

The Return of Art's Aura:  
Thomas Struth, Sherrie Levine, Ai Weiwei, and the Reproduction of the  
Original

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*Defended On*  
April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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## Introduction

The ability to reproduce art has been embedded in human culture for thousands of years. In its evolution, the method of reproducing art has become faster and more efficient and has therefore affected our perception of art. Walter Benjamin believed that the development of mechanical reproducibility of art at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century caused a loss of art's aura. He defines the aura as "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be."<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, I argue that the ability to mass reproduce art can also cause a reverse effect on the original work. In many cases, the reproduced works of art inspires a return of the original's aura. This is a phenomenon that artists Sherrie Levine, Ai Weiwei, and Thomas Struth capture in their work through the use of photography, spolia, and ekphrasis, respectively. I examine three specific works by each of these artists that either reproduce an original or use a reproduced image to reveal the return of the original's aura. This return is not only seen in specific artworks, but also in the recent growth of interest in the traditional sense of the museum experience which I will touch upon at the end of my paper.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin explains that although the reproducibility of art has been practiced for thousands of years, the development of film and photography caused a shift in its viewers' perception. For Benjamin, the lack of art's "unique existence" and "historical testimony" in the process of mechanical reproduction causes a lack of authenticity and authority in art.<sup>2</sup> He states, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space."<sup>3</sup> Benjamin believes that

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions," 222-223.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions," 222.

the decay of the aura is also associated with the formation of a mass audience that desires “to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” and in turn is willing to jeopardize the quality of an original for the quantity of reproductions.<sup>4</sup> He says, “...the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator.” Benjamin continues, “A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it.... In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the works of art.”<sup>5</sup> By applying Benjamin’s theory of the decay of art’s aura to specific works by Levine, Ai, and Struth, I will argue that their reproductions of an original or use of a reproducible image reveal the aura of the original rather than diminish it.

**Sherrie Levine’s Photography: *After Walker Evans: 1-22***

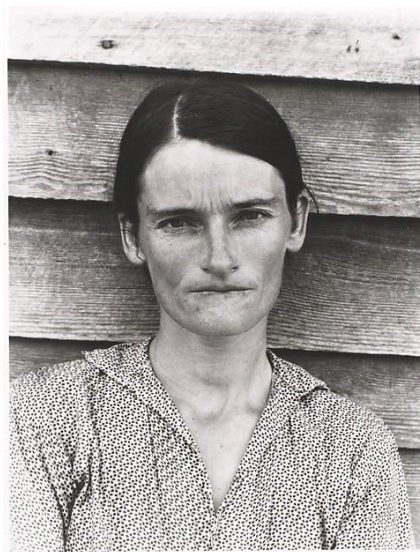


Fig. 1 Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4*. 1981. Gelatin silver print, 12.8 x 9.8 cm.

Sherrie Levine is an American conceptual artist who works with various mediums such as photography, painting, and sculpture. In the 1970s, Levine made a great turn in creating art through her various reproductions of original artworks. In making these reproductions, she took the works of famous artists and made them her own. In her work, she is known for confronting

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions,” 225.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions,” 241.

the topics of “originality, repetition, time and materiality.”<sup>6</sup> During her career, she has copied the work of many famous artists such as Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, and Henri Matisse. Her work has aroused many thinkers, critics, and controversy amongst the public and other photographers for its qualities surrounding appropriation and the ownership of art. However, many have also applauded her bold step into a new exploration of and contribution to postmodern art.<sup>7</sup>

A significant series that she made during this radical exploration of the appropriation of art is her *After Walker Evans: 1-22*, a series of photographs of a series of photographs by Walker Evans. One of the most famous photographs of both Levine’s and Evans’s series is shown above, a portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs. In this series, Levine took twenty-two photographs from Evans’s series in which he documented the rural south during The Great Depression.<sup>8</sup> Evans’s photographs had been released in the 1930s for the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.)<sup>9</sup> Although it is not completely clear from where Levine chose the twenty-two photographs by Evans, Howard Singerman believes that her source was most likely *Walker Evans: First and Last*, a book published in 1978 on behalf of the Evans estate.<sup>10</sup> In this series, Levine questions authorship, authenticity, forgery, and copying by taking photographs of Evans’s photographs with no additional manipulation and exhibiting them.

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<sup>6</sup> Sherrie Levine, Martine Hentschel and Howard Singerman, *Sherrie Levine: Pairs and Posses* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Adam D. Weinberg, forward to *Sherrie Levine: Mayhem*, by Johanna Burton and Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art History, After Sherrie Levine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Burton, “Sherrie Levine, Beside Herself” in *Sherrie Levine: Mayhem* by Johanna Burton and Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Singerman, *Art History*, 66.

Levine's series of photographs confronts what it means to reproduce artwork especially through technology like the camera and what this ability to reproduce images does to art's aura. Singerman states, "Levine's rephotographs insisted on the "return of that repressed;" she turned her focus, her lens, so to speak, on those places where the photograph—that singular print—was betrayed by its reproduction."<sup>11</sup> For Benjamin, the invention of photography created a shift in the reproduction of art. It was the first time that the hand was eliminated in the process of reproduction, only the eye and its contact to the lens created the image. The absence of the hand led to the acceleration of "pictorial reproduction," which in turn made these reproductions accessible to audiences at a faster rate and to further distances.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin says that although photography created a decay of the aura, it also provided some resistance to this phenomenon through its production of portraits. He states, "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face."<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Susan Sontag says that photography has become a part of someone's or something's mortality, it brings light to its "vulnerability" and "mutability."<sup>14</sup> The camera takes a moment in time and freezes it. Because of its ability to freeze time and space with just one click of a button, a photograph becomes a form of proof. Once the subject of the photograph has decayed or is gone from the world, the photograph still shows that the subject once existed. Therefore, after just a moment, photography shows its ability to maintain ones' life while representing the future of their death. Sontag says, "Photographs state the innocence, the

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<sup>11</sup> Singerman, *Art History*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 221.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 228.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 15.

vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.”<sup>15</sup> For many, photography becomes a kind of elegy even before death: a *momento mori*.<sup>16</sup>

For over a century after the first photograph was created, photographers, critics, and curators fought for the recognition of photography as an art form.<sup>17</sup> Photography is often viewed as a form of documentation. Benjamin says that when art becomes a form of evidence it offers no space for “free-floating contemplation” and instead simply challenges the viewer.<sup>18</sup> In his essay, Roger Scruton argues that unlike traditional forms of art, photography no longer represents the world but now it has become closer to duplicating it.<sup>19</sup> Evans’s photography, as seen through his work with the F.S.A. was meant for documentation purposes: to record the lives of rural workers who were victims of the Great Depression. Keeping this in mind, Levine’s re-photography of these photographs not only questions authenticity and authorship, but asserts photography as an art form by revealing the aura of the original series.

