Art after Aura.
On the integration of technological reproducibility into contemporary artistic practice

A Benjaminian reading of the oeuvres of Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons

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In this thesis the process of artistic production, the basis for an artwork's valuation, and the relationship between artist and viewer are analysed using Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' as theoretical starting point and artworks from Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons's oeuvres as case studies. Over the course of three chapters, this analysis is guided by means of the following research question: What are the consequences for art when technological reproducibility is integral to artistic practice?

Contents

Abstract

What are the consequences for art when technological reproducibility is integral to artistic practice?

Walter Benjamin explored the implications of mass media on art in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility'. Since then, the very aspects of technological reproducibility that changed art have become integral to many contemporary artistic practices. Due to the profound consequences it had on art, it is worth investigating the employment of technological reproducibility by artists for the production of their work.

This thesis uses Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons's artistic practices as case studies, and Benjamin's text as theoretical starting point for each chapter. Each chapter respectively discusses the process of artistic production, the basis for an artwork's valuation, and the relationship between artist and viewer.

Through its integrated position in artistic practice, technological reproducibility allows for increased output in exchange for the distancing of artist involvement from a works execution. Also, artists make familiarity the basis for value by using motifs and producing a singular concept in multiple editions.

The substitution of aura with personality is technological reproducibility's most profound consequence. Artists use mass media to cultivate a public persona which exists both outside the realm of art, but also as a context in which their works can be understood by the viewer.

Introduction

'In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible', states Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) at the start of his famous essay: 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' (1936).[1] Although a work of art may be copied exactly, its copy is generally not valued equally or indeed, favourably. For this phenomenon Benjamin offers an explanation: the work of art is imbued with aura, which is the product of an artworks authenticity, its unique existence in time and space that allows it to establish a contemplative distance between object and viewer.[2] The act of reproduction leads to the dissipation of an object's aura, for the new objects have no existence in tradition. They are new. According to Benjamin, means of technological reproduction such as photography go one step further. Photography allows for such a mass of copies to be made that aura is stretched so thinly, that it also dispels the authenticity of the original, which now exists in multiplicity, instead of unicity.[3]

Reproductive technology, such as photography, allowed for the mass reproduction of images that at the time of the early twentieth century had not yet been encountered. In his text, Benjamin offers an insight into the consequences that the arrival and proliferation of film and photography were having on the work of art in modern western society. The loss of aura was central to his argument. Since Benjamin's text first went to print though, more than eighty years ago, reproductive

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[1] The translations in question are those of the text featured in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,* translation of the second version by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland, and in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* a translation of the third version by J. A. Underwood. Although both versions have been consulted in this thesis, the second version of Benjamin's text is far more comprehensive than the third, and therefor shall be referred to and cited from far more often. What is more, the terminology of Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland's translation of the title allows for greater interpretive possibilities, with <u>technological reproducibility</u> being a more flexible definition that also points to activity, whereas <u>mechanical</u> sounds comparatively more specific and <u>reproduction</u> associates more with an object. Both translations used in this thesis are from 2008. To clearly distinguish Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland's translation from Underwood's, the former shall be referred to as Benjamin 2008a, the latter as Benjamin 2008[11]b.
Original editions in German of both the second and the third versions have also been consulted in this thesis, to compare possible variations in either Benjamin's formulation or translations published in both English versions. Both German text's consulted have been selected from Walter Benjamin, Karl-Maria Guth (ed.), *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Die drei deutschen Fassungen in einem Band*, Berlin 2015.
The sentence cited here is the same in both English versions: Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: second version', in: Michael W. Jennings (red.) e.a., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge (MA), London 2008 (1936), p. 20, or, Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* London 2008[11] (1936), p. 3.
[2] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: second version', in: Michael W. Jennings (red.) e.a., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge (MA), London 2008 (1936), transl. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland, p. 21.
[3] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 22.

technology has proliferated even more so throughout society, and today, by means of the internet, smartphones, and 3d-printers, it is more accessible than ever before. Contemporary artists are all too aware of this accessibility, for not only are their artworks reproducible, but in most cases, their artistic endeavours would not be possible without the opportunities offered by reproductive technology. World renown artists such as Jeff Koons (b. 1955) and Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) for example, both make extensive use of photographic imagery, either through taking photographs themselves or by appropriating already existing images for other purposes.

Despite Benjamin not possibly being able to have known what forms it would take on in future society, his writing on reproductive technology has remained incredibly relevant, and references to it is can be found in many academic fields, ranging from art history to anthropology, and particularly in the field of media theory. Due to the integration of reproductive technology into artistic practice, Benjamin's text could perhaps offer valuable insights when assessing the artistic practices of contemporary artists. When 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' is employed to discuss contemporary art, the main focus is on the author's notion of aura. Although a discussion referencing the essay cannot be done without touching upon this notion, it contains many other concepts that could perhaps prove to be equally as insightful.

In his essay Benjamin discusses the consequences for the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility. In this thesis, an attempt shall be made to similarly analyse and discuss the work of art in an age when technological reproducibility plays a central role in an artist's approach to artmaking. For this undertaking the following question has been formulated: What are the consequences for art when technological reproducibility is integral to artistic practice?

Benjamin's text shall serve as the main source in answering this question. However, due to variations in translations of 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', two different versions of the text have been consulted, hereby narrowing the possibility of a single translator's interpretation being overly predominant in the reading presented in this thesis. Benjamin's essay is supplemented by secondary source material, such as art theoretical texts, interviews with the artists, and other art historical literature. Three specific concepts have been chosen due to their relevance to the topic, and each is discussed in a corresponding chapter. These are: the process of artistic production, the basis for an artwork's valuation, and the relationship between actor and audience, or in the case of the analogy provided in this thesis: between artist and viewer. Other matters touched upon by Benjamin in his essay, such as audience perception of reproduced images or the politicising of art, do not form a main point of enquiry in this thesis, but shall be touched upon in a chapter when its inclusion is relevant to the discussion.

A number of assumptions are inherent to the central question, the first of which being that as an analogy to Benjamin's original essay, in which multiple consequences of technological reproducibility came to light, the discussion of its integration into artistic practice in this thesis should also have more than one consequence. For this reason, Benjamin's text shall provide not only a theoretical starting point for each chapter, but the original's chronology shall also dictate the order in which the three aforementioned phenomena are discussed. Each chapter uses Benjamin's essay as a point of departure, and statements from the essay will be used to analyse certain aspects in Ai and Koons's work, hereby furthering our understanding of the consequences of technological reproduction for artistic practice.

A second assumption is the definition of art. In this thesis, when referring to art it shall be by the following definition: an object conceived and produced in the artist's studio to be perceived and valued in the public realm. Interestingly, Benjamin's notion of aura does not imply the necessity for an artist's involvement to be able to appreciate an object as art in a traditional sense, as long as that object is old and unique. Due to its central position in Benjamin's essay, aura shall be discussed in relation to Ai and Koons's art, but due to the contemporaneity of the works discussed, it is necessary to make a distinction between what is art, what is an object, and what is merely *old*.

The third and final assumption is that of the dependence of the practice of certain artists on the notion of technological reproducibility. Although many artists have adopted similar ways of working, Ai and Koons have been chosen as case studies, due to their well-established name in the world of contemporary art, extensive opus, feverishly high productivity, and the amount of available literature dedicated to them, works from their oeuvres will not only allow for an extensive amount of examples, but also provide ones that are familiar.

With the central question having been defined, it is time to start the process of providing it with a fitting answer.

