History Lessons: Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art

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Went with Angelica to the Rondanini Palace. You will remember that, in one of my first letters from Rome, I spoke of a Medusa which made a great impression on me. Now the mere knowledge that such a work could be created and still exists in the world makes me feel twice the person I was. I would say something about it if everything one could say about such a work were not a waste of breath. Works of art exist to be seen, not talked about, except, perhaps in their presence. I am thoroughly ashamed of all babbling about art in which I used to join. If I can get hold of a good cast of this Medusa, I shall bring it back with me . . .[1] (Goethe, *Italian Journey*, 1786)

Introduction

Imitation, in Plato's philosophical ordering, established the ontological priority of a form or idea as preceding and granting a shadow life to the image, the relation of the original to a copy. Yet this absolute and normative sense of imitation is more simply understood descriptively, suspending Plato's stigma of truth, as the relation between a thing and its representation, where one thing stands for another thing that it resembles in some manner and to some degree. This relationship might also be expressed semiologically because a representation is also a sign. The picture of a tree and the word tree; a library and an installation named library; and in the work of Andy Goldsworthy discussed below, a riverine meander form as a sketch and its rendering as an icicle. This second descriptive sense of imitation accords with Aristotle's notion of mimesis in the *Poetics*, and the sign in Saussure's semiology. Yet there is a further sense of imitation that bears particularly on art and the visual arts, insomuch as it is a repetition or an iteration. A tree becomes a word for a tree, a picture of a tree, a sculpture of a tree, a film of a tree. All imitation involves repetition, yet not all repetitions are imitations. Imitation, when it comes to the consideration of art, is laden with a full and rich repertoire of operations, leaving to one side Plato's stigmatization of the original and the false coin of the copy. This essay will dispose of all these uses.

Certain distinguishing traits of contemporary art are the concern of this essay, in particular the way that time and work mark it as imitation. Through the emphasis that this art places on its practice as work, time and its transitory aspect come to the fore. Rather than advancing art as an *ergon* (work), as an achievement or oeuvre, its perpetuity as a form, instead contemporary art emphasizes the work art has to do. It has tasks, agendas, and once completed its work is over. By way of example consider the submergence and erosion of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), the steady and timed disappearance into the ground of Jochen Gerz and

Detail from book burning during the rally 'Against the Un-German Spirit' organized by German students along with members of the SA and SS, Opernplatz, Berlin, 10 November 1933 (*plate 8*).

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Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Monument Against Fascism* (1986), the form of the tree arising from and ending in the lumber yard of Giuseppe Penone's *Tree of Twelve Metres* (1980–82). Or take another tree, the travail each fall of Antonio Lopez Garcia to paint a quince tree in his garden, each attempt a failure and incompletion, the product of a season of labour consigned to the cellar. Yet Garcia's sojourn of work, having been filmically documented by Victor Erice, provides a record and iteration of one season of his labour, an imitation that brings the paintings to completion. Or not least the political art of Ai Wei Wei, for example the wall of names of the school children, all earthquake victims, an imitation for a memorial still to be erected, a visual statement of outrage, a reprimand, the work a temporary bivouac in pursuit of justice. Temporality and the transitory mark these artworks as imitations, shifting the sense of work as an intrinsic property of the individual work as an oeuvre to a transitive condition, documenting the journey of the object. Work becomes transitive, a verb, both labour and a task, a dilemma, a difficulty to be presented and worked through. In all of this, art as an imitation has shifted from an enduring finality to a condition where the object is marked by its passage or transit from one state to another.

This essay will pay particular attention to two works of contemporary art as paradigms of this shift of work as the property of an object to a transitive condition or journey of an object as it works through time. The first is an icicle by Andy Goldsworthy, an imitation of nature as a disappearing form, while the other is a memorial by Micha Ullman, a testimony to absence that is also an imitation of history. In short this essay seeks to delineate a dramatic shift in what is meant by the 'work of art', and trace a radical change in the conditions and nature of art as a kind or type of imitation.

The import of these two works is informed by yet a third sense of imitation – perhaps the most decisive for visual art – namely the cultural tradition that defined the work of art as having an allegiance to art forms of the past, to the era that the moderns designated as 'antiquity'. This third sense absorbs the normative and descriptive senses of imitation, and is the driving force in the aesthetic formation of the art of modernity. Goethe's notion of imitation is a good place to start because for him the very notion of a work of art was intimately aligned, and obedient to, a tradition expressed in the aesthetic injunction that the new art must 'imitate the art of the ancients'. This essay will explore the precarious place of the work of art in the way that it uncomfortably settles between ritual mimesis and technological reproduction.

