

THE TOPOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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Today, the term “contemporary art” does not simply designate art that is produced in our time. Rather, today’s contemporary art demonstrates the way in which the contemporary as such shows itself—the act of presenting the present. In this respect contemporary art is different from Modern art, which was directed toward the future and it is different also from Postmodern art, which was a historical reflection on the Modern project. Contemporary “contemporary art” privileges the present with respect to the future and to the past. So, to rightly characterize the nature of contemporary art, it seems to be necessary to situate it in its relationship to the Modern project and to its Postmodern re-evaluation.

The central notion of Modern art was that of creativity. The genuinely creative artist was supposed to effectuate a radical break with the past, to erase, to destroy the past, to achieve a zero point of artistic tradition—and by doing so to give a new start to a new future. The traditional, mimetic artwork was subjected to the iconoclastic, destructive work of analysis and reduction. It is also no accident that the vocabulary constantly used by the historical avant-garde is the language of iconoclasm. Abolishing traditions, breaking with conventions, destroying old art, and eradicating out-dated values were the slogans of the day. The practice of the historical avant-garde was based on the equation —“negation is creation”—already formulated by Bakunin, Stirner, and Nietzsche. Iconoclastic images of destruction and reduction were destined to serve as the icons of the future. The artist was supposed to embody “active nihilism”—the nothingness that originates everything. But how can an individual artist

prove that he or she is really, genuinely creative? Obviously, an artist can show it only by demonstrating how far he or she has gone along the way of reduction and destruction of the traditional image, how radical, how iconoclastic his or her work is. But to recognize a certain image as truly iconoclastic we have to be able to compare it with the traditional images, with the icons of the past. Otherwise the work of symbolic destruction would remain unaccounted for.

The recognition of the iconoclastic, of the creative, of the new requires, therefore, a permanent comparison with the traditional, with the old. The iconoclastic and the new can only be recognized by the art historically informed, museum-trained gaze. This is why, paradoxically, the more you want to free yourself from the art tradition, the more you become subjected to the logic of the art historical narrative and to museum collecting. A creative act, if it is understood as an iconoclastic gesture, presupposes a permanent reproduction of the context in which the act is effectuated. This kind of reproduction infects the creative act from the beginning. We can even say that, under the condition of the modern museum, the newness of newly produced art is not established *post factum*—as a result of a comparison with old art. Rather, the comparison takes place before the emergence of a new, radical, iconoclastic artwork—and virtually produces this new artwork. The Modern artwork is re-presented and re-recognized before it is produced. It follows that modernist production by negation is governed by just this reproduction of the means of comparison—of a certain historical narrative, of a certain artistic medium, of a certain visual language, of a certain fixed context of comparison. This paradoxical character of the Modern project was recognized and described by a number of the theoreticians and reflected on by many artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Their recognition of this inner repetitiveness within the Modern project led to a redefinition of it during recent decades, and to the postmodern thematization of the problematics of repetition, iteration, and reproduction.

It is no accident that Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" became so influential during these postmodern decades. That happened because, for Benjamin, mass reproduction—and not the creation of the new—constituted modernity. As is well known, in his essay Benjamin introduced the concept of "aura" to describe the difference between original and copy under the conditions of perfect technical reproducibility. Since then, the concept has had an astonishing philosophical career, largely as a result of the famous formula of the "loss of the aura" characterizing the fate of the original in the modern age. The "loss of the aura" is described by Benjamin precisely as a loss of the fixed, constant, and reconfirmable context of an artwork. According to him, in our age the artwork leaves its original context and

begins to circulate anonymously in networks of mass communication, reproduction, and distribution. That is, the production of the mass culture operates by a reversal of the “high” modernist art strategy: “high” modernist art negates the repetition of traditional images but leaves the traditional art historical context intact, whereas “low” art reproduces these images but negates, destroys their original context. In the modern age you negate either an artwork or its aura, its context—but not both of them simultaneously.

