

Aura of Multilocal Artworks

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Abstract

In my presentation, I discuss differences which are connected with object, auratic and telecommunications art. The question is, can we speak of the phenomenon of aura in connection with multi-local and telecommunications art? Walter Benjamin's concept of aura can be a productive starting point for discussion of multi-local art, where physicality is not excluded and where we can encounter the phenomenon of aura in connection with physical representations of virtual art. I would like to emphasize that, despite the boom in and increased understanding of virtual art, we cannot leave physical existence behind. We still live in a material world, to which we are connected through sensory experience. Regardless of the virtualization of practical experience (from communication to money transactions), the physical world still nourishes a spiritual, non-material world, which is a source of imagination of possible virtual states of being.

Following Walter Benjamin's aura concept, I turn to his reliance on Lev Manovich's interpretation. Manovich juxtaposes Benjamin's text with Paul Virilio's essay "Big Optics" (1992).

Relying on personal experience with telecommunication artworks on the net and in physical space, I suggest that analogues to the experience of the classical "auratic" object-art aura could be encountering physical representations of parts or objects which belong to the "body" of multi-local artwork. Examples such as Ken Goldberg's "Telegarden", 1995-2004, Rafael Lozano Hemmer's "Vectorial Elevation", 1999, and Paul Sermon's "Telematic Dreaming", 1992, are discussed.

For every person who has ever dealt with the terms “distance” and “aura”, the name Walter Benjamin comes to mind. In 1935–1936 Benjamin (1989) wrote “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”. “Aura” is an attribute of object, original, unique and local artworks. This famous text by Benjamin is the primary source of citation in the writings of different authors.

Dieter Mersch (2000), who has analysed the “performative turn” of art history and culture, has written about the changing of artwork from object (*Werkhaften*) to performance. The loss of “piece” in “piece of work” was most evident in the art of the 1960s and continued later.

Jaques Aumont (1997) has questioned the term set forth by Benjamin, as contemporary artworks have acquired other “auratic” characteristics. Aura is more related to institutions or the signature of the artist. One could agree with Benjamin on the devaluation of artworks with past aura in a time when they were reduced to reckless reproduction and recombination. The masterpieces of art classics are in the image bank of every advertisement artist and end up in TV ads on a regular basis.

I would again like to turn to Benjamin and also Lev Manovich, sharing in the contrasting ideas he presented of the two generations of theoreticians. This is connected with two technological eras and is important when discussing original-copy, liveliness-artificiality, naturalness-technicality and other concepts of meaning. Lev Manovich compares Benjamin’s text with “Big Optics” (1992)¹ – an essay by the contemporary author Paul Virilio. The main theme of both writings is an interruption caused by technological means, which in Benjamin’s case are caused by film and photographs and in Virilio’s case through telecommunications. Benjamin sees nature and painting as natural occasions of sense. These natural occurrences are interrupted by the intrusion of technological means, which lie between the viewer and the viewed object and thus result in the loss of physical space.

¹ Same ideas in Paul Virilio article „Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!” (CTheory 1995. – www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72, April 16, 2009).

A couple of years later, Virilio (1995) replaced the term 'global' with 'glocal' (a combination of 'global' and 'local'). Local can also be global; the terms do not necessarily have to mean different things.

Benjamin (1989: 355) interprets aura as a phenomenon of distance, however close that object may be. "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".

Benjamin wrote that an artist keeps a natural distance from reality when dealing with his or her works. This conception of the uniformity of distance between natural sense and drawing has been invalidated by new technologies of mass production, especially photography and film. The cameraman, whom Benjamin compares with a surgeon, penetrates deeply into its [reality] web." The camera zooms in and obtains the object through its shell.

Writing about telecommunication and telepresence, Virilio uses a similar distance conception to understand their virtue. According to Virilio, these technologies reduce physical distance, eradicating a familiar fashion of sensing based on culture and politics.