Goethe's Medusa

What enthralled Goethe in the epigraph? What led him to exclaim, 'the mere knowledge that such a work could be created and still exists in the world makes me feel twice the person I was'? Why this particular marble head? Winckelmann didn't even consider it the best.[2] Goethe's declaration is extraordinary because he says that its very existence made him feel he could be so much better as a human being. He would have known the story, engaged with the myth, and appreciated it as myth. No doubt he recalled that Athena, in her jealousy of the beauty of Medusa and the beguiling lustre of her hair, transformed her locks into snakes and made her look so deadly that to encounter her gaze would petrify the viewer. To avoid Medusa's gaze, Athena instructed Perseus to approach Medusa apotropaically (meaning the averting of the gaze, the avoiding of eye contact), by looking at her only as an image reflected on a shield.

In *Work on Myth* (1990), Hans Blumenberg theorizes the apotropaic in the formation of culture with reference to this very same passage:

> For Goethe the head of Medusa is the triumph of classicism. It stands for the overcoming of the terror of the primeval times by means no longer of myth or of religion, but of art. When he possesses this 'ardently hoped for presence' on the Fraunenplan, it has already become a distant memory . . . This is a unique paradigm of the 'work on myth' that may have begun with the 'apotropaic' [hindering, averting] accomplishment of naming . . .[3]

For Blumenberg the apotropaic gesture, the turning away from the dreaded thing or situation, signals an attitude toward representation adopted by humans in order to control their environment, to master the terrors of the real by avoiding the direct encounter, by looking obliquely. The real is to be approached indirectly, evasively. Blumenberg interprets Goethe's exultation as the recognition that we can free ourselves from the overwhelming power of those external forces filtered through religion and myth, that the real is to be encountered through art as the highest form of human experience. This is what Goethe saw as 'the triumph of classicism'. Classicism taught Goethe that human beings can overcome 'the terror of the primeval times' by means, not of myth and religion, but art. This discovery marks the episode when Goethe realized that the advancement of modern art required that the art of the ancients should be emulated, that it provided the model and method for the present. This is what Goethe draws literally, immediately, from his Medusa discovery:

> Works of art exist to be seen, not talked about, except, perhaps, in their presence. I am thoroughly ashamed of all the babbling about art in which I used to join. If I can get hold of a good cast of this Medusa, I shall bring it back with me . . .[4]

To rephrase Goethe's sentence slightly, not all art but 'works of art' exist to be seen, for which the Medusa is a model. He needs a copy of it for study and emulation. The ancients are to be imitated – to depict their ruins by reproducing them, rendering and emulating them literally, practically, figuratively, culturally. Imitation – practical, heuristic and speculative – arises from the recognition that the ancients had already achieved a state of perfection. The survivors thus provided the *paradigma*, models to pursue the lost ancient forms. Access to the original was, as Winckelmann had shown, only available through late Roman copies of classical Greek originals. This made Rome the cultural site and vestige of the survival of antiquity. To copy the copy was the way to return to the antique originals as the work that the moderns had to undertake toward ancient art, work that named the practice of the moderns in their pursuit of the ancients. In the study of ancient works, antiquity became part of the modern work, determining what made them what they are. In this regard 'work of art' designates ancient art as an object of study. The ancients had art, the moderns had work to do to render their art in accordance with the substance and model of an art that still had to be achieved. Thus modern art was to arise from a retrospective imitation of the ancients. To imitate the ancients was an injunction to bring the past into the present, an invitation to enact the past.

This imitation is all-pervasive, and is synonymous with the project of art itself. The paintings of Nicolas Poussin, who travelled to Rome 150 years before Goethe, manifest their form and content as imitations of the ancients and as

1 Nicholas Poussin, *Venus, Mother of Aeneas, Presenting Him with Arms Forged by Vulcan*, c. 1636–37. Oil on canvas, 108 × 134.6 cm. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario.

imitations of nature. In *Venus, Mother of Aeneas, Presenting Him with the Arms Forged by Vulcan*, who else but the gods of antiquity should occupy the humanly empty landscape (*plate 1*)? Aeneas' shield, looked at closely, shows only a few faint ciphers of the text from the *Aeneid* which Poussin has imitated, demonstrating both the potential and limitation of painting and the work still to be achieved against the ancient model. In such a way, the word 'work' was added to art. It is a retrospective operation. This is why it makes little sense to speak of the art of the ancients as 'artwork'. Yet there is no doubt that the ancients had art to the fullest degree. Under what conditions does art take on the property of work? How does it qualify or transform what is meant by imitation? What was it Goethe discovered when he beheld the Medusa?

In the way that Blumenberg theorizes Goethe's apotropaic discovery, he wants to suggest that the new art was to be conceived as a discrete space, precinct or domain, able to take in and absorb religion and myth without being subordinated to their power, in other words to advance a kind of imitation free of what might be called, after Walter Benjamin, ritual mimesis. Art turns away from looking directly at the real in order to face the real through the mirror, the picture as the very space of art. The space of art can contain but yet free itself from this external power. In short, art in Goethe's insight into the Medusa in the mirror constitutes, through the indirection of the representation, autonomy as a zone of operation. The shield as a mirror is a metaphor for the new power of art. In order to enunciate the difference between art as ritual mimesis and art as an imitation free from this external dependency, I will offer one example of art defined in terms of ritual mimesis, while a second, superficially resembling the first, will be shown as an imitation that is radically distinct because its practice of imitation is derived not from ritual but through work itself.