While some may say that photography led to the decay of the aura and associate it with death, in her work, Levine offers a more optimistic perspective. Through her reproductions she is not signaling towards a decay or death, but to a new life that the original can take on. Singerman states, “...what Levine’s frames marked out, what they staged even as they canceled it, was not the absence of Walker Evans, but the presence of his image.”<sup>20</sup> Many declare that through these

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<sup>15</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Cheeks, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetic of Ekphrasis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 144.

<sup>17</sup> Weinberg, forward, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, “Mechanical Reproductions,” 228.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” in *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, (London; New York: Methuen, 1983), 102-26.

<sup>20</sup> Singerman, *Art History*, 73.

reproductions, Levine questions the aura through the copying of an original work. However, through the desire for the unique experience and the creation of a double, she inspires the return of the aura to the original work. In doing so, she also sparks a new curiosity and fascination in her own work. Levine says, “I appropriate these images to express my own simultaneous longing for the passion of engagement and the sublimity of aloofness.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while Benjamin associated the decay of the aura with photography and mass reproduction, these two phenomena have actually led to the return of the aura that he once spoke of.

In her reproductions, Levine is not simply encouraging in her audiences a desire for her own work, but revealing their desire for the original work. In her essay devoted to Levine’s work, Susan Kandel describes her as taking on the role of the “stalker.” According to Kandel, the use of the word “After” in her title implies that she is not only creating a work temporally after Evans, but that she is coming after him in the same kind of pursuit that a stalker comes after his or her victim. Like a stalker, Kandel believes that Levine has the desire to be destructive to her victim. Just like a reproduction destroys art’s aura for Benjamin, Levine’s reproduction seeks to destroy Evans’s work. Summarizing Kandel’s thoughts, Joanna Burton states that Levine “...elevates her object yet threatens to destroy it...”<sup>22</sup> Although Kandel’s argument offers an interesting interpretation of Levine’s work, it is an interpretation that also contradicts her work.

Levine may desire Evan’s work; however, it is not the kind of desire that leads to destruction or death. In fact, it does the opposite by bringing it a new life that is created through the return of the aura. Levine states, “Desire is always mediated through someone else’s desire.”<sup>23</sup> In this statement, it seems that Levine is pointing towards a mimetic tendency in which

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<sup>21</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Burton, “Beside Herself”, 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> Burton, “Beside Herself”, 25.

humans want what the other has or also wants. Therefore, her desire for Evans's work can easily be seen as a push to her audience to also desire his work. In doing so, she brings their attention not only to her work, but also to Evans's work. Regarding this kind of desire, Benjamin explains that an increasing urge of the masses is to be closer to reproduced objects. He explains that the contemporary masses have a desire "...to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly."<sup>24</sup> However, instead of bringing artworks closer to her viewers through reproduction at the expense of the original, Levine causes a desire for the original.

Andrea Miller Keller explains that a lot of what we know about art today comes from the study and observation of reproductions of original works of art whether it be students seeking their masters or amateurs with a spontaneous interest in art. This wide consumption of reproductions is so common across the globe that until recently it has rarely been questioned or contemplated. She says that while the original painting might be the source, the reproduction itself is often "the famous reality."<sup>25</sup> Because of this, the reproductions that we see through books, postcards, and the Internet can easily become our only experience with art. These reproductions are what Levine grew up with. Therefore, her access to reproduced images of artworks only led her to desire the original. Growing up in the Midwest, she did not have direct access to the original works that fascinated her, which is heavily reflected in her own original works.<sup>26</sup> Through her conceptual art she is not simply destroying the original work of Evans, but instead she is trying to encourage the same kind of desire that grew inside her: the desire for the original. By creating her own work of art, which is also a reproduction of Evans's original work,

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 225.

<sup>25</sup> Andrea Miller-Keller, "Sherrie Levine/MATRIX 94" (Hartford, CN: Wadsworth Atheneum), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Miller-Keller, "MATRIX 94," 5.



she instills in her audience the same desire that was once instilled in her. Therefore, in her work she is not only reproducing an image but also a feeling. With that feeling comes a passion, interest, and fascination of the unique experience of the original.

Many also associate Levine's work with appropriation, the act of making an object one's own. When describing her work, David Deichter states, "... the twenty-two photographs she copied, framed, and put on view as her own."<sup>27</sup> In this statement, Deichter is implying that Levine only copies already-made works and claims them to be her own. However, if she were to do so, would she put Evans's name in the title and therefore point to his authorship of the original work? Yes, she exhibits the reproductions as her work, but Evans is celebrated just as much if not more. In her work she explores appropriation and, in doing so, she becomes a creator. In his essay, Craig Owens argues that Levine is not engaging with appropriation as many say, but instead, expropriation. As Adam D. Weinberg puts it: "Levine is an artist whose work is about respect as much as it is about critique, about variety rather than uniformity, and about fine craftsmanship as much as commercial reproduction."<sup>28</sup> In reproducing Evans's work, she is not taking something and keeping it to herself, but sharing and reintroducing it into the art world.

By not only creating a reproduction but also recognizing the original, Levine creates a relationship between her series and Evans's series. When discussing her work, Levine often mentions the topic of the pair, a common theme of her work. In *After Walker Evans: 1-22* she creates a pair to Evans's original work by reproducing it. Although these two series are not exhibited together, they are often, if not always, considered in relation to one another. During a

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Singerman, *Art History*, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Weinberg, forward, 9.

seminar that she spoke in at the Getty Research Institute, she posed to her audience, “Is a pair a repetition?”<sup>29</sup> The observer wants to see the one, and only one, in order to have his or her own unique experience in which an aura may arise. However, I would like to pose that the aura that arises with the singular, only increases when another is added to it. By creating a reproduction, which according to Benjamin, causes a decay of the aura, may, on the contrary, cause a reverse effect. The presence of an artwork that is lacking an aura may cause the original’s aura to appear to a greater extent in relation to its reproduction. Singerman discusses Levine’s work in relation to psychoanalysis and ideas surrounding the interest in the number two and the idea of the pair. He quotes Jacques Lacan who says, “The question of the two is for us the question of the subject and here we reach a fact of psychoanalytical experience in as much as the two does not complete the one to make two, but must repeat the one to permit the one to exist.”<sup>30</sup> This explanation of numbers can be easily confusing, but it seems that he is saying that the singular is not made whole by another, instead it is divided into two when another exists in relation to it.