1
Freeing the Artist's Hand

Perhaps one of the most readily available forms of reproductive technology is the humble mobile phone. A smartphone incorporates a camera of some kind into a small handheld device, granting their owners the possibility to take, edit and share images on online social media platforms with over a billion users. Photography has arguably become more accessible than ever before, and come a long way since Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851) first reproduced images in the form of the daguerreotype.[4] Daguerre did not intend for the camera to replace the artist as creator of images, but rather, saw it as a helpful tool to aid in the process.[5]

In his essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', Walter Benjamin notes that photography, 'freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction – tasks that now develop upon the eye alone'.[6] In Benjaminian terms, photography is a technological means of reproducing images. The camera made it possible for images to be replicated mechanically, and as a tool it presents its user with the opportunity to step back from the process of creation. All that a photographer has to do is see an image worthy of interest and the machine will reproduce that image at the press of a button. Benjamin views the camera similarly to how Daguerre had initially intended it to be received: as a device that could relieve the artist's hand.

In this chapter, the integration of technological reproducibility techniques into artistic production shall be discussed, the main consequence of which is the relieving of the artist's hand from his practice. It is the first aspect from Benjamin's essay to be discussed, and as the chapter progresses, principles provided by Benjamin will be supplemented with those from art theoretical texts by Theodor W. Adorno, Hal Foster, and Sol LeWitt. Furthermore, works from specific periods in Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons own artistic developments will be used to ground theoretical assumptions in physical practice. It is important to discuss this 'freeing' phenomenon first, for not only does it have consequences for how art is produced, it also effects how art is received, valued and related to, topics central to chapters two and three, which will be discussed later.

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[4] Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, *Daguerréotype*, ca. 1838 – 39, transl. Beaumont Newhall, p. 3.
[5] Daguerre ca. 1838 – 39 (see footnote 4), p. 4.
[6] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 20.

Involvement

In his essay, Benjamin states that 'around 1900, technological reproduction […] had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes'[7] Benjamin illustrates that since antiquity, artists have been willing to adopt and experiment with whatever new tools were made available to them to reproduce images, experimentation that has led to an expanding of art's boundaries. The camera is an instrument that gives an artist greater access to technical reproducibility, comparable to using a plaster cast. Tools however need not always be physical objects, and can take on a more abstract form, such as a computer algorithm or an organisational method.

Theodore W. Adorno (1903-1969) describes 'industrial' as the standardisation of an object as to allow it to be replicated and rationally distributed.[8] Here, industrial does not refer to mechanisation of production per se, but rather to standardised organisation of production. As an organisational method, industrialisation can greatly benefit the technological reproducibility of an artwork. Similar as to how an artist can employ a camera to reproduce images, an artist can make use of industrial organisational techniques to reproduce whatever image he might have in mind by the hands of however many assistants are needed to execute a work.

To keep his studio's output high but well organised, the industrial is used by Ai in his art production, which is equally as ambitious as it is labour intensive. An example of industrial organisation of production in Ai's art is *Sunflower Seeds* (2010, fig. 1), a work produced for Tate Modern's Unilever Series in 2010 and made from 100 million hand painted, ceramic sunflower seeds.[9] Ai did not produce the millions of little objects himself though, but instead employed 1600 residents of the town Jingdezhen. The size of the project and its artisanal nature made it inevitable for Ai to make use of industrial organisation. The millions of seeds needed were produced in batches of standardised objects, developing over multiple stages with the labour provided by many different hands. Industrial organisation allowed for the work to be completed without the need for Ai to micro-manage each stage of the production process.

Industrial organisation is observable in the production of most of Ai and Koons's artworks. Their artistic practice places themselves at the top of an organisational pyramid, in which they are responsible for an artwork's concept. When sufficient time and planning has gone into how a piece should be executed, then production, often a more meticulous and time consuming task, is passed

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[7] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 21.
[8] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', in: J. M. Bernstein (ed.), Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture,* London and New York 2001[2] (1963), p. 100.
[9] John Tancock, 'Born Radical', in: Adrian Locke, e.a., *Ai Weiwei*, ex. cat. London (Royal Academy of Arts) 2015, p.44.

on to a group of assistants. The artists know exactly the effect they want to achieve with their work, but are seemingly dependent on the skills of others to achieve this.

Despite their apparent need for assistants, this is not a consequence of the contemporary artist's inability to create. Industrial organisation is merely employed as an effective means to distribute the workload, not to compensate an artist's lack of skill. It allows the artist to work on one project without the production of another project needing to be halted. In the past, Koons has even gone so far as to say that were he not to employ so many assistants, he would not have had the time to be able to develop himself properly as an artist.[10] A consequence of the usage of assistants to the degree that Ai and Koons employ them though is a complete loss of physical involvement of the artist's hand from the production process.

Despite Ai and Koons's lack of involvement in the execution of their works, no one else is attributed as creator except for themselves. This practice however has long been accepted by the art world, perhaps most recently due to the writings of conceptual artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) in the 1960s. In LeWitt's seminal essay *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967), he states that the idea is the most important aspect of an artwork, and a work's success should therefore be based on its concept, not dependent on the skill of the artist as a craftsman.[11] LeWitt's approach privileges the artist as producer of ideas, similar to how the camera privileges the photographer as conceiver of images.

As an artwork should not be dependent on the artist's skill with a brush, for example, an assistant is therefore allowed to fabricate its tangible form, as long as the concept decided by the artist is by no means compromised. In Ai and Koons's case, the assistants reproduce the artist's concept as something physical. It is by means of industrialisation that assistants are able to be applied effectively, consequently allowing for multiple projects being developed at once, resulting in a scale of production that Ai and Koons are renowned for. Ai's *Sunflower Seeds* for example, took two and a half years to make, but other works were also completed during this period.[12]

Perhaps the crux of the application of industrial organisation as a means for technological reproduction of artworks is embodied by *Straight* (2008-2012, fig. 2), a sculpture consisting of ninety tonnes of steel bars, almost half of the 200 tonnes that Ai had managed to reclaim in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The work is a critique of Chinese regional government, whose employment of poor building methods and cheap materials led to the collapse of a school building

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[10] Jeff Koons, David Sylvester, 'Jeff Koons', (interview, 2000), in: David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, New Haven 2001, pp. 347-351.

[11] Sol Lewitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', in: Charles Harrison (Ed.) & Paul Wood (Ed.) *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000*, Malden 2003 (1967), pp. 846-847.

[12] Part of 'One-to-One with the Artist', a project in which visitors could record a video message for Ai Weiwei, the artist answered the questions he is asked most regularly about *Sunflower Seeds*, a list of which was then published on the Tate Modern's website: <http://www2.tate.org.uk/aiweiwei/content/most-asked-questions.html>, (19/04/2017).

during the earthquake, resulting in almost 5000 school children losing their lives.[13] The piece was dependent on the artist's ability to act as an overseer, guiding the project, and ability to standardise aspects of the production by dividing a large undertaking into separate, sometimes basic, tasks. For *Straight,* Ai asked workers to hammer the reclaimed rebar into perfectly straight pieces. These pieces could then later be arranged in the manner decided by the artist, wherever the work was to be exhibited.

During the sculptures' production, Ai was arrested and incarcerated for 81 days. In an interview with Tim Marlow, Ai recalls the moment he returned to his studio after his arrest, when he was greeted in the street by the sound of his assistants, still hammering steel.[14] Despite his absence, work on the piece was able to continue due to Ai's instructions and organisation of labour. The decentralised approach adopted by Ai and Koons to artmaking is achievable due to industrial organisation of production. A consequence of this approach is the loss of physical involvement in execution, but this does not however remove the artist from a work's conception. Since the concept of the work is of such importance, the passing on of mundane tasks to assistants does not only allow for an increased artistic output, but it creates room for the artist to further develop his abilities.