The Shaman's Coat

The American Museum of Natural History has among its holdings a Siberian shaman's coat (*plate* 2). Fashioned of caribou hide, the coat has a map embroidered on the front. The map is cosmological, depicting constellations of stars, a landscape with a river passing through it, animals of the hunt, reindeer. The wearer of the coat, the shaman, is the carrier of the picture of this world. His presence completes the picture. The map is at once fused to the locality and the wearer as the bearer. The map is cosmological because it is rooted to a peripateia of mobile spots that make up the terrain and territory of the shaman's journeys. The shaman carries the cosmos with him. The map orients his sense of place in the universe whether or not it serves as a guide. It is paradigmatic in that the subject secures the picture while the subject is in the world supported by the picture.[5] The wearer of the coat carries the world to re-enact it: imitation as resemblance, repetition, re-enactment.

Even when considered as an artefact in a vitrine, the coat allows one to adduce two basic features of its 'sacred topography'. The map is an imitation of the world with an orientation that mediates between the universe and a subject in the world. Second, the map, because it is worn, is incorporated into the world as the vestment of its wearer, a symbolic skin. The macrocosm of the universe is contained in and projected from the shaman's body. Thus sacred topography has a cosmological aspect carried by a subject whose world is secured by the picture. The picture is a model and a repetition. From these two features, two other elements can be extrapolated. The coat anticipates the action of language that names the features of the cosmos depicted in the map – the names of the stars, the landscape, the animals, human dwellers. Such acts of language are ritual and mimetic. Sacred topography requires appropriate acts of language to renew the world as symbolic enactments. The coat is stripped of its place names. Language, what André Leroi-Gouhran refers to as the 'descriptive binder', is absent.[6] Because the coat belongs to an oral tradition, it might well be lost, or if not lost, at least unavailable or unknown. In its original habitus, it is a strong model, a paradigm for ritual mimesis. As a museal object, it is an artefact so in excess of its lost use that its rarity and artifice compel the designation of a special term – art – a term not commonly in use by the practitioners themselves. The shaman does not

2 Koryak Siberian reindeer-hide Shaman's Coat, before 1910. New York: American Museum of Natural History. Photo: American Museum of Natural History.

need the word 'art'; (in this case the word 'art' functions as a meta-operator).[7] But it is not yet, or at least not prior to its museal deposition, a *work* of art. Only inside the vitrine, in a naked and frozen state, might it also be considered a work of art.

Overall, archaic art is always located, embodied and embedded. Its symbolic enactments have the purpose of establishing locality – *indwelling* in Robert Harrison's felicitous term.[8] Through such ritual acts human beings have a place. Raymond Williams offers a distinction between the 'colonus' and 'cultus' senses of culture: the former suggesting dwelling, and occupation; the latter repetition, symbolic enactment, ritual mimesis, and imitation.[9] Much contemporary art resembles this ritual curating of place that I have enunciated through the shaman's coat, a startling and sustained example being that of Australian Indigenous acrylic painting and its re-enactments of the Dreamtime.[10] Yet a group of recent contemporary environmental artists enunciate an art that is performative of place, yet devoid of ritual gesture as a deliberate imitation of nature. Andy Goldsworthy for one understands his work to be derived from the forms of nature – the meander, for example, that is the theme of the film *Rivers and Tides* (*plate* 3). The work marks the transit of his environmental art.

To create an icicle as a meander requires a labour that works with natural, not human, time. Its completion is determined by the weather, the moods of nature, a sunrise, the tides. Goldsworthy's sense of the human debt is evidenced by the emphasis he gives to the discourse of nature. The material conditions for the creation of the work carry the seeds of its destruction: the icicle will melt; the spiral of the salmon weir will drift out to sea; the chain of leaves will follow the current as a meander only to be scattered; the memory of landscape is left in abeyance. Goldsworthy's dedication to art as work is an imitation of nature, a repetition. The mimesis yields the work through work to make a statement of the finitude of all such works subject to the dominion of nature. It is as if Goldsworthy's images are lost chapters in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, demonstrations through work as art as a lesson showing an appropriate way for human beings to be in nature, demonstrations to tread lightly, to leave few traces behind.[11] Goldsworthy is not a shaman. The contemporary artist, because the work comes to term and disappears, needs to leave

3 Still from Thomas Riedelsheimer, *Rivers and Tides*, 2011, showing work by Andy Goldsworthy (*Nova Scotia Icicle Meander*). Photo: Skyline Productions.

records of the work that has vanished. What marks the Goldsworthy is the emphasis that he gives to labour of bringing to fruition a work of art as an imitation of nature, through work to the work to the end and the demise of the work and its return to nature. *Nova Scotia Icicle Meander* is a work of art that comes to term, leaving photographs as a trace of the work. As an imitation of nature, its repetitions offer lessons.