In *After Walker Evans: 1-22*, Levine divides Evans’s original work in two with the creation of her own. Now Evans’s original is not only a single work, but is also part of a pair. By making this pair, Levine forces her audience to not only contemplate upon her own work, but to return to Evans’s as well. This causes the viewer to shift in time and space between Levine’s reproduction and Evans’s original. The recognition of the time and space in which an artwork is subject to is vital in Benjamin’s theory of the aura. Benjamin argues that reproduction through photography causes a decay to the aura because it lacks the “...presence in time and space, its unique existence...” He continues by saying, “This unique existence of the work of art

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<sup>29</sup> Singerman, prelude, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Singerman, prelude, 23.

determined the history to which it was subject through the time of its existence.”<sup>31</sup> In the transition of time and space that the audience experiences, the unique history of each series can reveal the aura of both artworks. Singerman expands on Levine’s creation of the pair by introducing a third person in the scenario. He says, “...posed together, they insist on both their correlation and on something coming between them.”<sup>32</sup> The viewer is what comes in between them by recognizing the series as a pair. Singerman says:

They are identical, that is, except for the difference that at once gives each one a partner and limits the series to exactly two, according to a code they share with chess or “race” or night and day, that takes their difference as absolute opposition. They are not merely different, but differ in quite specific ways—ways that is to imagine that their difference is an opposition, and this, that it signifies.<sup>33</sup>

Levine’s series cannot be seen as a singular work because of the process she used to create it: the use of the camera to reproduce an original. She recognizes this through the use of the word “after” in her title. If her work is after, there must be something before it. Levine’s use of the word “after” can signal towards a recognition of the distance of time between the two series. As Miller-Keller explains, this can “...allude to the widely accepted practice in the history of art of making copies “after” established masterpieces.”<sup>34</sup> By stating her work is after an already-made work, Levine creates a temporal distance between the works and reaffirms the temporal distance between the observer and Evans’s original. For Benjamin this is a crucial element of the aura. To further her work of reproduction through the camera, Singerman uses Deleuze’s ideas to say, “...repetition is not an effect of a past from which the subject can never escape, but a communication of the subject in the present.”<sup>35</sup> This asserts conversation that

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, “Mechanical Reproductions,” 222.

<sup>32</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Miller-Keller, “MATRIX 94,” 4.

<sup>35</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 33-35.

moves back and forth between past and present, between Levine and Evans, and between the works and the observer: an effect of reproductions. This movement and recognition of time are where the fascination, the passion, and the aura all arise.

With the controversy and attention that arose from Levine's work, a story arose as well. It is a story that spans from the rural workers of the Great Depression, such as the now iconic Allie Mae Burroughs, the subject of Evans's famous portrait shown above, to the work and life of Evans, to the reproductions of Levine that are now both applauded and criticized. As psychoanalyst Robert Stoller states, "A fetish is a story masquerading as an object."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, through her use of the camera, Levine is continuing a story in which fetishes emerge. With Levine's ability to appropriate Evans's work through photography, she shows the "endlessness" that comes with the invention of photography.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin explains that a photographic negative can be reproduced with no limit.<sup>38</sup> With that endlessness also comes an endlessness to the story that triggers a fetish. By creating a reproduction and therefore furthering the story of the original, Levine illustrates that a fetish of an original can only grow with the reproductions of that original. This endless story is not only associated with fetish but aura as well. A story reflects the past and is therefore representative of 'historical testimony,' an essential aspect of Benjamin's notion of the aura. With the growth of reproductions through photography, there may be a decay to certain reproductions' aura, but that decay can cause a return and even growth of the original's aura. As Levine once stated, "A painting's meaning lies not its origin, but in its destination."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Marjorie Garber, "Fetish Envy," *October*, no. 54 (Fall 1990), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 224.

<sup>39</sup> Sherrie Levine, "Five Comments," in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), 93.

As seen above, Levine has created a new interest in not only her own series but a returning interest to that of Evans's. The many essays, books, and blogs that I have come across in my exploration into *After Walker Evans: 1-22* have not simply been analysis and discussions on Levine's work, but Evans's as well. In this return, an interest, fascination, and fetish arise in the original causing an emphasis on its uniqueness. In his essay about Levine, Singerman ends by referring to Deleuze and his thoughts on the act of encountering something. Deleuze says, "To encounter is to find, to capture, to steal [...] the opposite of plagiarizing, copying, imitating, or doing like."<sup>40</sup> In her work, Levine creates a dialogue between her and her encounter, which Singerman describes as a "romance" between the two.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, through her encounter with Evans's work, the desire that grew with it, and her action of instilling the same desire into her audience, Levine also productively creates a desire to experience the aura of the original work of art.

### **Ai Weiwei's Spolia: *The Coca-Cola Urn***



Fig. 2. Ai Weiwei, *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*. 1994.

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<sup>40</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Levine, *Sherrie Levine*, 47.

Ai Weiwei, born in 1957 in Beijing, is one of China's first post-Mao artists. His work point towards the political and economic state of China. Through his art "...his stated ambition is to change China..."<sup>42</sup> Ai left China in 1981 for the United States, where he primarily lived in New York City to learn more about western art. At the time it was hard to access books about western art in China and the most common images in China was a portrait of Mao.<sup>43</sup> During his time in the United States, Ai studied the works of Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp. He often declares Duchamp to be 'his master.'<sup>44</sup> Ai was inspired by Duchamp's 'ready-mades' and evolved that idea in into his 'ancient ready-mades.'<sup>45</sup> When discussing his inspiration from Duchamp in an interview with Barnaby Martin, Martin noticed him writing out Chinese characters: '*Lian jin shu.*' When asked about these characters, Ai simply responded, "Man from old days who turns shit into gold."<sup>46</sup> This concept of the 'ancient ready-made' can be seen in his famous series called the *Coca-Cola Urns* which he started in 1994. In this series, Ai painted the Coca-Cola logo onto various urns that he bought from a local Chinese market. These urns supposedly date back to various ancient Chinese dynasties: the most famous of his urns being from the Han Dynasty.<sup>47</sup> The series embodies "one of the larger themes of modern Chinese art; namely, the conflict between the progression of the modern and the preservation of the traditional."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Barnaby Martin, *Hanging Man: The Arrest of Ai Wei Wei* (London: Faber, 2013), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, *Hanging Man*, 29-31.

<sup>44</sup> Martin, *Hanging Man*, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Siemons and Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2009), 7.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, *Hanging Man*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2015), 155.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Z., Sage, and Genevieve, "Ink Art's Merging of the Old and the New," *The Met*, last modified January 21, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/for-teens/teen-blog/2014/old-and-the-new>.

In making his *Coca-Cola Urns* Ai utilized spolia to create a new piece of art with the use of the old. Spolia are associated mainly with the Late Antique period. They can be seen as a very old form of recycling in which old stones or sculptures from the ruins of buildings and monuments are reused and incorporated into new ones. Many structures were destroyed with the main purpose of using the remains for spolia.<sup>49</sup> Although they were common in Late Antiquity, art historians say that they can be seen in every period. Spolia are often the result of war, in which the victors used the ruins of the conquered to rebuild their new power both for pragmatic purposes as well as symbolic. They are also often seen as a “transfer of ownership.”<sup>50</sup> Because spolia are objects from the past that are turned into objects for the present, they create a connection with history, a way to look back in time and reflect upon the past. Ai uses this ancient practice of repurposing by making the urn a canvas for today’s most reproduced image: Coca-Cola.