Accent on the loss of the aura is, on one hand, totally legitimate, and certainly in tune with the overall intention of Benjamin’s text. Nevertheless, it may be less the loss of the aura but, rather, its emergence that gives us the opportunity to reach a better understanding of the processes taking place in today’s art, which operates predominantly with new media and techniques of reproduction. Concentrating on the emergence of aura might lead to a better understanding, not only of the destiny of the original, but also of the destiny of the copy in our culture. In fact, the aura, as described by Benjamin, only comes into being thanks to the modern technique of reproduction. That is, it emerges precisely at the very moment it is fading. It is born precisely for the same reason that it disappears. Indeed, in his text Benjamin starts from the possibility of a perfect reproduction that would no longer allow any “material,” visually recognizable difference between original and copy. The question he formulates is this: does the erasure of any visually recognizable difference between original and copy also mean the erasure of the difference between the two as such? Benjamin’s answer to that question is, of course, no. The erasure of all visually recognizable differences between original and copy is always only a potential one because it does not eliminate another difference existing between them which, albeit invisible, is none the less decisive: the original has an aura that the copy lacks. The original has an aura because it has a fixed context, a well-defined place in space; through that particular place it is inscribed also in history as a singular, original object. The copy is, on the contrary, without a place and is thus ahistorical—being right from the beginning a potential multiplicity. Reproduction means dislocation, deterritorialization; it transports artworks to networks of topologically indeterminable circulation. Benjamin’s corresponding formulations are very well known: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” and he continues: “the here and now of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”¹ But if the difference between original and copy is only a topological one—if it is only a difference between a closed, fixed, marked, auratic context and an open, unmarked, profane space of anonymous mass circulation—then not only is the operation of dislocation and deter-

ritorialization of the original possible, but so, also, is the operation of relocation and reterritorialization of the copy. We are not only able to produce a copy out of an original by a technique of reproduction but we also are able to produce an original out of a copy by a technique of topological relocation of this copy—that is, by a technique of installation.

Installation art, nowadays the leading form in the framework of contemporary art, operates as a reversal of reproduction. The installation takes a copy out of an allegedly unmarked, open space of anonymous circulation and puts it—even if only temporarily—in a fixed, stable, closed context of a topologically well-defined “here and now.” This means that all the objects placed in an installation are originals, even when—or precisely when—they circulate outside of the installation as copies. Artworks in an installation are originals for one simple topological reason: it is necessary to go to the installation to see them. The installation is, above all, a socially codified variation of individual flaneurship as described by Benjamin, and therefore, a place for the aura, for “profane illumination.”² Our contemporary relationship with art cannot, therefore, be reduced to a “loss of the aura.” Rather, the modern age organizes a complex interplay of dislocations and relocations, of deterritorializations and reterritorializations, of deauratizations and reauratizations. What differentiates contemporary art from previous times is only the fact that the originality of a work in our time is not established depending on its own form, but through its inclusion in a certain context, in a certain installation, through its topological inscription.

Benjamin overlooked the possibility—and thus the unavoidability—of reauratizations, relocations, and new topological inscriptions of a copy because he shared with high Modern art a belief in the unique, normative context of art. Under this presupposition, for an artwork to lose its unique, original context would mean that it would lose its aura forever, that it would become a copy of itself. The reauratization of an individual artwork would require a sacralization of the whole profane space of the topologically undetermined mass circulation of a copy—which would be a totalitarian, fascist project. That was the main problem of Benjamin’s thinking: he perceived the space of the mass circulation of the copy as a universal, neutral, and homogeneous space. He insisted on the permanent visual recognizability, on the self-identity of the copy as it circulates in our contemporary culture. But now, both of these main presuppositions in Benjamin’s text are questionable. In the framework of contemporary culture an image is permanently circulating from one medium to another medium, and from one closed context to another closed context. A certain length of film footage can be shown in a cinema theater, then converted to a digital form and

appear on somebody's Web site, or be shown during a conference as an illustration, or watched privately on a television screen in a person's living room, or put in a context of a museum installation. In this way, through different contexts and mediums, this footage is transformed by different program languages, different software, different framings on the screen, different placement in an installation space, and so on. Are we dealing all the time with the same film footage? Is it the same copy of the same copy of the same original?