Ritual Mimesis and the Work of Art in a Celebrated Essay

Aesthetic imitation was understood in one way before Walter Benjamin and in another way after him. Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century cultural theorist, Benjamin critically situated the work of art as an object that falls precariously between its source in ritual mimesis and its demise in the processes of technological reproduction:

> Originally the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals – first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function.[12]

'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' Walter Benjamin's short and rather compressed history of art, begins with ritual mimesis and ends with the technological copy. Between the act and the copy, he offers an account of the work of art as an imitation of nature. If painting is the implicit model, imitation is the conceptual thread of his history as if the classical tradition were presupposed. Yet between the mimesis of the shaman's coat and the technological copy, a gap opens in the onto-semiology of the art object, creating the need for Benjamin to establish a valid distinction between art and the work of art. There is no word available other than *art* to account for the shaman's coat, just as it seems reasonable to wonder whether a digital simulacrum should even count as art. Yet neither might qualify as works of art. If 'art' but not 'works of art', why not? Benjamin's aesthetic answers the question.

Just what object comes to an end under the technological conditions of (its) reproducibility? Is the object art or work of art? Does its withering mark the end of art or the end of a kind of art – the 'work of art'? Is there a discernible and pertinent difference between art and work of art? These questions shade the theorizing of imitation today. The assignment is a contemporary one. First art as a special kind of *mimesis* is to be considered in a global context, itself defined by digital reproduction as a kind of all-pervasive imitation (digital reproduction in its material manifestation is the motor for whatever is understood today by 'global'). It is a term that presupposes digital reproduction as a kind of simultaneity between the lived and the virtual as mass communication. So getting some keywords straight and theorizing imitation in conversation with Walter Benjamin may yield some promising results. The terms of reference for this aesthetic debate about the ontological status of virtual representation belong to Walter Benjamin. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that Benjamin's entry into the Platonic vocabulary of the original and the copy shows little interest in the diminished truth status of the copy, the fraudulence of its coin. His concern is purely aesthetic, advancing the onto-semiological diminishment of the work of art by its removal and uprooting from place. The work of art has to replace the original home, the lost place, by the invention of a place for itself as part of the task of imitation.

The deterioration of the artwork and its loss of place, not the disabling of the copy or its verisimilitude as a copy, is the thrust of Benjamin's investigation and his difficult-to-enunciate allegation of the withering of the aura that seems to have gained, not lost, traction in the era of digital screens. The allegation may be formulated as a proposition: *the work of art has been diminished to the point of disappearance by and under the conditions of (its) technological reproducibility*. If the withering of the aura marked the era of the mechanized reproduction of the artwork, how much stronger this claim is at present in the era of digital reproduction. Mechanical copies presuppose originals. Consider the photographic negative. The pre-digital movie set is a living theatrical space of the here and now; not so the digital screen. The digital image is sufficiently attenuated and recomposed by the apparatus to yield a simulacrum as a dematerialized site that undermines the assumption of the here and now. A virtual site is a location putting question marks against who, what, where, and why. In the era of the digital screen, it is almost as if Benjamin's allegation has yet to arrive.

Once again, what is the meaning of work? If the ambition is to show that the present era of screen technology diminishes the work of art, it plays on the ambiguity in the word 'work' (*ergon*) between labour and propriety.[13] This is significant because most of the art produced by the medium of the digital apparatus as labour, opus and propriety belongs to the apparatus. A traditional photograph is what it shows and shows what it is (Barthes' 'madness' of the photograph).[14] Not so a digital image. Whether as labour or as *ergon*, it seems at first sight plausible that a diminishment of the work of art takes place whenever art interacts with, or depends upon, digital technology.

From labour and *ergon*, there is the sense of what Romanticism meant by the autonomy of art to define art as work – that it was itself a transcendental good.[15] Goethe, toward the end of the eighteenth century, treated the very principle of autonomy of the subject as maximally demonstrated in the work of art. The work of art creates its own space to reveal the real. In this respect the work of art can show a myth, have a religious content without subordinating itself to external power. Directed at and through the work itself, it assures its autonomy by taking the overwhelming and the toxic into itself. That said, surely the principle of autonomy has been waylaid, nullified in its enmeshment in the digital apparatus itself? The erosion of labour, the cheapening of the entity, and finally the loss of autonomy are the symptoms of the withering of the aura – and such diminishment as occurs might apply especially to the kind of art called the work of art, leaving the art status of the digital simulacrum for a separate consideration.[16] In the era of technological reproducibility, either art is ceasing to exist as a pertinent category, or the work of art has migrated elsewhere to find work for itself. This is a matter both of a concept and an object. Has the category exhausted itself? Whither its migration?