With this combination, he considers the juxtaposition between antiquity and modernity, which complicates Benjamin’s notion of the decayed aura and mass reproducibility. By becoming spolia, Ai’s urns reveal the aura of the original, ancient urns, causing his audience to turn to the past through the consideration of his contemporary work. At a glance it may seem that by applying the Coca-Cola logo onto the urn, Ai caused the death of the original. However, in doing so he brought a new life to the original. Ai states, “People can still recognize them [as artefacts], and for that reason they also value them, because they move from the traditional antique museum into a contemporary art environment, and they appear in auction or as some

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<sup>49</sup> Philip Barker, *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation* (New York: Universe Books, 1977), 11.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney eds., *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine* (Farnham, Surrey, UK, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) 4.

kind of collector's item."<sup>51</sup> By painting the Coca-Cola logo onto ancient urns, for many, Ai caused a loss of the piece's original authenticity and value. The urn, in its original state, was an artifact that archaeologists and historians would have placed value onto through various studies and experiments. Ai made this process very hard by painting over the clay and ancient paint. By doing this, he made the original clay and paint less visible and less available for study. Therefore, the urn no longer has its historical value. However, with spolia, he revitalized the work's original authenticity by covering it with an image that reflects the present.

Through my research in contemporary new media, a common word that is associated with Ai's work is "vandalism."<sup>52</sup> Much of the general public simply views his work as an act of destruction and seems to be closed off from other perspectives and interpretations of it. However, if these urns held historical value, why were they so easily available to a buyer who did not have the intention of directly studying and celebrating their historical value? In fact, it is not even proven that these urns are authentic objects from the Han Dynasty and may even be fakes. Ai, however, assumes that they are real.<sup>53</sup> Archaeologist's and historian's lack of interest in the urns before their transformation into a new work leads me say that the urn's interest and use surrounding them increased as a result of Ai's alteration of them. Although their historical value has been reduced with their inability to be studied, this reduction can cause one to focus on their history through their new connection with the past and the present. Therefore, the simple

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<sup>51</sup> Siemons and Ai, *So Sorry*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Jones, "Who's the Vandal: Ai Weiwei or the Man Who Smashed His Han Urn?" *The Guardian*, February 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/feb/18/ai-weiwei-han-urn-smash-miami-art>.

<sup>53</sup> Ai Weiwei. *Ai Weiwei*, 155.



accusation of Ai as a vandalizer of historical objects is very inappropriate especially when considering his agenda in the matter.

Because of this loss in historical value, it is commonly thought that Ai's urns symbolize a form of destruction. In creating a new work of art through spolia, Ai is destroying the past. In an interview, Tim Marlow asked Ai about his act of recreating the urns while at the same time destroying them. Ai responded by stating, "You call it being destroyed [...] I think I change the form; it's just a different way to interpret the form [...] I wouldn't call it being destroyed, it just has another life, you know, it's a different way of looking at it."<sup>54</sup> By painting over what archaeologists and historians may consider to be historical value, Ai has enforced a new artistic value onto the urn. He does this by covering it with his artistic expression, controversy, and a statement about how he views the world. In doing so, he reveals an aura of the urn's original form through the audience's growing interest in its past.

Paul de Man discusses the paradox of modern poetry in its ability to emit allegory through contradictory language. He states, "One of the ways in which lyrical poetry encounters this enigma is in the ambivalence of a language that is representational and nonrepresentational at the same time."<sup>55</sup> Therefore, a poet can communicate not only through representation, but also through non representation, what he calls the 'enigma of language.' Although Ai does not utilize poetry in his work, he seems to communicate in the same way as de Man's modern poet. By covering up the ancient elements of the urn through the representation of a modern logo, he causes his audience to first see the Coca-Cola symbol. However, after time in which interpretation is allowed, the audiences' curiosity is drawn to what is not being represented.

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<sup>54</sup> Ai, Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> Paul de Man, "Lyric and Modernity," In *Blindness and Insight*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 185.

Therefore, through Ai's nonrepresentation of the past through the representation of the present, the space of nonrepresentation (the past) in relation to representation (the present) causes the non-represented to be represented in the viewer's minds. This is how Ai utilizes allegory through the form of spolia. In this indirect representation of the urn's unique past, he is causing the return of the urn's aura through the representation of mass reproducibility that is so prominent in the present.

Ai's *Coca Cola Urn* represents the combination of a unique work of art and a mass reproduced image. Each of Ai's urns is unique through form and composition. Like snowflakes, there are no two alike. Benjamin discusses the aura in relation to historical objects and their unique existence in time and space. The decay of the aura is a result of increasing masses and a destruction of tradition, therefore, in order for the aura to be revealed one must return to the historical original. Benjamin says, "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition."<sup>56</sup> In many of his blogs, Ai reflects and laments the loss of memory and tradition in contemporary China.<sup>57</sup> Because of this lack of memory, there is also a lack of an "accurate understanding of the world and history."<sup>58</sup> Without the recognition of the past, the aura cannot exist.

Unlike the urns, each Coca-Cola is exactly the same. It is made up of the same ingredients, in the same can, with the same logo. It is mass produced and reproduced, spreading faster and further with each year, a result of globalization. According to an in-depth analysis of

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<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 225.

<sup>57</sup> Karen Smith, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Bernard Fibicher, *Ai Weiwei*. London; New York: Phaidon, 2009), 39.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, Obrist, and Fibicher, *Ai Weiwei*, 137.

the company, “By 2011, Coca-Cola was the world’s most recognizable brand.”<sup>59</sup> Regarding reproducibility, Benjamin states, “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, Coca-Cola is evidence of Benjamin’s discussion on the elimination of the unique in the age of mechanical reproducibility. By representing the present through mass reproducibility, Ai is signaling his viewer towards reality. Martin states, “Normal things were transformed by his touch so that they appeared in a new and uncanny light. It seemed that over the course of three decades he had succeeded in erecting a half-recognizable netherworld that had the effect of forcing people to look again at reality.”<sup>61</sup> By combining a unique object and a reproduced image in one work, Ai embodies the reality of today through the reflection of the past.

The importance of turning back to history through art can be seen in modern poetry. De Man says that the more poetry tries to depict the world, the more it moves away from it.<sup>62</sup> This idea can relate to the phenomenon of the mirror. When one looks at their reflection in a mirror, the only reason that they think it is he or she in the reflection that they are experiencing is the result of language; however, the image that is seen through the mirror is false.<sup>63</sup> Because the reflection is a reproduction of the the original through a one-dimensional image, it is not authentic or unique. The time that separates one from their memory can create a reproduction of that memory; however, it is a reproduction that is different than the experience that is being

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<sup>59</sup> MarketLine, *Coca-Cola Case Study: The World’s Most Recognizable Brand* (London: MarketLine, 2011), 6.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 223.

<sup>61</sup> Martin, *Hanging Man*, 5.

<sup>62</sup> De Man, “Lyric and Modernity,” 167.

<sup>63</sup> De Man, “Lyric and Modernity,” 170.

remembered. The interpretation of that memory has been altered and impacted by time.

According to de Man, this is why modern poets turn to their memory instead of utilizing the mimetic style. Through the use of memory, allegory can arise. This temporal separation between the poet and his memory creates a space in which one can analyze what is being represented and not represented to uncover an allegorical meaning.