The topology of today's networks of communication, of generation, translation, and distribution of images is extremely heterogeneous. The images are all the time transformed, rewritten, reedited, reprogrammed on their way through these networks. They become visually different at every such step. Their status as copies becomes, therefore, just a cultural convention—as, earlier, was the status of the original. Benjamin suggested, as we saw, that the new technology was able to make a copy more and more identical to the original. But the contrary has become the case. Contemporary technology thinks and works in generations. To transmit information from one generation of hardware and software to a next generation means to transform it in a significant way. The metaphoric use of the notion of “generation,” as it is practiced now in the context of technology, is very revealing. All of us know what it means to transmit a certain cultural heritage from one generation of students to another. The situation of “mechanical reproduction” in the context of, let us say, the contemporary Internet, looks no less difficult—perhaps it will prove to be even more so.

We are as unable to stabilize a copy as a copy as we are unable to stabilize an original as an original. There are no eternal copies, just as there are no eternal originals. Reproduction is as much infected by originality as originality is infected by reproduction. By circulating through different contexts a copy becomes a series of different originals. Every change of context, every change of medium can be interpreted as a negation of the status of a copy as a copy—as an essential rupture, as a new start that opens out a new future. In this sense, a copy is never really a copy, but rather always a new original in a new context. Every copy is by itself a flaneur; it experiences time and again its own “profane illuminations,” turning it into an original. It loses old auras, and gains new ones. It remains, perhaps, the same copy, but it becomes different originals. This shows that the Postmodern project to reflect on the repetitive, iterative, reproductive character of an image is as paradoxical as was the Modern project of recognizing the original and the new. This is also why Postmodern art is able to look very new even if—indeed, actually because—it is directed against the notion of the new. Our decision to recognize a certain image as an original or as a copy is dependent on the context—on the scene where this decision is taken.

And this decision is always a contemporary decision, one that belongs not to the past and not to the future but to the present.

That is why I would argue that the installation is the leading art form of contemporary art. The installation demonstrates a certain selection, a certain chain of choices, and a certain logic of inclusions and exclusions. By doing so, an installation manifests here and now certain decisions about what is old and what is new, what is an original and what is a copy. Every large exhibition or installation is made with the intention of designing a new order of memories, of proposing the new criteria for telling a story, for differentiating between past and future. Modern art was working on the level of individual form. Contemporary art is working on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation. That is why contemporary art is less a production of individual artworks than it is a manifestation of an individual decision to include or to exclude things and images that circulate anonymously in our world, to give them a new context or to deny it to them: a private selection that is at the same time publicly accessible and thereby made manifest, present, explicit. Even if an installation consists of one individual painting, it is still an installation, since the crucial aspect of the painting as an artwork is not the fact that it was produced by an artist but that it was selected by an artist and presented as something selected.

The installation space can, of course, incorporate all kinds of things and images that circulate in our civilization: paintings, drawings, photographs, texts, videos, films, recordings, objects of all kinds, and so on. That is why the installation is frequently denied the status of a specific art form, because the question of its specific medium arises. The traditional art media are all defined by a specific material support for the medium: canvas, stone, or film. The material support of the medium in an installation, however, is the space itself. This artistic space of the installation may be a museum or art gallery, but also a private studio, or a home, or a building site. All of them may be turned into a site of installation by documenting the selection process, whether private or institutional. That does not mean, however, that the installation is somehow “immaterial.” On the contrary, the installation is material par excellence, since it is spatial. Being in space is the most general definition of being material. The installation reveals precisely the materiality of the civilization in which we live, because it *installs* everything that our civilization simply *circulates*. The installation thus demonstrates the material hardware of civilization that would otherwise go unnoticed behind the surface of image circulation in the mass media. At the same time an installation is not a manifestation of already existing relationships among things; on the contrary, an installation offers an opportunity to

use the things and images of our civilization in a very subjective, individual way. In a certain sense the installation is for our time what the novel was for the nineteenth century. The novel was a literary form that included all other literary forms of that time; the installation is an art form that includes all other contemporary art forms.