Presence

As has already been noted in the first part of this chapter, Ai and Koons's practices share a distinctive distance from the execution of the artworks due to industrial organisational methods. Their positioning of themselves in the process of production is arguably similar to the photographer as described by Benjamin, who notes that the camera privileges the artist's eye, affording it an exclusive position from which to dictate artistic principles.[15] This would seem to be similar to Ai and Koons's practices, which make sure that, despite their physical absence from the production procedure, the finished product is realised exactly how they imagined it.[16]

What has been described above is a transition from the eye to the mind's eye. This transition brings to light a development in art history in which art has gone from something made by

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[13] Tim Marlow, 'Ai Weiwei in Conversation', in: Adrian Locke, Tim Marlow, Daniel Rosbottom, et al., *Ai Weiwei*, ex. cat. London (Royal Academy of Arts) 2015, p. 22.

[14] Marlow 2015 (see footnote 13), p. 23.

[15] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 20.

[16] Michelle Kuo's essay 'One of a Kind' illustrates how Koons uses the latest scanning and digital rendering techniques to ensure that his objects, that start out as a readymade, are customised to his exact standards. Michelle Kuo, 'One of a Kind', in: Scott Rothkopf (ed.), Antonio Damasio, Jeffrey Deitch, et al., *Jeff Koons: A Retrospective,* ex. cat., New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2014, pp. 247-252.
Ai's approach seems more relaxed than Koons's, but in a 2009 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, he explains that he makes use of hand-drawn and digital sketches to illustrate to his team the concept of the work he wants to realise. Ai Weiwei, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 'The Many Dimensions of Ai Weiwei' (interview, 2009), in: Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks,* London 2016[2], p. 44.

an artist, through art as something that can be selected by an artist, and finally, to art as something that can be purely imagined by an artist. Ai and Koons are not the first to employ this approach, but it is integral to their own practices nonetheless. LeWitt is but one of many artists from the 1960s whose theories, techniques and approaches have proven to be fertile ground from which Ai, Koons, and indeed many others, have drawn from. During the 1960s, artists associated with conceptualism, minimalism and pop art all rallied against late modernism, and in their resistance, cemented alternative approaches to art common in artistic practices today. In *The Return of the Real* (1996) Hal Foster notes that although minimalism and pop art may seem to be opposites of each other, with the former resisting established notions of high and low culture whilst the latter integrates them, both movements use similar tactics to confront the art of late modernism.[17]

The above mentioned art of late modernism that Foster speaks off refers to abstract expressionism, which with the efforts of modernist art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, had by the 1960s finally been institutionalised. Barnett Newman (1905-1970) and Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), like all abstract expressionists, each had a distinct visual style and unique painting technique. Counter to this, minimalism and pop art made standardisation and serial production an integral part of the technical production of the work of art.[18] As a result of their production techniques, it became harder to recognise the presence of the artist's hand.

Unlike one of Pollock's characteristically paint splattered canvasses, works by artists associated with either minimalism or pop art lack any trace of personal style, and at most document a certain artist's material and technical preferences. For example, Donald Judd (1928-1994), one of the artists most often associated with minimalism, made use of new industrial materials such as aluminium and plastic, uncommon in artmaking at the time, and his sculptures were assembled, not cast. Andy Warhol (1928-1987), the champion of pop art, took images from the media, and had them reproduced multiple times by means of either stencils or silkscreens. Judd's employment of industrial materials, Warhol's appropriation of media imagery, and both their factory style assembly techniques are also present in the work of Ai and Koons today.

Between 2004 and 2014, Jeff Koons produced many artworks, a number of which belong to the *Hulk Elvis series* (fig. 3). One of the main motifs of the series is a rendering of the Incredible Hulk (a comic book character) as an up-scaled inflatable toy. The sculptures are made of bronze, but visually mimic the material qualities of plastic. By juxtaposing the Hulk pieces with objects such as a marble boulder, objects that should crush an air-filled toy, the artist dispels the notion that what is being presented is merely an assemblage of readymades. Koons's mimicry of things is of the highest standard, for were he not to create situations that betray his pieces material divergence, then all

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[17] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real,* Cambridge (Mass.) 1996, p. 60.
[18] Foster 1996 (see footnote 17), pp. 62 – 66.

effort that went into the creation of the artworks would remain fully concealed from the viewer. Ai Weiwei's furniture sculptures have been produced by the artist since 1993, and consist of radical alterations of Ming and Qing dynasty antiques (fig. 4). Despite the changes Ai makes to the pieces of furniture, he has skilled craftsmen do their best to maintain surface patina and joinery so that despite their being reconfigured, the tables and stools appear as unaltered as possible.[19]

Koons uses mimicry to create objects that look like commodities and Ai goes to great lengths to minimise traces of intervention to the object. Despite the distinct visual differences of their artworks, both artists share not only a decentralised approach to art production, but also their work lacks any indexical qualities. Hereby, the artist is not only physically removed from the execution of the work, as they act more as supervisors than manufacturers, but their work also physically omits the presence of the artist. This is not just the case for recent work by Ai and Koons, produced in their well-established studios by their assistants, but it is also visible in much earlier work, such as Koons's *Inflatables* (1978 – 1979) and Ai's Duchamp-inspired *One Man Shoe* (1987). Their willingness to hide the presence of the artist early on in their careers allowed for the seamless integration of industrial organisation into their studio practices, without resulting in the integrity of their art to be compromised.

Conclusion

Artists whose practices create artworks that deny both their involvement and their presence in the production process lend themselves particularly well to integrating means of technological reproduction. Because of the presence of the artist is not noticeable in their art, the artist's physical involvement in the production process is therefore also unnecessary. By means of industrial organisation of the studio, the artist can effectively apply assistants, allowing for multiple projects to be worked on at once. By embracing the freeing of the artist's hand due to means of technological reproduction, it would appear that the ambitions of the artist, no matter how complex or large of scale they may be, are more achievable than ever before. The size of some of Ai and Koons's artworks and the vastness of their oeuvre is testament to the advantages of artistic practice embracing technological reproducibility.

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[19] Marlow 2015 (see footnote 13), pp. 18 – 20.

2
Multiplicity of Incidences

In 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', Walter Benjamin discusses his notion of 'aura', the concept he is perhaps most well-known for in scholarly circles. For Benjamin, aura is an aspect of traditional works of art that establishes a contemplative distance between object and viewer that has its roots in the work's unique existence in time and space.[20] Objects such as tribal totems, altarpieces and artworks all exude aura due to their uniqueness, permanence, and history, and it is because of these aspects that they enjoy appreciation. Benjamin's notion of aura can be used to explain why a copy is valued differently than an original, for it is not a unique object and does not share the same history.[21] Whilst an original is appreciated for its uniqueness, the reproduction is valued as a referent to the original. On this matter, Benjamin states the following: 'Reproductive technology, we might say in general terms, removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition. In making many copies of the reproduction, it substitutes for its unique incidence a multiplicity of incidences.'[22]

The first chapter of this thesis discussed the consequences of technological reproduction for the manner in which art is produced. This chapter will focus on the consequences for the perception and appreciation of art, when it is removed from the realm of tradition by the act of reproduction. To do so, works by Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons will be discussed in relation to Benjamin's constituted 'multiplicity of incidences' that results from technology's ability to create exact copies. The first part of this chapter will discuss instances in which Ai and Koons incorporate the possibilities offered by technological reproducibility into their artworks to establish familiarity with the viewer. The second part of this chapter will reflect on the consequences of multiplicity for the appreciation of genuineness. For this discussion Benjamin's text shall be complemented by insights into the perception of originals and reproductions offered by Rosalind Krauss (b. 1941) in her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985)*.