Virilio introduces the terms 'small optics' and 'big optics', stressing the dramatic nature of change. 'Small optics' is based on human sight, linear perspective, the geometric sensing of painting and film. It embraces differences between the close and the far; differences between object and horizon, by virtue of the former, are different from the latter. 'Big optics' is the electronic forwarding of information in real time and it takes place at the speed of light.

Small optics is replaced by big optics and the former differences are erased. If different information can be forwarded at the same speed, the concepts of near and far, distance, horizon and space lose meaning. According to Benjamin, the industrial age removed the position of objects or at least shifted it. Virilio's post-industrial age removes distance completely. Any place in the world is available from anywhere. Due to this, big optics closes itself into the claustrophobic world without depth and horizon. The world becomes our prison.

Virilio directs attention to the ever-increasing expansion of the terrestrial horizon. The result of this is threateningly flowing optics in real time and dominance over the linear geometric optics of *quattrocento*, set primarily in real space. He mourns the destruction of distance,

geographic grandeur, the vastness of natural space, the vastness which guaranteed time delay between events and our reactions, giving us time for critical reflection necessary to arrive at a correct decision. The regime of big optics inevitably leads to real time politics, which demands reactions at the speed of light and operates efficiently with the help of computers.

In 1936 Benjamin used scenery and painting examples, which are natural to human senses. This naturalness has been defeated by film and photo, which abolish distance, bringing everything equally close and destroying the aura. Half a century later, Virilio wrote about these things in a totally new light. Film, which for Benjamin was the future, has now become a natural extension of our sight. In Virilio's case, the perspective on renaissance, painting and film are part of small optics.

Manovich asks: what could be radically new in electronic telecommunication, for example as opposed to film? He answers – two-way communication. Besides the fact that the user can quickly obtain images of different places by bringing them to the screen, through “tele”, he also gets to “be” in those places.

The analyses of Benjamin and Virilio brought closer an understanding of the historical virtue of these technologies and terms. These technologies decreased and eventually erased something that could be considered to be a fundamental state – extensive distance, the distance between the observer and the observed.

Their writings also describe the interpretation of sight as the opposite of touch. The lack of distance makes touch actual. Benjamin and Virilio consider this to be negative. They do not associate this with fragility, but with aggressiveness and violence.

The connotative meanings of sight and touch become opposites. According to Benjamin and Virilio, distance guaranteed by sight keeps its aura. Electronically attainable touch allows for the destruction of objects and the affecting of them from a distance. Observing and seeing are more innocent than an electronically mediated aggressive touch (Manovich, 2001:175).

A tactile and haptical sense providing “tangible” space and reality are linked with the desirable, with the principles of the complementary – one cannot be obtained without the other. The subject of closeness/remoteness is inevitably linked to the presence of the body in

the room. This is, in turn, linked with the subjective emotional interpretations of closeness/remoteness, a topic which lies outside the discussion.

This means that the other side of telepresence is teleremoteness. This is remoteness from the places in relation to which the actor is “tele-present”. This is caused by the appearance of the relationship dimension between the “here” and the “there”. When we have more than one place to tie our existence to, we can say that we relate to the places where we are not as “away” or “not present”.

The phenomenon of being away has allowed Peter Weibel (1994) to discuss the “age of absence.” Weibel discusses the immaterial space and “age of absence” of telecommunication. The virtual space of the de-materialised technology age is a space of absence, but it is also a new space of telepresence, which is set on the other side of the visible – it has always been there, though not visible. The technology space and technology age are outside bodily experience. They are space-times that can only be experienced through telematic machines.

In keeping up with the terms described above, one could reach contradictory linkages. In Benjamin’s case, technology operates as a redactor of distance, as its destroyer and as the destroyer of aura. The telecommunicative technology and image of Manovich brings the space and the viewed object closer. It even provides an opportunity to touch, but in a physical sense this reality or object is much “further” than an object with Benjamin’s “aura”.