The inclusion of film footage in an artistic installation shows its transformative power in an especially obvious way. A video or film installation secularizes the conditions of film presentation. The film spectator is no longer immobilized, bound to a seat and left in the darkness, supposed to watch a movie from its beginning to its end. In the video installation where a video is moving in a loop the spectator may move about freely in the room, and may leave or return at any time. This movement of the spectator in the exhibition space cannot be arbitrarily stopped because it has an essential function in the perception of the installation. Clearly a situation arises here in which the contradictory expectations of a visit to a movie theater and a visit to an exhibition space create a conflict for the visitors: should they stand still and allow the pictures to play before them as in a movie theater, or move on? The feeling of insecurity resulting from this conflict puts a spectator in a situation of choice. The spectator is confronted by the necessity to develop an individual strategy of looking at the film, at the individual film narrative. The time of contemplation must be continually renegotiated between artist and spectator. This shows very clearly that a film is radically, essentially changed by being put under the conditions of an installation visit—from being the same copy the film becomes a different original.

If an installation is a space where the differentiation between original and copy, innovation and repetition, past and future takes place, how can we speak of an individual installation itself as being original or new? One installation cannot be a copy of another installation because an installation is by definition present, contemporary. An installation is a presentation of the present, a decision that takes place here and now. At the same time, however, an installation cannot be truly new, simply because it cannot be immediately compared to other, earlier, older installations. To compare one installation to another installation we have to create a new installation that would be a place of such a comparison. Which means that we have no outside position in relationship to installation practice. That is why the installation is so pervasive and unavoidable an art form.

And that is why it is also truly political. The growing importance of the installation as an art form is in a very obvious way connected to the repoliticization of art that we have experienced in the recent years. The installation is not

only political because it provides the possibility of documenting political positions, projects, actions, and events. It is certainly true that such documentation has also become a widespread artistic practice in recent years. Yet more important is that fact that installation is in itself, as I suggested earlier, a space of decision making: first of all, for decisions concerning the differentiation between old and new, traditional and innovative.

In the nineteenth century Søren Kierkegaard discussed the difference between the old and the new using as an example the figure of Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard noted that for a spectator who was a contemporary of Jesus Christ it was impossible to recognize in Christ a new god, precisely because he did not look new. Rather, he initially looked like every other ordinary human being at that historical time. In other words, an objective spectator at that time, confronted with the figure of Christ, could not find any visible, concrete difference between Christ and an ordinary human being, a visible difference that could suggest that Christ is not simply a man, but also a god. So, for Kierkegaard, Christianity is based on the impossibility of recognizing Christ as God, a function of the impossibility of recognizing Christ as visually different: by merely looking on Christ we cannot decide, is he a copy or an original, ordinary human being or God. Paradoxically, for Kierkegaard this implied that Christ was *really* new and not merely recognizably different, and therefore that Christianity is a manifestation of difference beyond difference. We might say that Christ, according to Kierkegaard, was a ready-made among gods, just as Duchamp's urinoire was a ready-made among artworks. In both cases, the context decides the newness. In both cases we cannot rely on an established, institutional context, but have to create something like a theological or artistic installation that would allow us to make a decision and to articulate it.

The differentiation between old and new, repetitive and original, conservative and progressive, traditional and liberal is not, therefore, just one set of differentiations among many others. Rather, it is a central differentiation that informs all other religious and political options in modernity. The vocabulary of the modern politics shows this very clearly. Contemporary artistic installation has as its goal to present the scene, the context, and the strategy of this differentiation as it takes place here and now. That is, indeed, why it can be called genuinely contemporary. But how does the contemporary installation relate to the recent controversy between Modern and Postmodern art practices?