De Man goes on to state, “This reconciliation of modernity with history in a common genetic process is highly satisfying, because it allows one to be both origin and offspring at the same time. The son understands the father and takes his work a step further, becoming in turn the father, the source of future offspring.”<sup>64</sup> This shows the tendency of reproducibility to always go back to its past, its origin. It is seen in a poet’s return to the past to represent his or her present state, an offspring’s relationship to his or her parent, the study of history to better understand the present, and the use of spolia to confront contemporary issues. Ai returns to his past through his artwork. He uses spolia to return to the history of his ancient ancestors to better understand and question the present. Through reproducing the past through the representation of mass reproducibility of the present he illuminates the difference between the unique and copies.

Pointing towards his work more broadly, one can consider the title of one of his exhibitions called “Fragments.” In an interview Ai stated, “‘Fragments’ is a metaphor, not a value judgement of these objects; it’s like deciphering the DNA of an animal from a single hair. The title ‘Fragments’ alludes to a previous condition, or the original situation.”<sup>65</sup> Through the use of spolia to reproduce art through reuse, Ai notions towards a need to return to a primitive

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<sup>64</sup> De Man, “Lyric and Modernity,” 183.

<sup>65</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants 2006-2009*, ed. and trans. by Lee Ambrozio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 41.

state. Through his work, he shows the importance of returning to one's past through the original object. In one of his well-known blogs, Ai writes:

If everyone blindly followed trends, the world would become incredibly boring; lifestyle is everyone progressing towards their own place, doing the things they are most willing to do. Returning to one's self is the most important, and most difficult thing to do; after so much struggle, suffering, debauchery, and aesthetic decay, reality is already riddled with gaping wounds. Even though returning to the primal self is difficult, it is important indeed.<sup>66</sup>

Through his use of spolia to transform an ancient urn into a contemporary work of art, Ai causes his audience to look back at the past through the consideration of the present. Although his work can easily be seen as destruction, through this kind of destruction he increases the work's original aura. The audience did not pay attention to these specific urns or their history before Ai's alteration of them. Through their responses of fury or fascination, they are given a space to reconsider the urns' past specifically and also humanities' past more broadly. Through the application of the Coca-Cola logo onto the urn, Ai blends the past and the present into one object while also creating the clear distinction between the two. During the Han Dynasty, each urn was created by hand and molded into a unique shape one by one. Coca-Cola cans are mass produced at faster speeds, which allows them to reach as many people as possible in mass quantities. According to Benjamin, this kind of reproducibility and lack of ritual results in a lack of aura. Ai forces his audience to consider this form of reproduction by encouraging his viewers to look back into the past in which the aura once existed. As Benjamin states, "A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [...]. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art."<sup>67</sup> By highlighting Benjamin's fear of the lost aura through reproducibility, Ai causes a reverse effect. In illustrating the mass reproducibility, Ai causes a return of the aura. By

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<sup>66</sup> Ai, *So Sorry*, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 241.

encouraging his audience to look back into the past, Ai highlights the original piece's uniqueness with the application of the Coca-Cola logo. The realization of the urn's ancient history, causes a return of its original aura.

### Thomas Struth's Ekphrasis: *Museum Photographs*



Fig. 3. Thomas Struth, *Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice*.

Thomas Struth, born in 1954, is a German photographer who is best known for his cityscapes, portraits, and museum photographs. Since the 70s, Struth has been interested in capturing the spaces in which “art is celebrated socially.”<sup>68</sup> He does this by capturing monuments, temples, churches, and museums. Struth not only walks through the galleries and contemplates the artworks by looking at them, but in doing so, he also creates artwork. *Museum Photographs* is a series that he took between 1989 and 2005 in museums around the world, such as the Louvre in Paris, the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna, the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the National Gallery in London.<sup>69</sup> Some of these photographs include both museum visitors and artworks and some just the visitors. In some photographs, the

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Struth and Diego de Estrella, *Thomas Struth: Making Time* (London: Turner; Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2007), 9.

<sup>69</sup> Miranda Baxter, “Seeing for the First and Last Time in Thomas Struth’s *Museum Photographs*” *Photographies* 7, no. 2 (2014): 203.

visitors are looking at Struth's lens, and in some the museum space is empty of any visitors.

According to Diego de Estrella, "...Struth has focused his creative work on portraying the everyday life of artworks in the museum space, and their relation to spectators."<sup>70</sup> De Estrella's comment gets at the central purpose of Struth's work.

In his photographs Struth creates a dialogue between the museum as an institution, the artworks that hang around its walls, and the observers that stroll through its halls. This image-facilitated dialogue causes the viewers of his works to become aware of *how* they see. They are not simply looking at his artwork, but also at a reproduction of original works and at others looking at these original works. By capturing these different ways of seeing, Struth inspires his viewers to desire a direct experience with the original work. In order to have this direct experience, one must inhabit the same time and space as the work. By triggering this desire to see an original work of art through the reproduction of others' experiences in the museum, Struth emphasizes the importance of being physically present with works of art. He does this through ekphrasis, an ancient form of reproduction through the artistic description of an original piece of art. In *Museum Photographs*, Thomas Struth leads the audience to desire a direct experience with the original work of art that he captures in his reproduction causing the return of the aura.

In reproducing works of art as well as the art-going experience, Struth uses photography—the "instrument of revelation" and "an authenticating tool"—as an ekphrastic medium.<sup>71</sup> Ekphrasis is the description of an original work of art through the creation of a second work in a similar or different medium. In Greek, ekphrasis, which means description, was done

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<sup>70</sup> Struth and de Estrella, *Making Time*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> Baxter, "Seeing for the First and Last Time," 208.

to expand the meaning of the original work of art.<sup>72</sup> In the classical tradition, ekphrasis was often done through poetry or other forms of rhetoric in order to reproduce an original work's quality and character and transform its sensation from the visual to the rhetorical.<sup>73</sup> The earliest example of ekphrasis comes from Homer's *Iliad*. It takes place through a long description of a shield that Hephaestus gives to Achilles. James A. W. Heffernan claims that because Homer's work dates back to approximately the 8th century B.C.E., about the same time that writing begins to appear in Greece, "...it is hardly an exaggeration to say that ekphrasis is as old as writing itself in the western world."<sup>74</sup> It was born thousands of years ago with the rise of literature in the western world. Although most commonly a rhetorical exercise, ekphrasis can also be created in other media, for example, creating a painting in response to a musical composition.<sup>75</sup>

Through ekphrasis, the reproducer creates a dialogue between the new work and the original. This dialogue causes a reexamination of the original work through the new work. Hugh Kenner, regarding the impossibility of ekphrasis states, "one art does not attempt what another can do better."<sup>76</sup> Although this is true in an obvious sense, that a painting can touch someone visually more effectively than poetry can, and poetry can touch someone orally more effectively than a painting, ekphrasis is still valuable in that it leads its receiver to see a work from multiple perspectives. Just as the original work can inspire interpretation and appreciation in the

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<sup>72</sup>"Glossary Terms: Ekphrasis," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/ekphrasis>.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Cheeks, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetic of Ekphrasis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 4-7.

