

Why Printmaking Matters

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Printmaking has always had an uncomfortable relationship with Walter Benjamin's notion of the "aura of an artwork". In a 1936 essay, Benjamin discusses the aura of an artwork as that special feeling you have when you stand in front of an original artwork—standing where the artist once stood. He discusses how the aura is threatened by mechanical reproduction (mass printing, photography, film etc.). Printmaking sits outside this type of "mechanical reproduction" because printmaking is invested in the mechanics of (rather than mechanical) reproduction. Therefore Benjamin's critique, linked to the rise of mass culture, doesn't fit well with printmaking. Yet this is because most people ignore the subtlety of Benjamin's argument—far from opposing mechanical reproduction to art, he argues that the aura only comes into existence at the point of its death. It is only retrospectively applied to artworks at the point that we needed to prove that something is lost in a reproduction. The aura attempts to fix the social, political and economic pressures mechanical reproduction applied to art. It is here that printmaking can provide some insights because it is a medium which refuses the nostalgic bandage of the aura. Contemporary art still uses the aura, but new forms of reproduction, in particular digital reproduction, have required supplements to keep the myth of art alive. Once again printmaking provides subtle critiques of these supplements and the exhibition *AURA: Repetition, Reproduction, and the Mark of the Artist*, demonstrates how contemporary printmakers are subverting the assumptions art makes of itself and its audience.

Many of the works in the exhibition could be described as "post-internet art". They have an aesthetic, which is drawn from glitch, greenscreens, backlighting, chrome and 3D modelling. However this is a simplistic observation and it is worth unpacking post-internet art to understand why *AURA* is a critique of the thing it looks like. Post-internet art is not an index of the internet, in fact its success is located in the continuation of the "aura" argument. Post-internet art is the latest bandage on the inflated balloon of contemporary art—or to be precise, the inflated balloon of the contemporary art market. Benjamin's critique was primarily anti-capitalist, and the aura is a capitalist strategy to preserve the value of the art object in the face of its proliferation and democratisation through reproduction. The art market shapes art in a manner that is inaccessible to the vast majority of its makers as well as its audience. And the thing that has had the greatest impact on the art market in the last 30 years is probably something you've never heard of—freeportism. Freeportism is the use of ports outside of state control to store and trade art. Sotheby's was one of the first auction houses to use this system. In the 1990's Sotheby's offered its clients the ability to trade art without the artwork ever being present. Finally art could be traded as immaterial capital. Art stopped moving, finding its final home in high-end storage vaults in freeport tax havens, completely invisible even to its owners. Better yet, because art does not have the same governance as other commodities, it became the blue chip stock of criminals, tax avoiders and launderers.

Post-internet art appears to be an elegant solution to the reality of freeport art. Post-internet art offers total access. It looks better in reproduction, it offers more features in its online forms than in gallery spaces. It seems to achieve the final liberation of art from upper-class gestures of connoisseurship. Art can finally be consumed like pornography. But this liberation

is a false one and it is only allowed to operate because the value of art is no longer located in galleries, or even in private collections. There is no value in art having to perform as a class signifier anymore. The value of art is located in the necessarily invisible, sealed sarcophaguses in freeports. Outside of that, art can be whatever it wants. Post-internet art submits, on one hand, to the mechanisms of the late capitalist art market and the other to the utopian dream of infinite reproducing, free *and* individualised art.

As a contemporary printmaking show *Aura* refuses this trajectory. What the works in this exhibition achieve is a dragging of the history of printmaking through expanded and post-internet art discourses. It is important to be precise about this distinction: this exhibition is about reproduction and aura, but it is not about infinite reproduction nor about the pleasure of the original. The works sit, oscillating between these two, collapsing the binary. The works are digital *and* analogue, rich *and* poor, spectacular *and* mundane, incomplete *and* overworked, disease *and* cure. Fundamentally they are printmaking, which is to say they make a print. If you think about it a *footprint* is always both original and reproducible. This is the unique combination we feel when we look at a print. We might think this feeling is somehow lesser than looking at a painting, but the opposite is true. When we look at a painting we see the artist rather than the artwork—we feel the manufactured aura like an omnipresent Hollywood biopic. However when we look at a print we encounter a co-mixture of ideas, conditions and feelings—from the collective effort of skilled practitioners to the vibrancy of an intimate idea seeking new audiences through its iterations. Printmaking has always offered us this fascinating alternate history that has run alongside the dominant, paranoid history of “art.” There are moments when these histories touch, and when this is deliberately and critically done, as is the case with *AURA: Repetition, Reproduction, and the Mark of the Artist*, it can result in tectonic rumbles under the shock resistant, climate controlled freeport art tombs.

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