Relying on personal experience in dealing with telecommunicative artworks on the Internet and in real space, I would argue that the analogue for the aura-experience in dealing with telecommunicative installation art might be seeing their physical representation or different reality-based feedback.

One of the projects that gathered fame in the 1990s is **Ken Goldberg’s** “Telegarden”², 1995-2004, though it now (after nine years) no longer operates. There one could direct the actions of an industrial robot taking care of a garden through static pictures, clicking on the spot it has to plant with flowers. The image was schematic, but in order to receive a convincing distant experience one does not need the space-time resolution to be photographic. Objects on radar screens are also marked only as dots. That information is enough for real time functioning.

² “Telegarden”. – <http://queue.ieor.berkeley.edu/~goldberg/garden/Ars/> (April 16, 2009)

Having used the “Telegarden” online and having seen it later in the Ars Electronica Center in Linz, I was able to experience a certain “auratic” experience of meeting the “original”. For a person interested in art, it is a complex mixture of emotions, which includes enjoyment of a certain intellectual reward, the experience of one’s status of “being chosen” as a witness of a rare work of art and satisfaction from a task completed. I remember a similar feeling from seeing Rembrandt’s “The Return of the Prodigal Son” (1669) in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, which I had only seen a reproduction of.

The original experience associated with “Telegarden” was, in my opinion, the fact that only in the installation room could one visually and aurally enjoy the elegant functioning of the industrial robot in the garden. It is clear that an industrial robot is exotic and unique enough to create amazement merely at its existence, not to mention the amazement of viewing a situation in which it is in the environment of a banal garden.

Paul Sermon’s project “Telematic Dreaming” (1992) was different. It could be described as an interactive installation between physically separated places.³

It united two rooms with beds. On one bed was an image of a partner, who could be thousands of kilometres away. It was a clear and very convincing projection of another human being, who could react to the viewer’s movements in almost real time.

Based on my experience in Montreal in 1995, that work of art gave an impression of an attractive video bed, where visitors to the exhibition wrestled with the moving picture. One could probably sense amazement when he or she later met with the “original”, the person projected on your bed, who stepped out of the other room

As a third example, I would like to mention “Vectorial Elevation”⁴ by **Rafael Lozano Hemmer**, an example of “architectural and environmental telecommunicative art”. It was ordered for the New Year’s Eve festivities of Mexico City in 1999.

³ P. Sermon. – <http://creativetechnology.salford.ac.uk/paulsermon/dream/> (April 16, 2009)

⁴ <http://www.alzado.net> (April 16, 2009)

The artist prefers to describe his projects as “relational architecture”, using this term as opposed to “interactiveness”, or virtual reality and virtual architecture (Lozano Hemmer 2000).

“Vectorial Elevation” used two locations: Zocalo Square in the centre of Mexico City and a website. Eighteen projectors on top of buildings surrounded the square, and the beams of the projectors were visible as far as 15 kilometres away.

Eight hundred thousand visitors to the website from four continents could develop their beaming configurations. They made light sculptures, which were shown from six in the evening until six in the morning, from December 26th to January 7th. Thus the project was composed of robotised projectors, the Internet, an architectural environment and the participation of users around the world. The viewers who were physically present were passive, but people online were active – Lozano-Hemmer suggested that the term “telecreation” be used to describe the process. Lozano-Hemmer (2004) performed similar projects in Lyon and in Dublin.

I myself designed one configuration of beams and pressed “send”. After its performance an e-mail was sent to me with photos. It is also possible to send a design to www.alzado.net, though the response is “Data received from the Alzado server is invalid. It might be best to wait a while and then try again.”

In the case of these three examples of distance art, the inclusion of the real world is a natural part of the work of art. Encountering the actual installation or getting real feedback virtually from an artwork that is seemingly virtual offers the experience of encountering a unique and special kind of art, which is characteristic of encountering object, physical and auratic art.

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