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[20] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 22.

[21] '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.' Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 21.

[22] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* London 2008[11] (1936), transl. J. A. Underwood, p. 7. For this citation, I found Underwood's translation more preferable than that of Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland, for its terminology is more similar to that used by Rosalind Krauss, discussed later in this chapter.

Motif

A consequence of the industrial organisation of artistic production by Ai and Koons as discussed in chapter one, is that over the years both artists have built up extensive oeuvres. A survey of each of their bodies of works reveals a distinct seriality: either long running series of works produced since early in their career up until the present day, such as Ai's furniture sculptures, or in the form of groups of work produced in shorter periods of time or for a certain show such as Koons's *Hulk Elvis* series. Even though there is a large visual and material diversity present in the oeuvres of both artists, it is still easy enough to attribute a work either to Ai or Koons specifically. This seriality may not be a purely practical simplification of production, so that the artist need not personally be involved during every step of production. Rather, due to the lack of the artist's hand, seriality might be used as a method to gain recognisability.

Works of art are not to be confused with commodities, and to distinguish one from another, Adorno turns to Benjamin's notion of aura. Adorno states that it is a work of art's aura that distinguishes it from a mere commodity.[23] An art object is inherently unique, whereas a commodity object is numerous. The original object may be copied and reproduced *en masse*, but its aura is impossible to replicate.

Everyday commodities may have no aura, but this does not mean they are any less recognisable. Iconic design can leave an equally lasting impression on the viewer as any work of art considered to be a masterpiece. Due to its inherent multiplicity, the commodity can establish a recognisability equal if not greater than any work of art. It is exactly this aspect of the commodity that Ai and Koons exploit in their work: They appropriate the familiarity of an image or object from mass culture and reproduce it as a recurring motif throughout their oeuvres.

The artworks in each series Ai and Koons produce share a relation to an overarching theme and similar aesthetic qualities. The overarching theme is dictated by the artist and the aesthetic qualities are a result of the capabilities offered by contemporary reproductive technology. Through their use of motifs, Ai and Koons employ the commodity's recognisability, and imbue it with the aura of a unique work of art. An example of this is *Bicycle Chandelier* (2015, fig. 5) by Ai Weiwei, a work which illustrates the artist's appropriation of the Forever company's bicycle as a motif.

 During Ai's youth the bicycle was the Chinese worker's most readily available mode of transport and Forever the country's largest supplier. Ai first started making sculptures out of the bicycles in 2002, and since then it has become synonymous with the artist through its recurrence as

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[23] Adorno 2001[2] (see footnote 8), p. 102.

a visual motif.[24] The Forever bicycle is not the only motif Ai has appropriated, for Han dynasty pottery, children's rucksacks, and antique tables and stools are all frequently used by the artist. The same goes for Koons, whose work is often identifiable due to the artist's incorporation of luxury consumer goods, such as vacuum cleaners, basketball advertisements and pool toys. Recognition of the artist through his chosen motifs also works on a more abstract level than merely becoming familiar with a specific object being assimilated into works of art. *Inflatable Flower (Tall Purple)* (1979) and *Balloon Dog* (1994-2000, fig. 6) for example, are two works from different times in Koons's artistic career, yet both share the banality and aesthetic of the inflatable object, as do many other works in Koons's oeuvre. In this instance, it is the concept of the inflatable object, not a specific readymade, which becomes the motif which the viewer learns to attribute to Koons. The same can be said for sculptures produced in Ai's studio that, for example, incorporate characteristically Chinese craftsmanship.

A consequence of Ai and Koons's use of reproductions of recognisable objects is that although their artworks might have initially become identifiable to the viewer as a motif, original object and artwork may become inseparably connected in the mind of the viewer. The commodity now acts equally as referent to the work of art as vice versa. This concept is attributed by Elizabeth Athens to works by Andy Warhol, who says Warhol's paintings of Campbell's soup cans '[upend] the chain of representation'.[25] The same can be said for works by Ai and Koons. For example, after having seen one of Koons's monumentally sized and mesmerizingly textured *Balloon Dogs*, its imprint on the viewer's mind will almost certainly be recalled when he is confronted with a balloon animal at a child's birthday party. In this situation, the artwork is equally recognisable through lending from mass culture imagery as that same imagery works as a referent to the artwork. Coincidentally, both consumer product and artwork are available in various different colours.

Copies without originals

An advantage of Ai and Koons's use of motifs is their utilisation of reproductive techniques to apply the same image over and over again to create new works of art. By creating new works of art they need not worry about their pieces being considered unappreciable due to lack of uniqueness, permanence and history. Contemporary reproductive technology however makes it possible for an artist to do more than recycle motifs, for it allows for the creation of exact copies of any work of art, including one of the artist's own. Ai's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* (2011) for example, has two

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[24] Adrian Locke, 'Catalogue Plates', in: Adrian Locke, Tim Marlow, Daniel Rosbottom, et al., *Ai Weiwei*, ex. cat. London (Royal Academy of Arts) 2015, p. 219.

[25] Elizabeth Athens, 'Andy Warhol's Production Kitchen', *Gastronomica* vol. 9, no. 2 (spring 2009), p. 47.

versions, one of which cast in gold, and one slightly up scaled but otherwise completely identical version cast in bronze. Koons's practice goes one step further. He often has certain works manufactured in multiple editions, with all editions being identical to one another. Koons keeps a version of the work for himself, hereby holding it outside of the art market (now common practice among artists working in inherently multiple media), and the others go on to be sold at auction and exhibited in museums across the globe. An example of such a work is the *Hulk (Rock)* sculpture discussed in chapter one (fig. 3), which has been produced in an edition of three plus one artist's proof.

In keeping with Benjamin's writing on the subject of reproduction, the making of editions should have profound consequences for Ai and Koons's work. In his essay, Benjamin states that 'the here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity'.[26] Due to the fact that the works discussed above are not unique, but multiple, the 'here and now' of these pieces is devalued at the moment of their inception.[27] This does not mean that works produced by Ai and Koons in this manner are not to be considered art because they are less genuine however. Referring to Benjamin's discussion of the futility of his contemporaries' search for the authentic print, Rosalind Krauss notes that 'authenticity empties out as a notion as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple'.[28]

Authenticity, often synonymous with genuineness and originality, was a concept central to the practices of avant-garde artists that were shaping the art world during the time that Benjamin wrote his essay. In her book, Krauss puts forward the idea that the original and the copy are two sides of the same coin, bound together 'in a kind of aesthetic economy, interdependent and mutually sustaining'.[29] Modernism has long set the criteria by which art is to be appreciated, which is why, in this relationship, originality is viewed positively whilst the copy is condemned. Krauss points out that it makes no sense to judge an artwork that is inherently multiple on its lack of genuineness, for although these concepts are connected, such a work is not concerned with unicity, but with repetition. The importance of the original makes as little sense to the photographer, as it does to the contemporary artist who has fully embraced the opportunities offered by technological reproducibility. Their art is one of reproduction, 'grounded on a perception of an irreducible plurality, the condition of the multiple without an original'.[30]

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[26] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 21.
[27] 'These changed circumstances may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork.' Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 22.
[28] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge (MA) 1985, p. 152.
[29] Krauss 1985 (see footnote 28), p. 159.
[30] Krauss 1985 (see footnote 28), p. 184.