The Document as Treasure

Benjamin's inquiries are driven by his wish to grasp the cultural significance of art – why humankind assigns a special value to certain kinds of artefacts, how it becomes an object of hyperbolic or surplus value, a special cultural capital or treasure. This is a matter of symbolic investment. Indeed 'treasure' is the very word he uses to designate art in the oft-cited eighth proposition of the 'On the Concept of History':

> The historical materialist knows what this means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to

> traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called 'cultural treasures', and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.[17]

Such processions paraded the vanquished and their possessions as in the famous entablature from the Arch of Titus in Rome, most likely familiar to Benjamin (*plate 4*). Even though the arch itself is an invention of architecture, art was certainly put in the service of commemorating the processions as friezes and entablatures. The sentence 'these cultural treasures ... owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period' leads to the surmise of art as the unsaid object as if it filled in a blank. Art is the object of the labour both of its producers and the anonymous toil of social labour itself. The spoils that are treasures for Benjamin are works of art, arising from the labour itself. One names an object a 'work of art' because it is a product of work. Benjamin was influenced both by Karl Marx and Georges Bataille in his cultural reassignment of Marx's theory of labour value. In particular Benjamin adapts Bataille's generalized concept of surplus value, moulding it to the aesthetics of cultural transmission. Work is both individual and collective. Wrought by individuals, it defines a collectivity. In this sense, architecture may well be considered a work of art, the product of mass labour.

4 Fragment of *Triumphal Procession of Titus after the Sack of Jerusalem*, 82 CE. Arch of Titus, via Sacra, Rome. Photo: Jason LaFountain.

Thus for Benjamin, the Roman triumphal procession connects the work of art to the 'tradition' of the procession as the source for a metaphoric transfer of spoils to works of art as cultural treasures. His transfer turns art itself into the victor's most precious treasure (Benjamin likely knew of Napoleon emptying Italy of its art and carrying it to the Louvre, a condensing of plunder that anticipates the most wanton predations of the Nazis).

So beneath the Roman triumphal procession, Benjamin offers a rather special object for the modern triumphal procession, the work of art. His reflection is thoroughly contemporary to his times. If works of art are the treasures in his imaginary triumphal procession, then we can ask: why do works of art accumulate such an excess of value? How did they become such highly desired objects of plunder with an excess of value greater than other artefacts? How did they become currency itself? How did dwellings come to be invented to hold them with designations such as *gemäldegalerie*, *pinacoteca*, or picture gallery? Benjamin responds to such a question with another of his surprising turns of thought. Works of art are treasures because they are 'cultural documents'. But what is a cultural document? Under what conditions did the victors become archivists?

'Cultural document' is an interesting conceptual turn because one does not at least initially think of works of art as cultural documents, just as one does not think of more mundane sorts of artefacts such as knives and forks and shards of pottery as cultural documents either. Yet with the rise of archaeology, household artefacts are treated as cultural documents, especially in the absence of what is taken as the most obvious, namely inscribed or written records. In the absence of the records of language, the substitution of material things for tokens of language sheds light on Benjamin's motivation for treating works of art as privileged cultural documents. That works of art assume such a privileged status is advanced in an earlier essay, 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian', perhaps one of his earliest formulations of the proposition that documents of civilization are documents of barbarism.[18]

Art for Benjamin carries the material record of individual and collective human existence. Art is saturated with the evidence of human passage and has a survival value. Transmitted through time, art is a 'time-cairn'. Indeed, transmission belongs more to the thing itself with the agents as stations in a relay and not to the agents as polluting social relations of the power. This might be said for Benjamin to be the work of culture. His notion of culture as historical transmission in some ways resembles Richard Dawkins' account of the meme in evolutionary biology, where Dawkins seeks to provide a biological foundation for culture.[19] Yet what distinguishes the Benjaminian cultural document from the Dawkins meme is in the very materiality of the thing as a signifier. It is not in the human body, it is what human beings fashion as records. Thus Benjamin relies on the ontological necessity for an original artefact – a thing – transmitted through time, not the copy of the thing but the singular original itself. This requirement of ontological singularity underlies Benjamin's claim of the diminishment of the work of art in the era of (its) technological reproduction. For Benjamin the original work of art carries the record fully. It is an archive. So while all fabricated things are such records, art carries these records to the fullest and hence highest degree. From a Benjaminian point of view, there is a continuum of humanly fabricated things from the lowliest artefacts to the maximum, the 'work of art'. There is gradation from a minimum to a maximum. Artefacts are not all the same. Art is a special kind of artefact, the *work* of art is a special kind of art.