<sup>74</sup> James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashby* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>75</sup> Siglind Bruhn and American Council of Learned Societies, *Sonic Transformations of Literary Texts: From Program Music to Musical Ekphrasis*, vol. 6 (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 428.



consumer, reproduction of an original work through ekphrasis can offer the same. In fact, reproduction often inspires appreciation to a greater extent. The reproduction encourages the consumer to interpret and appreciate the reproduced work, and also go back and appreciate the original, as well as the two together. Stephen Cheeke states, “In the strongest examples of ekphrasis there is always therefore a sense of extension or enlargement, but one which brings with it a pressure to discriminate and differentiate between the two media, the two kinds of experience.”<sup>77</sup> For the purposes of my paper, I will be using ekphrasis with reference to Struth’s photographs of iconic paintings in a dialogue that I call ekphrastic photography.

Struth engages in ekphrasis to create a dialogue between the original work of art and the reproduction of the museum visitors’ experience with it. When asked about the essence of photography, Struth replies, “It is a communicative and analytical medium.”<sup>78</sup> His use of communication and analysis can be seen in his *Museum Photographs*. He asks his viewer to look at how they look at art and think about how they think about art. By posing the question of how the viewer looks at original work through a reproduction, Struth shifts the viewer’s attention from the reproduction and back to the original. Hans Belting states, “We have become accustomed to reproductions and replicas, images of images. In juxtaposing the fixed time of the paintings with that of the viewers, Struth’s museum photographs have the unexpected effect of returning to the paintings a sense of ‘aura.’”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, by mediating a dialogic experience through photography, Struth initiates the return of the aura in the original work.

Through ekphrasis, the creator of the reproduced artwork leads his viewers in two

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<sup>77</sup> Stephen Cheeks, *Writing for Art*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in “Cultural Images,” by Hripsime Visser, trans. Donald Mader, Still (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Struth, Hans Belting, Walter Grasskamp, and Claudia Seidel, *Museum Photographs* (Schirmer-Mosel, 1993), 3-4.

opposing steps. First, by creating a new work, he distances his audience from the original through a shift in focus. His audience confronts this reproduced work through observation and contemplation. However, in this distance, the audience is then drawn back to the original work to reexamine and compare it to its reproduction. This distancing is an important aspect of the dialogic experience. With regards to photography, Ai Weiwei states, “In the end, photography is unable to either record or express reality, it ejects the authenticity of the reality that it presents, making reality even more remote and distant from us.”<sup>80</sup> In this distancing from reality (i.e. the original) Ai depicts a relationship that instills in the viewer a longing for the original.

Struth not only distances his audience through ekphrastic photography, but also through the content of his work. Struth states, “Because the viewers are reflected in their activity, they have to wonder what they themselves are doing at that moment.”<sup>81</sup> According to Baxter, “The figures in the photograph (and paintings) are so consumed by their own activity that they stop the real visitors in their tracks to command viewing.”<sup>82</sup> In his reproductions, Struth is not creating an exact replica of the original as seen in Sherrie Levine’s work. Instead, his ekphrastic photography consists of capturing the original work in relation to the time and space that it inhabits in relation to its viewers. Through this mean, Struth is able to expand upon the original work by incorporating its viewers in relation to the space that it exists in. The presence of the viewers of the original artwork gives the viewers of Struth’s images a new perspective of the artwork’s unique existence in time and space.

As discussed earlier, for Benjamin, the aura is defined as the phenomenon of the ‘unique distance’ between the viewer and the artwork. To illustrate this, Benjamin describes a natural

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<sup>80</sup> Ai, *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Struth, Belting, Grasskamp, and Seirdel, *Museum Photographs*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Baxter, “Seeing for the First and Last Time,” 208.

landscape. He says, “If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.”<sup>83</sup> This aura arises from the unique experience of the observer of this summer afternoon. The relation to and distance that he or she is from the mountains, the sun, the branch, all create a unique experience in which the aura arises. Likewise, Struth captures the viewers of the original work by emphasizing their ability to view the work from many different angles and distances to create a unique experience of their own. Phyllis Tuchman states, “Struth feels the paintings in his museum photographs regain aspects of their original vitality when seen anew in the context he renders so seamlessly.”<sup>84</sup> Through their positions, he illuminates their temporal and spatial relations to the original artwork in which, like the mountains or the branch, a horizon line or shadow may appear.

Struth’s depiction of the relationship between the viewers in his photographs and the original work gives his audience a new perspective on the original work. The distance between themselves and the original that has been brought to their attention through Struth reproductions creates a desire to view the original work directly. As Svetlana Alpers states, “looking at an artwork in a museum and watching others looking at an artwork in a museum means participating in and contributing to the story of an artwork’s life.”<sup>85</sup> His viewers are drawn to desire a similar experience as the museum visitors captured in Struth’s work. In order to make this possible, one cannot simply see the artwork through a reproduction, but must be physically present with the original work so that they may achieve this given distance.

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<sup>83</sup> Benjamin, “Mechanical Reproductions,” 225.

<sup>84</sup> Phyllis Tuchman, “On Thomas Struth's ‘Museum Photographs,’” *artnet*, n.d. [www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/tuchman/tuchman7-8-03.asp](http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/tuchman/tuchman7-8-03.asp).

<sup>85</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 67.

In his process of first distancing his viewers from the original artwork and then bringing them back to it, Struth emphasizes the importance of the authentic and unique experience of the artwork that Benjamin feels is so important. In describing Struth's work Regis Durand states: "...by virtue of its articulation in long series that overlap in time, his oeuvre does perhaps capture something of what, according Benjamin, constitutes the power and originality of storytelling: the fact that it conveys the weight of an experience of history and time, sharing it with the reader so that in turn it becomes an experience for him too."<sup>86</sup> The only way to experience the original work is to be positioned physically in its presence and not simply in the presence of its reproductions. Tuchman states, "[Struth] makes you believe you are there -- or that you have been there or somewhere else like it."<sup>87</sup> However, I disagree. He makes the viewer realize that in that moment of experiencing his work, he or she is not experiencing the original work. Baxter states, "The experience that Struth attempts to represent photographically, of engaging in a museum and viewing paintings, is an expression of the artist's transformative experience which demands that the viewer reconsider their own."<sup>88</sup> Simply seeing the work through a reproduction in which others are viewing it does not bring a sense of nostalgia, but desire to have that experience as well.

The desire to be physically present with an artwork and create a unique distance where the aura may arise is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it was the main cause for the opening of the Louvre museum. The transformation of the palace of the Louvre into a public museum was largely the result of a growing middle class whose cultural curiosity was growing as well. In

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<sup>86</sup> Regis Durand, "A Common Measure," in *Still*, Thomas Struth (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001) 214.

<sup>87</sup> Phyllis Tuchman, "On Thomas Struth's 'Museum Photographs,'" *artnet*.