In his essay, Benjamin states that 'works of art are received and appreciated with different points of emphasis, two of which stand out as being poles of each other. In one case the emphasis is on the work's cultic value; in the other, on its display value.'[31] Of these values, catholic relics are an example of the former, whilst Hollywood cinema fittingly illustrates the latter. The cultic value of the relic stems from its absolute genuineness. Despite the fact that it is rarely seen outside of the reliquaries within which it is housed, the relic has been venerated over the course of many centuries. Counter to that of the relic, the display value of cinema stems from its irreducible plurality. A Hollywood blockbuster can be on view at multiple cinemas simultaneously, its duration but fleeting, and the onscreen image ever-changing. Whilst the relic is appreciated without needing to be seen, the Hollywood movie is appreciated because it can easily be seen anywhere.

In his essay Benjamin states that due to technological reproduction, public interest in art has increased allowing for a situation in which 'quantity has been transformed into quality'.[32] Through the multiplicity of their works, Ai and Koons exploit display value by using quantity of copies to establish public recognisability. Their works are present in most major art museums and private collections worldwide, and due to some works being copies without an original, a single work can be physically present in multiple places at once. An example of this is Jeff Koons's *Tulips* (1995 – 2004, fig. 7), a sculpture that since 2008 has been on permanent view at both the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and the Museo Guggenheim in Bilbao.[33] By being presented within the context of prestigious locations, an artwork is imbued with importance and worth through association. Ai and Koons's copies without originals increase the ability of their artworks to insist upon appreciation, simply by having identical pieces present at multiple locations.

Conclusion

Through the use of motifs and a disregard for originality, Ai and Koons are able to foster a broad appreciation from a large public for their art without first needing to establish its position within the

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[31] Benjamin 2008[11]b (see footnote 22), p. 12. Here, I have chosen for Underwood's translation of 'Austellungswert' as 'display value'. Underwood's translation lends itself better in the discussion of the differences between 'the poles'. Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland have used 'exhibition value' in their translation, which here would be a slightly confusing choice of words in the comparison of reliquaries and Hollywood cinema. Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland's translation is as follows: 'Art history might be seen as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself, its course being determined by shifts in the balance between the two. These two poles are the artwork's cult value and its exhibition value.' Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 25.

[32] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 39.

[33] List of locations at which *Tulips* has been exhibited as noted by Christie's New York on the lot description for the Post – War & Contemporary Art Evening Sale on the 14th of November 2012 at the Rockefeller Centre, at which one of Koons's *Tulips* sculptures was sold. Christie's website: <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/jeff-koons-b-1955-tulips-5621948-details.aspx> (07/03/2017).

realm of tradition. Technological reproducibility is used to appropriate any image or aesthetic quality as a motif. The motif garners recognisability not for being unique to a singular work, but for being employed in multiple works as well as being common outside of the context of art. Also, the multiplicity of Ai and Koons's pieces challenge the notion of genuineness customarily attributed to the work of art as a unique object. Through the use of technological reproduction their works can be conceived as multiples without need for an original. This approach allows for a singular artwork to be present in multiple gallery spaces at once, fully utilising Benjamin's concept for appreciation by means of display value.

3
The Cult of Stardom

In the previous chapter, Benjamin's notion of aura was discussed within the context of reception and value. Central to Benjamin's understanding of aura, but what has not yet been discussed in this thesis, is how it is affected by technological reproduction. Although it is impossible to copy an artwork's aura, the act of reproduction causes that of the original to wither.[34] The dissipation of aura is not per se problematic, for as has already been illustrated, works that are inherently multiple do not rely on the notion of authenticity for their appreciation. Furthermore, according to Benjamin the destruction of aura presents new opportunities: 'as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionised. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.'[35]

Taking into account the geo-political context in which Benjamin's statement was formulated, the politicising of art after the loss of aura seems understandable. It coincides with the proliferation of propagandistic art throughout Western society, perhaps most explicitly employed in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. What though, can be said of works by artists who are not government propagandists, yet employ technological reproduction in their artistic practice? What is aura replaced by in those inherently multiple artistic media when it is not politics? In his essay, Benjamin provides a possible answer: personality. 'Film's response to the shrivelling of aura is an artificial inflation of 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of stardom promoted by film capital preserves the magic of personality that for years has lain solely in the rancid magic of its commodity character.'[36] Despite Benjamin's somewhat disdainful tone, it would appear that reproductive technology offers personality as a viable substitute for aura.

In this chapter, the consequences of the notion of personality offered by technological reproducibility shall be examined. The weight of this concept as a notion from which art could derive its value and ways of being perceived should not be underestimated. After all, nowadays the opportunities offered by (mass) media coverage can make renowned artists such as Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons equally as recognisable as any Hollywood movie star. Part one of this chapter will discuss the notion of personality separate from artistic practice, based on how the artists present themselves outside the studio. Part two will discuss artworks produced by Ai and Koons, scrutinising

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[34] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 22.
[35] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 25.
[36] Benjamin 2008[11]b (see footnote 22), p. 21. Here, Underwood's translation of 'Starkultus' has been chosen above that of Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland due to its comparatively greater ambiguity. What Underwood has translated as 'the cult of stardom', Jephcott, Livingstone, and Eiland have translated as 'the cult of the movie star', which, due to its specificity, is less freely interpretable. Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), p. 33.

how the notion of personality functions in works inherently lacking originality, indexical presence or the need for the artist's involvement.

Inflation of personality

Ai and Koons are not the first artists to be the subject of a level of media interest similar to that of movie stars. Salvador Dali (1904-1989) is often credited as a pioneer of artist self-promotion and active participation in celebrity culture. Keith L. Eggener notes: 'Like the film stars – Mae West or Errol Flynn, for example – Dali blurred the distinction between on-screen and off-screen existence.'[37] The artist's carefully constructed public 'mad man'-persona made him perhaps Surrealisms most recognisable member, and despite his later eviction from the movement by André Breton (1896-1966) due to ideological differences, this did nothing to lessen the public's association of Dali with Surrealism. 1930s American interest in the Surrealists coincided with a broad public interest in Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and art critics preferred to discuss the aesthetic alternatives the movement provided to cubism instead of the Surrealist's proclaimed adherence to communist ideology.[38] In this reading devoid of the movement's political leanings, Dali seized the opportunity to come to the forefront not as a member of the group, but as a larger than life individual, a mad man synonymous with precisely those aspects of Surrealism that the American public was interested in.

Isabelle Graw attributes Jeff Koons's rise to fame due to his willingness to interact with the contemporary art world, an environment she describes as: 'a global industry ruled by the laws of celebrity culture'.[39] Hans Ulrich Obrist ranks Ai Weiwei 'among the most widely recognised and influential cultural figures in the world.'[40] Similarly to Dali, Ai and Koons's success originates from their art, but the celebrity status both artists enjoy is also the product of their effort in shaping for themselves a specific media personality.

In a world in which success of any kind leads to media attention, an artist can play an active role in increasing the amount of information in circulation about him by partaking in photoshoots and lengthy interviews which are often either published separately in an exhibition catalogue or in a

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[37] Keith L. Eggener, '"An Amusing Lack of Logic": Surrealism and Popular Entertainment', *American Art* Vol. 7, No. 4 (Autumn, 1993), p. 41.

[38] Eggener 1993 (see footnote 37), pp. 32-33.