The Work of Art as a Displacement of Language

The cultural document as treasure is thus quite far from the spoils of the Roman procession. To consider art as a privileged document leads to a further and even deeper presupposition that underlies Benjamin's theory of the cultural significance of the artwork. For Benjamin artworks, as I have argued elsewhere, are witness objects that derive their capacity to testify from language.[20] Here one might say that art imitates language in serving representationally a proxy role. Language is the original treasure, the oldest depository of the human record. In this regard Benjamin, even without being acquainted with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, is at one with the Swiss linguist in his conviction that language is the fundamental cultural document. While Benjamin's claim might have an onto-theological edge, it is thoroughly consistent with the theory of language articulated by de Saussure, his contemporary. Recall, for example, the first of his inaugural lectures at the University of Geneva in November 1891:

> And I must recall the good Geneva name of Adolphe Pictet of whom we are so proud for being the first to have considered methodically that aspect of language as the witness of the prehistoric era.[21]

In that lecture de Saussure goes on to show that language is the sediment of history, that language is history itself, prompting him, the good citizen of Geneva that he was, to advance the antiquity of language by drawing on the geological vocabulary of rock formation, sedimentation, glaciation and stratification, the geological trope in short, to enunciate the formative distinction between morphology or the forms of language and phonology as its substance.[22] Benjamin is a thorough-going Saussurean because the paradigm for the work of art as a 'survivor' is the treasure of language itself.[23]

The Saussurean speech act has its correlation in the primacy that Benjamin assigns to the oral tradition of storytelling, which is his paradigm for the transmission of language itself. Benjamin thus displaces the cultural document from language to material artefact to invest it in its maximum capacity for storage in the work of art. The displacement ultimately arises from, and returns to, its source in the act of speech. Art receives its assignment from language, drawing from language its capacity to testify. Without language it would merely be a fabricated thing. A synonym for such displacement is imitation.

This leads to one further consideration as to 'Why Walter Benjanim?' in the theorizing of imitation. So much of Benjamin's critical and theoretical writing is topographical and site-centred, from 'The Arcades Project' to 'One Way Street' to the two 'Berlin Childhood' essays. Yet Benjamin's aesthetic theory might be thought of as a meditation on imitation precisely because it begins and ends as locality and place in relation to which mimesis as representation in the widest sense is to be understood. Benjamin posits the authenticity of the work of art as a singular attachment to a locality, a place as a methodological presupposition. Not only is it singular, it is in its aspiration chorographic, a quality returning to the embeddedness of art to mark the spot. Thus the ritual mimetic aspect of art shows that what Benjamin means by authenticity and aura derives its significance as the *topos* where art resides as a cultural operator. Benjamin never leaves the ritual site, at least as his model in his aestheticizing of the lost place. Tacit within the destruction of the aura is alienation as the loss of, and finally the destruction of, place. The virtual is a site devoid of place. It is nowhere.

5 Albrecht Dürer, *Triumphal Arch for Maxmillian I*, 1515. Woodcut, 35.7 × 29.5 cm. London: British Museum. Photo: British Museum.

Most paintings, like writing, are mobile. They are unattached. They can be moved about, carried from location to location, removed from somewhere without damage to the ecology of the locality. Benjamin's analysis of modern technological forms of reproduction is marked by an alienation from the here and now of place, an uprooting, a removal of the bird from the nest, the separation of the kernel from the shell. Benjamin's notion of the aura arises from the extraction of a thing from the niche, its original residence.[24] Stripped of the residence, the thing derives pure capacities to *represent* as if representation replaces inscription. The site for place has radically shifted from the here and now of somewhere to the picture in pursuit of a place as a record of events – a paradigm instance of what Benjamin means by the embeddedness of art. It is the arch itself that makes a monument of the event of the procession. Thus the work of art has its *source* in the embeddedness of art in place, yet the work of art comes into discourse, produces a new cultural category, by designating an unattached object, drained of prior inscriptional operations of adherence to the here and now, to place. Pictures represent by losing the prior function of inscribing themselves in the here and now, as Albrecht Dürer's example

of a picture monument to Emperor Maxmillian I shows (*plate* 5). Dürer's woodcut is not a monument but a picture of monument, at one remove from the here and now, uprooted from place yet it is as if the picture had become the place. This is the difference between the sculptural frieze of the triumphal procession on the arch and the picture of a triumphal procession and the arch. In assuming the role of a place the picture is thus a *dis-place*.