The iconoclastic gesture that produces the modernist artwork functions, of course, not simply as a manifestation of artistic subjectivity understood as pure negativity. This gesture had the positive goal of revealing the materiality of the artwork, its pure presence. It aimed to establish, as Malevich stated it, the

“supremacy of art” by liberating art from its submission to mimetic illusion, communicative intention, and the traditional requirements of instantaneous recognizability. Too often characterized as “formalistic,” modernist art can hardly be defined in formal terms alone. Modernist artworks are too heterogeneous on a formal level to be subsumed under any purely formalistic criteria. Rather, modernist art can be characterized by its specific claim to be true: in the sense that it be present, thoroughly visible, immediately revealed, or, to use a Heideggerian term, “unconcealed.” Beyond this specific claim to truth the modernist artwork loses its edge and becomes merely decorative, whatever its form might be. Precisely this claim to truth was put in question by postmodernist criticism: the apparently immediate presence of a modernist artwork was accused of concealing its actual repetitive, reproductive character. The mere fact that a modernist artwork is still recognizable as an artwork means that it reproduces the general conditions of recognizability of an artwork as artwork, even if it seems to be quite original in form. Moreover, the iconoclastic gesture that produces the modernist artwork can itself be described as functioning in a repetitive, reproductive manner. This means that the truth of the modernist artwork, understood as its immediate material presence, can easily be described as a lie, as a concealment of the potentially infinite number of reproductions, copies that make this “original” artwork identifiable, recognizable in the first place. Postmodernist art gives up the claim to truth that Modernism has raised. But postmodernist art does not formulate its own claim to truth, remaining exclusively critical and deconstructive. Under the conditions of Postmodernity art becomes a lie that manifests itself as a lie, finding its truth in the classical paradox of a liar confessing to be a liar. This paradox arises because a Postmodern artwork presents itself as merely an example of an infinite sequence of reproductions and repetitions. This means that the Postmodern artwork is present and absent, true and false, real and simulated at the same time.

With these distinctions in mind, it becomes relatively easy to characterize the place that the contemporary installation occupies in relationship to the modernist claim to truth and to its Postmodern deconstruction. The installation is, as it was already said, a finite space of presence where different images and objects are arranged and exhibited. These images and objects present themselves in a very immediate way. They are here and now, and they are thoroughly visible, given, unconcealed. But they are unconcealed only as long as they are parts of this individual installation. Taken separately, these images and objects do not raise the claim to be unconcealed and true. Quite the contrary, these images and objects manifest—mostly in a very obvious way—their status as copies, as reproductions, as repetitions. We can say that the installation formu-

lates and makes explicit the conditions of truth for the images and objects that this installation contains. Every image and object in the installation can be seen as being true, unconcealed, present, but only inside the installation space. In their relationship to the outside space the same images and objects can be seen as revealing and at the same time concealing their status of being merely the items of the potentially infinite sequences of repetition and reproduction. The Modern artwork raised the claim to be unconditionally true, to be unconcealed. Postmodern criticism put this unconditional claim into question, but without asking about the conditions of truth understood as presence, as unconcealment. The installation formulates these conditions by creating a finite, closed space that becomes the space of open conflict and unavoidable decision between original and reproduction, between presence and representation, between unconcealed and concealed. But the closure that is effectuated by an installation should not be interpreted as an opposition to the “openness” as such. By closure, the installation creates its outside and opens itself to this outside. Closure is here not an opposition to openness but is its precondition. The infinite is, on the contrary, not open because it has no outside. Being open is not the same thing as being all-inclusive. The artwork that is conceived as a machine of infinite expansion and inclusion is not an open artwork but an artistic counterpart of an imperial hubris. The installation is a place of openness, of disclosure, of unconcealment precisely because it situates inside its finite space images and objects that also circulate in the outside space—in this way it opens itself to its outside. That is why the installation is able to openly manifest the conflict between the presence of images and objects inside a finite horizon of our immediate experience and their invisible, virtual, “absent” circulation in the space outside of this horizon—a conflict that defines contemporary cultural practice.

NOTES

- 1 Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 214–15.
- 2 On flaneurship and the aura, see Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 321–29 and 337–43. On “profane illumination” see the discussion in Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 207–21.