[39] Isabelle Graw, 'Life as a resource: Mythologisation, Self-Marketing, and the Creation of Value in the Work of Jeff Koons', in: Scott Rothkopf (ed.), Antonio Damasio, Jeffrey Deitch, et al., *Jeff Koons: A Retrospective,* ex. cat., New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2014, p. 232.

[40] 'His outspoken activism – on issues of freedom of speech and human rights – has earned him as many admirers as his art. His pioneering approach to new media allows him to reach new and diverse audiences, and to expand the influence of contemporary art. Always controversial, always fearless, he is now among the most widely recognized and influential cultural figures in the world.' Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Ai Weiwei Speaks,* London 2016[2], p. vii.

comprehensive book of multiple interviews, a project often spanning many years.[41] The information the reader can glean from the interview depends upon which experiences the artist is wishing to share, and the reader should also note that sometimes, the artist may stray from the facts to better develop a certain narrative. For example, in the exhibition catalogue of his retrospective at the Royal Academy in London, the only studio production views that were published were those which showed Ai himself dipping Neolithic pots in industrial paint.[42] These pictures confirm Ai's position as an autonomous artist, despite many of his works are assembled by others. On this matter, Graw states that: 'the life of an artist [is] permeated by retroactive projections and grounded in authentic experience,' and offers an example of an interview in which Jeff Koons, who after having found the first version of his biography he gave unsatisfactory, supplied a second, different, version.[43]

The artist's interview and photoshoot is a means of inflating personality in a relatively controlled manner, for the artist ultimately decides which aspects of his image are made more pronounced in the process. In this manner, the artist is able to shape his media persona in the same manner he can give shape to an artwork. The contemporary media society however also allows for personality shaping to take place in a less controlled manner. Without need for the artist's direct involvement, a broader public knowledge of the artist grows thanks to the journalistic efforts of mainstream news outlets such as newspapers, with reporting on court cases and record sales at auctions seemingly the most often recurring themes.[44]

Apart from the reporting of news media causing the public's knowledge of Ai and Koons to grow, artists can nowadays themselves make use of social media outlets such as internet blogs to reach out to thousands of followers online. Illustrative of the potential power social media can offer an artist is the Chinese government's shutdown of Ai's blog in 2009.[45] Since then, Ai has taken up Instagram and has over 302.000 followers from across the globe.[46] Artists have never before had such means to dictate the world's perception of them before than with Instagram's free photo and video sharing services for mobile phones. Equipped with the handheld camera of their smartphone,

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[41] In this thesis multiple artist-interviews have been used. An interview conducted by Tim Marlow that was published in the exhibition catalogue of Ai's solo show at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, whilst another has been taken from Hans-Ulrich Obrist book *Ai Weiwei Speaks,* consisting of many different interviews held over a period of ten years. Marlow 2015 (see footnote 13), pp. 16-29. Obrist 2016[2] (see footnote 40).

[42] Eight photographs of Ai Weiwei dipping Neolithic pots in industrial paint are included in *Ai Weiwei* exhibition catalogue. Interestingly, far fewer photographs of assistants at work were included in the catalogue. Locke 2015 (see footnote 24), pp. 160-161.

[43] Graw 2014 (see footnote 39), p. 229.

[44] Perhaps the event that received the most news coverage was Ai Weiwei's arrest in 2011 by the Chinese authorities. An example: Tania Branigan, Jonathan Watts, 'Ai Weiwei detained by Chinese police', *The Guardian* 3 April 2011: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/apr/03/ai-weiwei-detained-chinese-police> (07/04/2017).

[45] Obrist 2016[2] (see footnote 40), p. ix.

[46] Ai Weiwei's Instagram homepage: <https://www.instagram.com/aiww/> (07/04/2017).

the artist can now offer a view of themselves and their daily lives from their own unique perspective and share it with anybody also in possession of the app. Ai and Koons can show-off works currently under production from their own perspective, without the need for a studio photoshoot with a professional photographer, but can also use their phones for far more banal moments, such as lunch with friends or a snapshot of a pet.

In light of what has been discussed above, inflation of personality should be understood as the artist taking an active role in expanding public knowledge of his personality via multiple non artistic media. The coverage of Ai and Koons in the media illustrates not just the artist's ability to supply information about themselves, but independent reporting and followers on social media also point towards public demand. Demand constitutes value, and through interpreting Benjamin's text further, it is possible to find a possible source of origin.

Commodity character

Ai and Koons's decentralised approach and use of reproductive technology may have removed their involvement and indexical presence from their work, but these same factors also afford them the opportunity to insert themselves into their work in a different, far more explicit manner. Chapter two described how reproductive technology allows the artist to appropriate the image of anything to function as a motif in his oeuvre. This appropriation of images can off course include the image of the artist himself and in doing so Ai and Koons quite literally commodify their appearance, an aspect of their personality, to be deployed within the context of an artwork.

Photography, film and video are perhaps the quickest and most direct means by which the artist can create the most perfect reproduction of his likeness. Film is not only able to record the artist's appearance, but it can also track his movement in real-time and reproduce the sound of his speech. Apart from photography and film, Ai and Koons also make use of another reproductive technique to replicate their likeness, which has already been discussed in chapter one: industrially organised labour. Ai and Koons employ expert craftsmen who, when instructed to do so, create sculptures of their image in materials ranging from wood and marble to porcelain and fibreglass. These copies may lack the exact transference of a detailed likeness achieved by the camera, but, in contrast to the flatness of the photograph and cinema screen, these works share the artist's occupancy of actual, physical space.

A survey of Ai and Koons's oeuvre shows that the works in which their likenesses appear are either photographic, such as Ai's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995, fig. 8), or have been realised as sculpture made to represent an image that was initially a photograph, such as Koons's *Jeff and Ilona*

(Made in Heaven) (1990, fig. 9).[47] In both instances, the artists create a work by posing before a means of reproductive technology. Hereby, the artists are not only responsible (as artists) for the conception of the work, but because they lend their appearance to it, they are also intrinsically bound to what is eventually visualised (despite their lack of physical involvement in the production process). Telling of the division of labour in his practice, in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, Ai is not the photographer, but the one who is photographed. He is pictured not once, but three times, and due to the capabilities of reproductive technology, many editions of the artist's iconic triptych have been produced between 1995 and 2004.[48]

The works that feature the image of the artist not only share certain production values, they also share a general theatricality of composition. *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* depicts Ai in various stages of a destructive act that cannot have lasted more than a few seconds. Despite the short timeframe of the performance, care has been taken to capture the artist in artist in full whilst maintaining the visual impression of snapshots. Koons's *Jeff and Ilona* sculpture also presents a frozen image of the artist in mid-act, positioned atop a rocky outcrop surrounded by a golden serpent for maximum dramatic effect.

The performative and theatrical elements of the works discussed above are particularly interesting when considered alongside the content of Benjamin's essay. According to Benjamin, audience sympathy is one of the main differences between a screen actor's performance and that of a stage actor.[49] The theatre player presents his performance to the audience in person. The film actor's performance however, is presented to the audience by means of a camera. This mediation by means of reproductive technology causes the film audience to perceive the act through a filter, hereby making it impossible for them to sympathise with the actor. Unlike the theatre actor, the film actor's performance is not a single entity, but heavily fragmented due to editing.[50] This mediated performance causes the audience to sympathise with the camera instead of the actor, sharing in its ability to scrutinise. In a live situation the theatre actor is the subject of empathy, but through the filter of technological reproduction the screen actor is objectified.