Benjamin's theory of the aura speaks to modern, post-Renaissance paintings. Yet in the texts that I have cited, nowhere are paintings given particular mention. It is rather post-Renaissance painting with its proliferating, supplementary operations of the signature that most closely corresponds to the account that Benjamin gives to the work of art to stake itself as the special terrain, as if it were a cocoon that holds visual meaning, as if it had established the place for itself. From the material frame to the signature, everything about the work is apodictically inscribed as authenticating traces, as if the work had grounded itself as the proof of its autonomy, as self-contained, self-containing and self-sufficient. Framing is an operation of reinscription. Benjamin's genealogy of the work of art is situated in the here and now of a spot on the surface of the earth, a 'dwelling'. The most significant aspect of imitation in modern painting is the seldom noticed operations of framing to create a residence for the art, as if it were the place for itself, both *colonus* and *cultus* to return to Williams' definition of culture. Framing constitutes as an imitation the painting as the spot. Benjamin's concept of the aura, the crux of his aesthetic theory, concerns the fragility and instability of paintings, whose imitative aspect begins with architecture and pictures on the wall of the cave because they become images there and nowhere else, because they are rooted in place. All in all the theory of the aura most aptly applies to painting, severed from the material site, and establishing through operations of framing itself as the site, as its ownership of itself as a place. It makes worlds in Nelson Goodman's sense by making itself the world.[25] The order and hierarchy of imitation as painting is brought into a unity and completed by what Giorgio Agamben calls the signature.[26] The uprooting of the technological copy from place, its placelessness, not its verisimilitude or the fraudulence of its coin as copy, distinguishes the imitation of Benjamin from the original Platonic theory of mimesis.

This is why it is cautionary to conclude this section by juxtaposing the fragile construal of place of the artwork to geographical places, in particular to the public space – the precinct, the park, the square, the civic commons. Such a space was the site of one of the most infamous attacks against art's dedication both to the imitation of the ancients and to the imitation of nature staged in Florence in 1497. Recall Jacob Burckhardt's account of the event:

> On the last day of the Carnival in the year 1497, and on the same day the year after, the great Auto da Fé took place on the Piazza della Signoria. In the centre of it rose a high pyramid of several tiers, like the 'rogus' on which the Roman emperors were commonly burned. On the lowest tier were arranged false beards, masks, and carnival disguises; above came volumes of the Latin and Italian poets, among others Boccaccio, the 'Morgante' of Pulci, and Petrarch, partly in the form of valuable printed parchments and illuminated manuscripts; then women's ornaments and toilet articles, scents, mirrors, veils and false hair; higher up, lutes, harps, chessboards, playing cards; and finally, on the two uppermost tiers, paintings only, especially of female beauties, partly fancy pictures, bearing the classical names of Lucretia, Cleopatra, or Faustina, partly portraits of the beautiful Bencina,

> Lena Morella, Bina, and Maria de' Lenzi . . . When the pile was lighted the Signoria appeared on the balcony, and the air echoed with song, the sound of trumpets, and the pealing of bells. The people then adjourned to the Piazza di S. Marco, where they danced round in three concentric circles...[27]

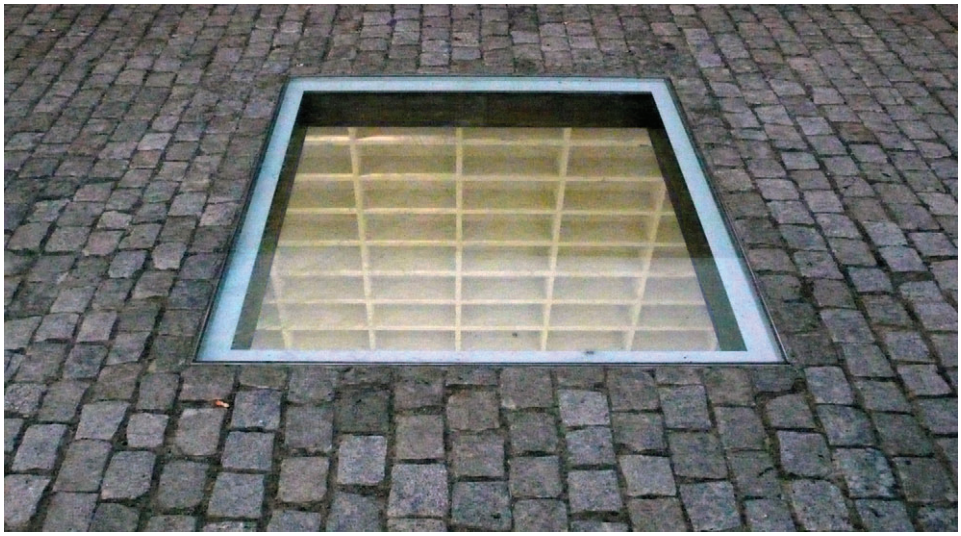
At last I turn to another public place, another *auto da fé*. This time art is not heaped on the flames but has the task of recording the outrage, compelling art to assume a civic responsibility, to find a place for itself outside itself; the German word for both square and place is *platz*.

Berlinplatz Chorography

A photograph exposes a window into a room full of empty, white bookshelves (*plate 6*). The photograph doesn't say where it is, how big it is, what surrounds it. Just a window exposing a white room full of empty shelves. A photograph of it taken at night emphasizes pure black and white values, a flooded lighted white space filled with empty bookshelves framed by darkness. As a night shot, that is about all that can be said about it. As a photograph it isn't difficult simply to register a window into the room as an aesthetic object, an installation, perhaps with a temporary residence in an art gallery with the legend *Bibliothek*, announcing a room empty of books. A window opening onto a room with empty book shelves or an artwork bearing the title *Bibliothek*? It all depends upon the title and its location. Without the title, it is a shot of a window into a room or is there something in addition that still needs to be revealed? It is stark, even eerie in suggestion – bookshelves without books. Treated as a discrete aesthetic object, it is minimalist, modest.