<sup>88</sup> Baxter, "Seeing for the First and Last Time," 213.

order to fulfill this curiosity, they felt the need to physically see art in a space that would be welcoming to everyone. This curiosity could not be fulfilled by simply knowing that art existed in spaces that were hidden to them. It could only be fulfilled by viewing the art with their own eyes, contemplating it in their own minds, and experiencing it with their own bodies. As a response to this desire, the French crown sponsored its first public exhibitions of contemporary art at the Salons of the Palais du Louvre in 1737.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, as seen in the Louvre's dedication to bringing art to the people, we can see the vital importance of the viewer's body in this experience. By truly experiencing art instead of simply hearing about it through the myths and stories that arose in its absence, people were able to have a unique experience of the original artworks.

In Jonathan Crary's book "about vision and its historical construction," he discusses the effect of the camera obscura on our vision.<sup>90</sup> He states, "The camera obscura *a priori* prevents the observer from seeing his or her position as part of representation. The body then is a problem the camera could never solve..."<sup>91</sup> The advent of camera obscura created a way of experiencing the world through vision in which the body was not involved, causing a disjoint between the mind and the world. In his work, Struth relates this similar phenomenon to the reproduced images of the camera. This can relate to the viewers of Struth's works versus the viewers he captures in his work. Viewing the original artwork through Struth's reproduction of it only offers one possible perspective of the original: the perspective of the camera's lens. The image

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<sup>89</sup> Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 214.

<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>91</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 41.

produced is what the camera sees, therefore it reflects only one moment in time and position in space leading to a finite representation the original.<sup>92</sup> With the single shot of the camera, the image is stuck in that given time and space leading to a static state of the original history.<sup>93</sup> Although he causes his audience to view the original artwork through the single and finite perspective of his camera's lens, Struth also may inspire his audience to, like the subjects of his work, see the the original work through Benjamin's "unique phenomenon of a distance."<sup>94</sup> Instead of disjointing the experience by viewing the original work through his reproduction, the audience may be inspired to view the work in its original form, hanging on the walls of the museum.

In order for the senses to be joined, the body and eyes cannot be in a state of disjoint. By describing one work through another medium and reproducing it into a new work, the audience is led to experience the works through their different senses. Although painting and photography are both visual arts, their reproduction through the camera eliminates the use of the body in its viewing, instead it only utilizes the eyes. This differentiation can easily lead the viewer to the original so that they may experience an artwork with not only the eyes, but in relation to the the body as well. By experiencing the ekphrastic works through these two senses, the viewer can then make a comparison between the two. In this comparison, the viewer returns to the original work in order to understand the dialogue between the two works.

The importance of the body in viewing art is also underlined in Goethe's *Theory of Colors* in which he describes an experiment where an observer focuses on a small, colored object which is then removed from the vision of the observers unmoved eyes. After the removal,

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<sup>92</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 222.

<sup>93</sup> Alpers, *The Vexations of Art*, 67.

<sup>94</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 224.

another color will appear in the viewer's vision where the previous one once was. From this experiment, according to Crary, Goethe concludes, "The human body, in all its contingency and specificity, generates 'the spectrum of another colour,' and thus becomes the active producer of optical experience."<sup>95</sup> This "physiological phenomena" that interested Goethe so greatly can be seen in his depiction of the famous fictional character, Faust. In *Faust*, Goethe emphasizes the need for the physical experience. Instead of only learning through reproduced experiences from various texts, Faust can gain a new kind of knowledge based on his own direct experiences in the world. Similarly to the goal of Struth's work, Faust is encouraged to have "...those beautiful, fleeting moments that defy description."<sup>96</sup>

Goethe's *Faust*, easily considered one of the the most famous pieces of German literature, is a story about a man's relationship with the devil. The devil, Mephistopheles, makes a pact with God. He declares that he is capable of guiding Faust, a man seeking to learn everything there is to know about the world, into an evil life and distracting him from righteous living. Faust becomes frustrated due to a lack of knowledge after long hours in his study. Faust has only sought knowledge in his study and therefore has only experienced the world through words written in books. He has only attained knowledge through the representations and reproductions of the experiences of others, but has no experiences of his own to reflect upon. In his frustration, Faust asks Mephistopheles to expose him to the physical world in which space and time are always changing. By making an agreement with Mephistopheles, Faust is introduced to physical experiences through which he can gain a new kind of knowledge about the world. He says,

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<sup>95</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 69.

<sup>96</sup> Struth and de Estrella, *Making Time*, 73.

“Show me the fruit that rots before it’s plucked and the trees that change their foliage.”<sup>97</sup> Faust’s desire to experience the changing effect of time and space leads him to a “beautiful moment” that passes his presence.

Through his ekphrastic photography, Struth expands upon the original work in a dialogue between the viewers of his reproduction and the original. Struth highlights the role of “looking” in both his art and the original piece. He shows his viewers the different experiences that the original and the reproduction have to offer. The finite perspective offered by the camera lens leads the viewer to become curious of the other perspectives that can be experienced with the original work. In this dialogue, he can easily arouse in his viewers a desire to return to the original in search of that unique experience depicted in his work. In this unique experience, the importance of the physical body is exemplified by the specific distances between the viewers in his photographs and the original artwork. These distances create a space for art’s aura to arise. As de Estrella says, “...the complex operation offered by his photos is somehow only completed when one confronts the painting...”<sup>98</sup> In his work, Struth takes his viewers on a journey that reveals the desire for the original artwork as a result of reproducibility through ekphrastic photography.

### **Epilogue: Reproducibility in the Museum**

By using ekphrasis, spolia, and photography, Sherrie Levine, Ai Weiwei, and Thomas Struth show the power that the reproduction of art or a reproducible image has on the aura of the original. Benjamin believed that the development of mechanical reproducibility in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century would diminish art’s aura. The aura in the reproduced images may have diminished as

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<sup>97</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 51-52.

<sup>98</sup> Struth and de Estrella, *Making Time*, 79.



Benjamin says; however, that is not the focus of my paper. What the reproduction does to the original is a reverse effect of Benjamin's theory. I originally entered my research with the strong mindset that the ability to reproduce images, especially through digital technology, diminished a certain passion and meaning in the experience with art, particularly in the art museum. My personal observations of museum visitors led me to believe that the experience of art and the museum had been lost when considering Benjamin's aura. I noticed that many visitors were more concerned with capturing images of art through their digital devices, such as their camera or iPhone, than directly looking at and contemplating the original works that were directly available to them. However, the exploration into the work of Levine, Ai, and Struth led me to see the effect of reproducibility from a new perspective: its power to reveal the aura.

While reproductions of art and images of the museum experience may lack a sense of aura, this lack can also result in a desire to physically experience the museum. Digital technology is a tool that is characterized by its electronic or computerized components. Its relevant uses for my argument is its capability to reproduce a life image into digitized images, which can then be shared across the Internet or printed and distributed. Before digital technology one could easily find images of artworks in books and other printed media; however, the process of possessing these reproductions took more time and mobility. One had to go to a store or library, look for the specific book, and flip through its pages to find a specific work. In using digital technology, one can simply press a button or type a word and endless amounts of reproductions pop up immediately. As seen through the works of Levine, Ai, and Struth, the reproduced guides the viewer back to the original. Therefore, because artworks and images of museums are so readily available, a desire to physically experience the museum has resulted in the recent increase of museum visitors.