In their artworks Ai and Koons's performances are also filtered by being reproductions, resulting in the viewer not empathising with the artist's appearances, but analysing the work in its entirety instead. Ai and Koons never partake in performance art before a live audience. They only

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[47] Graw 2014 (see footnote 39), p. 231.
[48] Lot description of a version of *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* from Sotheby's auction held on the 10th of February, 2016. Christie's website:
<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.42.html/2016/contemporary-art-evening-auction-l16020> (07/04/2017).
[49] Benjamin 2008[11]b (see footnote 22), pp. 17-18. This is comprehensively formulated in the third version, translated by Underwood, and absent from the second version original and translation.
[50] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), pp. 32-33.

appear in their art through a mediated form, as an object of indirect perception, reminiscent of the relic as discussed in chapter two where the public does not see the actual relic, but only the reliquary. In light of technological reproduction ability to influence viewer perception in this manner, 'the cult of stardom' seems to be a particularly accurate description.[51]

The manner in which Ai and Koons present their self-image allows them to actively shape a cult of personality not only through mass media, but also through their art. In doing so, their personality becomes a context through which works can be understood. For example, *The New Jeff Koons* (1980, fig. 10) not only offers an image of a young, crayon wielding Koons in a nod towards the supposed origin stories of many artists being creative child prodigies, but also communicates a marriage of childlike fascination and innocence as well as an interest in consumer culture.[52] All this fits within the banality which is Koons's image, his personality made medium. Many artworks in Koons's extensive oeuvre, the liquor-filled *Jim Bean – J.B. Turner Train* (1986), *Elephant* (2003) and even works from the *Made in Heaven* series, could all be viewed and understood within this context of banality. Similarly, in *S.A.C.R.E.D.* (2012, fig. 11), Ai presents the viewer with copies of himself in detailed dioramas which not only acquaint the viewer with the artist's appearance, but also provide back-story of Ai Weiwei as a troublemaker: the dissident artist closely monitored and harassed by the state. From these examples, it would appear that the use of the artist's image as motif is an effective means to further the notion of personality. In this form, personality provides the viewer with a broad context in which many of an artist's artworks can be understood, despite the artist not truly being reproducible. Personality as the presence of that which is not present is reminiscent of that which is intrinsic to cultic value: aura.

Ai and Koons's use of their self-image as motif differs from that of artists such as Cindy Sherman (1954). Sherman's oeuvre is almost exclusively made up out of photographs of herself. Although the artist's appearance features in most of her works, making each still recognisable as 'a Sherman', they cannot be understood within the context of her personality. Unlike Ai and Koons, whose appearance in their works is a direct reference to themselves, Sherman portrays a character. Although her appearance in her photographs creates recognisability, Sherman's use of herself as sitter is not primarily meant as reference to herself, but for practical purposes.[53]

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[51] Benjamin 2008[11]b (see footnote 22), p. 21.

[52] The myth of the artist already showing signs of his creative genius at a young age is a subject discussed at length in chapter two of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, this book is but one of many discussing the subject however. Ernst Kris, Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven 1979, pp. 13-60.

[53] Barbara Vinken, 'Woman as Image: The Artist is Present?', in: Ingvild Goetz, Karsten Löckemann (eds.) e.a., *Cindy Sherman*, ex. cat., Munich (Goetz Collection) 2015, pp. 127-128. In this essay, Vinken describes that: 'Cindy Sherman has always stressed that she does not make self-portraits. The fact that she is her own sitter

In Cindy Sherman's work, the self-image is not meant to imbue a photograph with value derived from personality. Stating this however implies that in different circumstances, an artist's appearance could actually have such an effect on an object. In the 1980s Koons's artworks shared a distinctive advertising aesthetic (evident in *The New Jeff Koons* fig. 10). During the same period, Koons also produced advertisements for exhibitions of his work (fig. 12). Instead of offering a view of what was on show, he had himself pictured in multiple situation meant to provoke, and that shared the same subject and aesthetic qualities of many other of Koons's artworks. Since then, prints of these adverts have gone on to be sold at auction and exhibited in galleries around the world.[54] A possible explanation for this could be that because Koons lent his appearance for these pieces, an image explicitly enriched by his personality, the viewer is offered a context within which the advertisements can be understood as works of art. It would appear that due to the artist's well established personality and use of technological reproduction to replicate the image of himself as a motif, the image of the artist can be used to shift the understanding of an object executed in media with little or no artistic tradition such as such as magazine advertisements, into the realm of art.

Conclusion

Via interviews, social media, and newspaper reporting, the artist's personality is subject to 'inflation'. This inflated personality creates a context within which Ai and Koons's art can be understood without need for the viewer to have first been acquainted with their oeuvre. Due to Ai and Koons's embrace of reproductive technology, the artist's image, an aspect of their personality, becomes a means to insert cult value into their art. Authenticity, previously expelled from the realm of art by display value, seeks refuge in the personality of the artist, which although in itself is not replicable, can be utilised by the artist to expand the realm of art even further.

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and model is something she has never described in theoretical terms, but always in terms of a pragmatic approach dictated by circumstance.' p. 128.

[54] Indeed, prints of Koon's *Art Magazine Ads* have been sold at auction for thousands of dollars. Lot description of *Art Magazine Ads Art Magazine Ads (Art, Flash Art, Art in America, and Art Forum)* from Christie's Post-War and Contemporary Art Day Auction held on the 26th of June 2013. Christie's website: <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/prints-multiples/jeff-koons-art-magazine-ads-5700248-details.aspx?from=searchresults&intObjectID=5700248&sid=45d2493a-fecb-4a7d-970f-8708f0b44bda>, (20/04/2017).

Conclusion

During the course of this thesis Walter Benjamin's venerable text guided an examination of artistic practices within which technical reproducibility holds an integral position. Works from Ai Weiwei and Jeff Koons's extensive oeuvres played a vital role in this analysis, not only grounding art theory in the realm of artistic practice, but also in testing the relevance of observations made on the subject by Benjamin in 1936. Three respective points from Benjamin's original essay with the most relevance to recent art world developments formed the main point of inquiry for each chapter, within which Ai and Koons's art was discussed at length. Additional literature provided by well-recognised theorists, artists and art historians aided in this discussion.

The first chapter, on the process of artistic production, discussed the manner in which technological reproduction frees the artist's hand not only from physical involvement, but also from its perceivable presence. Ai and Koons's art lends itself particularly well to industrially organised divisions of labour, in which the artists supply a work's conceptual content and employ many assistants to realise their concepts as physical objects. By embracing the possibilities of reproductive technology, the artist's hand is relieved in exchange for increased ability to realise even his most ambitious projects.

On the matter of the basis for an artwork's valuation, chapter two observed Ai and Koons's appropriation of everyday objects to be reproduced as recurring motifs in their oeuvre. This not only makes their art highly recognisable, but it also has consequences for the grounds on which their art should be valued. This is not cultic, but instead based on its displayability. The techniques used to create their art also allow for a single concept to be produced multiple times and allows for editions to be displayed simultaneously. Through these copies without originals, Ai and Koons hereby multiply the instances in which the viewer can perceive their work in a gallery space or elsewhere.

The third chapter revolved around the relationship between artist and viewer, and consequently examined instances when technological reproducibility allows for aura to be replaced by personality. Through published interviews and photographs Ai and Koons shape a media persona, establishing a cult of stardom which affords them a broad public recognisability separate from their artistic output. When Ai and Koons introduce an image of themselves into their art, they offer an understanding of the work within a context explicitly relating to their personality. Due to the frequent marrying of work of art and context of personality, the image of the artist alone can potentially bring any medium into the realm of art.

