequently cited term *Unheimlichkeit* – meaningful on different terms. In other words, was the optical ultimately meant to work through and beyond *Erlebnis*, or to make *Erlebnis* finally rout the memory of *Erfahrung* for good? Is Benjamin's conclusion complicated by Arendt's later diagnosis that the hallmark of modernity is not alienation *per se*, but rather that “life is the highest good” (Arendt 1958: 319)?

Arendt insists on the separation between life and world, but for her the artwork's connection to tradition (Benjamin's aura) is precisely what obviates a final verdict on the condition of world alienation. Art spoke to the enduring need to produce “worldly things,” and thus embodied a last vestige of activities that were not exclusively oriented toward the faculties of introspection (Arendt 1958: 319). Art enforced and maintained what Hans Blumenberg elegantly dubbed the division between life-time [*Lebenszeit*] and world-time [*Weltzeit*] (Blumenberg 1986). Works of art could therefore articulate a particular political form simply through their ability to look beyond the horizon of any single life. Though this could not eradicate the conditions Arendt describes, art could at the very least continue to preserve the life/world split while simultaneously refusing untimely reconciliation.

If I turn to Arendt and Bloch, it is because together they constitute a unique group of thinkers who suffered, like Benjamin, under the campaigns of National Socialism, but

unlike Benjamin, survived to report on the relationship between art and politics that had been proposed under fascism from a uniquely postwar perspective. Their work is thus marked by the experience of having lived through World War II, witnessing both the rise and fall of National Socialism. It is a perspective that was never afforded to Benjamin, and while Benjamin's discussion of aura was a very early attempt to confront the growing specter of totalitarianism in Germany and elsewhere, it may not ultimately stand as an effective diagnosis after the fact. As Bernhard Siegert recently suggested, "nothing is more questionable today than Benjamin's hope that the concepts he elaborates are incompatible with Fascist aesthetics" (Siegert 2003: 37).

So how can we recover the political charge of Benjamin's essay today without privileging the types of engagement that run counter to the postwar perspective expressed by Arendt and Bloch? A provisional answer will take issue with the notion that the political in art can only be brought about through the disposition of the observer, in the present tense of experience. The formal structures of the reproducible image, either digital or analog, parallel Arendt's description of the human condition in several crucial respects. First, without a unique, material presence, the image is infinitely accessible to the modern consumer. It can be displayed in numerous settings, and furthermore promotes rather than disrupts the processes of introspection and self-consciousness that Arendt claims are the hallmark of modernity. Second, images are not merely compatible with this uniquely modern temperament; they in fact enforce and regulate a reflective subjectivity as the *sine qua non* of aesthetic engagement.

It would seem, then, that images can only abolish ritual by celebrating, or at the very least indulging, the movement of the self toward the center of all artistic and political concerns. Does Arendt's diagnosis of life-orientation then signal a new aura for the postwar epoch? If so, can art effectively intervene by becoming a political tool different from what Benjamin had originally envisioned?

Bloch's forward-looking notion of the unconscious offers a way to reconceptualize the role that materially-specific media are capable of performing. Instead

of enforcing distance through a connection to ritual and myth, perhaps the physical medium of the work of art can effect distance proleptically, reminding us that the separation between our own time [*Lebenszeit*] and the time of the world [*Weltzeit*] is an irrefutable condition of humanity itself. As Benjamin well knew, architecture offered a paradigm for this condition. Buildings were designed to shelter against the terror of finitude by creating a second nature whose substance would hopefully guard against the infinite swallow of time (Harries 1982: 58-69). Architecture as a formal instantiation of myth did not just imitate the world. As an act of building, a concretizing of skepticism and doubt, architecture, like myth, scrutinized the world as an “absolutism of reality” (Blumenberg 1985: 4). Architecture was therefore not mimetic *to* the world as image, but mimetic *of* a world as a second-order *physis*.

The spatial nexus of mythic disruption so essential to the dissolution of aura has received considerably less attention than Benjamin’s theories of vision and the reproducible image. Perhaps a reconsideration of the art object as a matter-based form, and not as mere image or representation, could develop such an approach. This would embody an appeal for an art that disconnects from the contemplative tendency linked to aura, and instead focuses on the problems of placement, spatiality, and temporality. While these issues are foregrounded through the built environment, they are not, in fact, the exclusive province of architecture.

For example, significant developments in postwar (post-1945) artistic production have explored the structural correspondences between abstraction and matter, where the very intransigence of an object’s chosen material resists its evaporation into either experience or theory. Imi Knoebel’s *Raum 19* (*Room 19*) (1968) attests to the realm of expanded possibilities that exist between building and painting, where both are involved in specifying space through placement. The work *Raum 19* is comprised of seventy-seven component parts made from unembellished wood and Masonite materials, and was first installed in the eponymously titled studio that Knoebel occupied while studying with Joseph Beuys at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. While each of the pieces – canvas stretchers, frames, geometric and planar slabs – remains in their original state,

Knoebel gave precise instructions that whenever the work is shown that it be arranged in each instance anew according to the specific parameters of the exhibition environment. This rather simple request imbues *Raum 19* with the potential for infinite permutation, where the formal structure of the work coheres around the anticipation of future sites of engagement. Furthermore, the work's unassuming character and coloration (subdued construction-site brown) deflect specularized attraction, returning one's attention to *Raum 19*'s occupation and articulations of space.

But the subtlety of *Raum 19*'s elements belies its formal complexity. In lieu of producing what Benjamin called "cult value," Knoebel's piece incorporates "exhibition value" within an otherwise temporally-static configuration of the work itself. The crux of this move is that exhibition value here is not directed to the space of a viewer as it was for Benjamin in film, rather *Raum 19* establishes a kind of forward-looking open-endedness that gestures beyond the timelines imposed by human life. It is a "worldly" production *à la* Arendt, but more importantly, *Raum 19* refuses to settle into a single image, even of itself. The stacked fiberboard and lumber of Knoebel's work performs a layering, an archaeology of the formal tropes specific to the properties of reproductive media, and in so doing acknowledges the unfinishedness of any object.

In our own digital and dematerialized era, perhaps matter-based artworks like *Raum 19* can function like an unconscious of the image, where material excess helps give shape to a world-time (*Weltzeit*) that looks toward a future potential (Not-Yet-Conscious) inherent within the present moment. Rather than reject the notion of aura outright, maybe what is needed today is some critical distance (both literal and figurative). Reinvesting in materiality and the spatial concerns related to myth and aura can only be achieved by returning to Benjamin's insistence on the revolutionary nature of things, where thingliness itself effectively resists the age of the world image [*Weltbild*]. If, on the other hand, we continue to read this essay exclusively as a proposal for the study of images, art will become little more than a pastime for our own subjectivity, therapy for the lived-time of the present, and not, as it could be: a means to a different world.

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