As seen through the example of the Louvre, a major goal of the art museum was to make art accessible to the masses. Reproduction through a screen offers a much different experience than that in the museum. Viewers that look at a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* through an iPhone or computer see it through the same lens, the lens that captured the original. The availability of reproduced images causes a lack in the unique experience for the viewer. Additionally, the existence of the reproduced work of art is always associated with the original; without the original, there is nothing to be reproduced. Therefore, knowing that the reproduced image exists, causes one to question or imagine the original. In realizing this, viewers can be drawn to desire a unique experience with the original work in which they see art through their own eyes and distance themselves with their own bodies.

The increase in museum visitors as a result of reproduced art is not new and can be seen in the Louvre's 19<sup>th</sup> century copyists. After its transformation, the Louvre was not only a space to see art but to create art as well. Artists would go to the Louvre to learn and train in the Grand Gallery where they would copy paintings and sculptures. They were not only there for their education, but also with the goal to make the masterpieces hanging on the walls of the galleries known to the public.<sup>99</sup> In regards to the attraction of paintings, Benjamin says, "The simultaneous contemplation of paintings by a large public that emerged in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis of painting."<sup>100</sup> This 'crisis of painting' during the 19<sup>th</sup> century aligns with the period of the copyists in the museum. Through their reproductions, they attracted more audiences to experience original works. Therefore, the increase in museum visitors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can easily be seen as a result of the copyists' aim to make the original

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<sup>99</sup> McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*, 225.

<sup>100</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 236.

masterpieces known through their reproductions.

This early form of reproduction was only a precursor to what digital technology has evoked among the masses: a growing desire to experience the Louvre (and all other art museums) *in situ*, at its origin. Although Benjamin associates the emergence of the masses with the decay of art's aura, he does not consider the attraction to painting to be detrimental to the aura.<sup>101</sup> When viewing a painting, as seen in Struth's *Museum Photographs* the viewer still looks at the work from a unique distance in which the aura may arise. Benjamin states, "Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in the galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception."<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Klaus Müller states, "In a world where experiences are increasingly produced, translated, or shaped by media, the museum often seems to be the only place to find the 'authentic.'"<sup>103</sup> Therefore, with the development of mass reproducibility, the museum still offers a space for the unique and authentic work of art to reveal its aura.

Like the 19<sup>th</sup> century copyists, digital technology acts in the same way today, yet to a greater extent. The accessibility of art through digital technology can be seen through Müller's analysis of artwork and viewers on the Web. He explains that in 1995, the French museum database called *Jaconde* began to transform original works of art into digitized reproductions and share them on the Web. He says, "In 2001, more than 132,000 images from seventy-five-museums could be searched. And the number of users is growing, from 52,000 hits in 1999 to 335,000 in 2001."<sup>104</sup> This growth of reproduced images can be connected to the recent growth in

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<sup>101</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 237.

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproductions," 237.

<sup>103</sup> Klaus Müller, "Museums and Virtuality," in *Museums in a Digital Age* ed. Ross Parry (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 297.

<sup>104</sup> Müller, "Museums and Virtuality," 299.

museum visitors. According to the *Art Newspaper*'s visitor figures of 2014, "...the Louvre remains the most visited museum since we added total attendance figures seven years ago. It drew 9,260,000 visitors in 2014, around half a million fewer than in 2012, but the museum believes that attendance could grow to 12 million by 2025."<sup>105</sup>

Today, the reproducer of art in the museum is not a trained artist, but the museum visitors themselves. *Art Newspaper* also explains:

When discussing a recent increase in attendance figures, Social media, and the popularity of photo-sharing networks such as Instagram means that more people are tapping into the medium. "Everyone can easily make photographs now with their smartphones; it is all about the image," [...] This interest may account for the recent rise in attendance figures.<sup>106</sup>

Capturing the experience of art and the museum and uploading it onto the Internet creates an endless cycle of reproduced art attracting more visitors to the museum who in turn capture their own image and share them as well. The endless cycle can be reflected in the Louvre. In 2009, France's first Apple Store opened in the The Carrousel du Louvre right by the entrance of the museum.<sup>107</sup> Standing at the entrance of the museum, the Apple Store encourages visitors to buy its newest upgraded technological devices in order to capture the best image of the artworks and their experiences.

This tendency to reproduce the museum experience through the use of digital technology can even be seen here in Boulder, right on our campus. Ironically, on the CU Art Museum's website under the visit tab, the image displayed is several students inside the museum viewing

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<sup>105</sup> "Visitor Figures 2014: Exhibition & Museum Attendance Survey," *Art Newspaper*, no. 267 (2015): 3.

<sup>106</sup> Gareth Harris, "Mass exposure: why museums are focusing on photography," *Art Newspaper*, no. 256 (2014): 5.

<sup>107</sup> Brian Garner, "Apple opens doors to France's first Apple Store," *appleinsider.com*, November 8, 2009, [http://appleinsider.com/articles/09/11/08/apple\\_opens\\_doors\\_to\\_frances\\_first\\_apple\\_store](http://appleinsider.com/articles/09/11/08/apple_opens_doors_to_frances_first_apple_store).

art through their iPads. They are in the act of reproducing images of the original works of art and the museum experience.<sup>108</sup> This image supports my initial mindset of the contemporary museum experience. However, in the museum, a visitor is able to have a direct relationship with art and the people around them. In this direct relationship, Benjamin's unique distance is made, thus inviting a return of the aura. Because of this space where the aura arises in a world where mass reproducibility is so prominent, museums seem to be a place that can still bring people together and create dialogue in a world that otherwise has become divided among the Web. Hilde S. Hein says, "...people do feel in museums a sensation of awe like that of being in the presence of something sacred."<sup>109</sup> This sacredness that art museums can instill in us seems to be more significant today with the increase of flashing, movement, and accessibility of reproduced images that surround our culture.

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<sup>108</sup> "Installation view of the exhibition *Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art*, in the CU Art Museum, on view February 14 – April 4, 2015," *CU Art Museum*, University of Colorado Boulder. Digital Image. Available from: <http://www.colorado.edu/cuartmuseum/visit>.

<sup>109</sup> Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2000), 21.

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### List of Figures

- Fig. 1 Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4*. 1981. Gelatin silver print, 12.8 x 9.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org> (accessed March 1, 2016).
- Fig. 2 Ai Weiwei, *Han Dynasty Urn with Coco-Cola Logo* 1994. Paint/ Han Dyansty urn. 10 in. x 11 in. x 11 in. Mary Boone Gallery, New York. From: Mary Boone Gallery, <http://www.maryboonegallery.com> (accessed March 1, 2016).
- Fig. 3. Thomas Struth, *Galleria dell'Accademia Venice* 1992 184.5 x 228.3 cm. artnet, New York. Available from: artnet, <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/tuchman/tuchman7-8-1.asp> (accessed March 1, 2016).