To conclude, the most profound consequence of the integration of technological reproducibility into artistic practice has been the substitution of aura with personality. Personality is fundamental to art produced in artistic practices to which technological reproducibility is integral.

The integration of technological reproducibility allowed for the effective organisation and use of assistants in artist's studios. In Koons's own words, the hiring of assistants gave him more time to develop himself as an artist. In light of what has been discussed in this thesis, this time is most effectively spent when it is put towards to inflating his personality. Personality is a construct created by the artist which acts as a context through which their art can be understood.

It has been mentioned that the integration of technological reproducibility allows for unbridled creativity, for it makes anything the artist could possibly imagine producible. Despite this though, Ai and Koons mainly appropriate pre-existing imagery and objects for their art. The appropriated imagery is carefully selected. It not only makes the aesthetics of their art familiar to most viewers, but also fits within the context of the artist's personality. Hereby, the viewer develops a greater understanding of what Ai or Koons embody as artists. Through this understanding the criteria by which the artist's art should be valued by are also imparted upon the viewer. These criteria are informed by the artist's personality, and therefor also dictated by the artist. A work that embodies aspects central to the artist's personality can, in this situation, only be received positively.

Throughout his essay, Benjamin stated that by means of technological reproducibility, art could be politicised.[55] Coincidently, Ai Weiwei's art is often understood to be political. This political aspect of Ai's art however derives from Ai's use of technological reproducibility to imbue his work with his personality, which is synonymous with political dissidence and activism. (Politics is not an aspect associated with Koons's personality, and, consequently, it is not present in his art.)

Due to the integration of technological reproducibility replacing aura with personality, pre-existing and difficult notions often viewed as integral aspects of art such as genuineness, authenticity, and originality, are no longer criteria of valuation. Aura varies per artwork, but personality is a shared quality present in all works produced by a certain artist. Because of this, it acts as a unifying quality of many different artworks, allowing for an easier understanding of the pieces by a broader audience, creating the possibilities for new discussions, understandings and appreciations of art.

The integration of technological reproducibility into artistic practice, as it was explored in this thesis, could also provide a useful approach into research of relatively new fields of art, such as internet art. The main points of focus taken from Benjamin's essay for this thesis (production, valuation and artist-viewer relation) could provide a useful framework on which to structure an analysis of works of art that are not realised as physical objects, but as a digital ones. The production of internet art relies either on highly specialised knowledge such as programming, or readily available and accessible means such as social media. Valuation also has its challenges, for unlike film

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[55] Benjamin 2008a (see footnote 2), pp. 41-42. The politicising of art was also touched upon in chapter three.

and photography, which today are considered as legitimate artistic media, internet art remains relatively underrepresented in art world institutions. Finally, internet art also offers the artist perhaps an entirely new type of relationship with his audience. The internet frees art from being tied to a specific type of space, like a museum, but also allows for mass viewing on an individual basis, which is where it differs from cinema, that generally presents art as a shared, social, viewing experience.

Despite being written more than eighty years ago, Benjamin's text has proven itself to be relevant to describing contemporary developments in the art world. With more and more artists exploring the possibilities of using new media such as the internet as a means of artistic expression, and also with museums now starting to facilitate this art in their collection, Benjamin's theories on the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility may prove invaluable to both artist's, curators, and the public, as a basis for understanding of those media that seem to depart from all traditional classifications of what art is. Currently that basis, as argued in this thesis, could be the notion of personality. When this changes, which it undoubtedly will, a rereading of Benjamin's masterpiece could once again prove insightful.

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- **Figure 11:** Ai Weiwei, *S.A.C.R.E.D.* (interior detail), 2012, fibreglass, iron, oxidised metal, wood, polystyrene, sticky tape, 377 x 198 x 153 cm, collection unknown. Image: <http://www.designboom.com/art/ai-weiweis-s-a-c-r-e-d-depicts-scenes-from-his-incarceration/>.

- **Figure 12:** Jeff Koons, Art Magazine Ads (Arts), 1988-1989, two of four lithographic prints on paper, each 91.6 x 71.2 cm, collection Tate and National Galleries of Scotland, © Jeff Koons, edition of 50 plus 10 AP. Image: <http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/banality/art-ad-portfolio>.
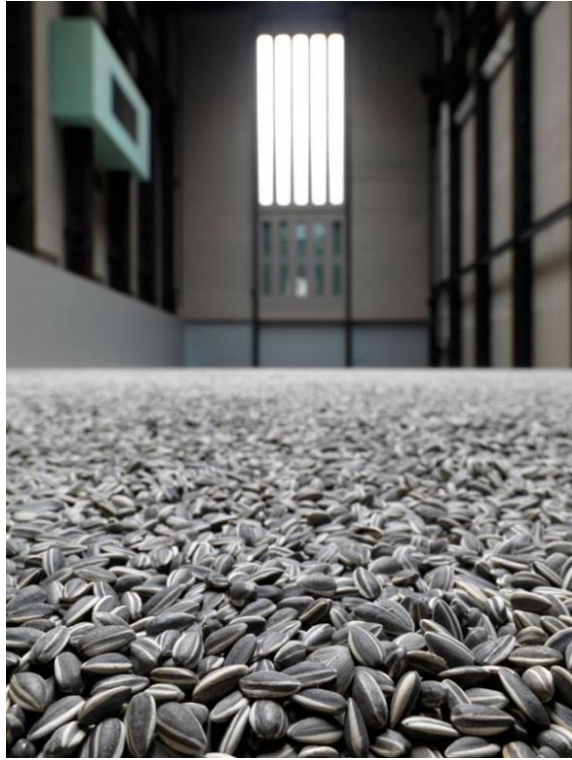
Appendix: Illustrations

Figure 1: Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds,* 2010, porcelain, variable dimensions, installation view of the work as exhibited for the Unilever Series at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, Tate collection.

Figure 2: Ai Weiwei, *Straight*, 2008-2012, steel reinforcing bars, 1200 x 600 cm, installation view of the work exhibited at the Royal Academy, Ai Weiwei Studio.

Figure 3: Jeff Koons, *Hulk (Elvis)*, 2004-2013, polychromed bronze and marble, 221.9 x 123.8 x 71.4 cm, ©Jeff Koons, edition of 3 plus 1 AP.

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Figure 6: Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*, 1994-2000, mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent colour coating, 307.3 x 363.2 x 114.3 cm, installation view of the work exhibited at the Broad Museum, ©Jeff Koons, 5 unique versions in existence (Blue, Magenta, Yellow, Orange, Red).

Figure 7: Jeff Koons, *Tulips*, 1995-2004, mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent colour coating, installation view of the work exhibited at the Broad Museum, 203.2 x 457.2 x 520.7 cm, ©Jeff Koons, 5 unique versions, collection Broad Museum.

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Figure 9: Jeff Koons, *Jeff and Ilona (Made in Heaven)*, 1990, polychromed wood, 167.6 x 289.6 x 162.6 cm, ©Jeff Koons, edition of 3 plus AP, collection unknown.

Figure 10: Jeff Koons, *The New Jeff Koons,* 1980, duratran, fluorescent light box, 106.7 x 81.3 x 20.3 cm, ©Jeff Koons, private collection (2013).

Figure 11: Ai Weiwei, *S.A.C.R.E.D.* (interior detail), 2012, fibreglass, iron, oxidised metal, wood, polystyrene, sticky tape, 377 x 198 x 153 cm, collection unknown.

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