The legend for the object provides more details. It was installed in November 1995 by the artist Micha Ullman, on Berlin's Bebelplatz, the vast square formerly called Opernplatz (Opera Square), the cultural epicentre of Berlin. The platz is empty, an empty public space of monumental significance. The platz occupies a whole city block, stretching from Behrendstrasse on the south side to Unter der Linden on the north. On the side to the north is the State library, the official entrance to Humbolt University, and the War Memorial. On the west side, the Faculty of Law, to the east, a symphony hall and opera house (*plate 7*).

The opera house, in particular, embodied all the aspirations, so fully articulated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, for a true national opera and Adolf Hitler, of course, had a special and parochial relationship with the operas of Richard Wagner. The Soviets,



6 Micha Ullman, *Bibliothek: Memorial to the Book Burning by the National Socialists, 10 May, 1933*, 1995 [day]. Berlin: August-Bebel-Platz. Photo: Blake Fitzpatrick.

7 Friedrich Wilhelm University in the former Prince Heinrich Palace, Opernplatz, Berlin, 1886. Photo: Hermann Ruckwardt/ bpk, Berlin.

8 Book burning during the rally 'Against the Un-German Spirit' organized by German students along with members of the SA and SS, Opernplatz, Berlin, 10 November 1933. Photo: bpk, Berlin.

having endured the brunt of the ideological toxin that fused classicism with opera into a National Socialist *kultur kampf*, dedicated themselves to the destruction of the cultural source of that aggression, not least by replacing 'Opern' with 'Bebel' (August Bebel, the friend of Marx and founder of the German Socialist Party) as the name of the platz.

Bibliothek on Bebelplatz recalls an outrage that took place at the spot of the memorial. The event in question was the Nazi-inspired book burning of 10 May 1933 (*plate 8*). Thus *Bibliothek* remembers a long and accumulated history of great national

9 The heavily damaged façade of the Neue Wache on Unter den Linden, Berlin, 1945/46. Photo: Hugo Herbst/bpk, Berlin/Art Resource, NY.

expectation and a catastrophe. The tiny window inset into the grey cobblestone recalls and makes contemporary an offence to civilization that took place there sixty-two years earlier. The memorial induces a certain anxiety because it is barely visible and unannounced, dwarfed by the uniform neo-classical edifices that surround it. *Bibliothek* is without a prospect, without tell-tales, a needle in a haystack. German has a word for such a memorial – *mahnmal*. A *mahnmal* is a kind of *denkmal*, the generic word for monument, literally something to prompt thinking again, to reflect, hence to remember, while a *Mahnmal* is a kind of 'again' that invites one to take in and recall the grievous, the hard, even the horrible. As a protest against a heinous crime, *Bibliothek* performs a double repetition. With the first repetition, it marks the spot by recalling the event. With the second repetition, *Bibliothek* signals that it was books that were the object of the assault – hence the window looking down into an underground chamber empty of books. With the second repetition the event is reignited with an unstoppable release of signs. Not the books but the absence of the books is signalled. With absence there is no closure. The aesthetic of absence leaves a visible and irreparable scar as its *punctum*. Yet the memorial summons the need to study not only the events and the causes, but to consider the cultural institutions around the platz that contributed to the events. *Bibliothek* posits an archive as a work of vigilance and retrieval. The surrounding neo-classical edifices of the Prussian State Library, the University, the Law Faculty and the Opera House – all nineteenth-century imitations of the ancients – hold the records and are the records. The surrounding institutions are the silent architectural witnesses to the infamy. *Bibliothek*'s force is derived from its subliminal modesty, its recognition of the impossibility of competing with the neo-classical precinct that encloses it. *Bibliothek* cannot compete with the Schinkel-inspired *temenos* to the imitation of the ancients. Where does an artwork end and a memorial begin? How is an artwork changed by its transformation into a memorial? Here the artist is only one worker in this collaboration. This question arises because of the public space where *Bibliothek* is located. The marker is there and art has work to do only there. It has to be there because it happened there. This is unlike the war memorial *Neue Wache* as a commemoration of the previous wars. Just across

from the platz on Unter der Linden to the east of Humbolt University, *Neue Wache* has passed through many transformations to maintain itself as a war memorial. Christian iconography replaced by Nazi iconography replaced by East German iconography; Christian crosses replaced by Prussian crosses replaced by the Hammer and Sickle and finally a Kollwitz sculpture of a grieving mother. Yet through all these transformations *Neue Wache* remains to this day a Greek-inspired neo-classical temple, an unmoveable pediment through which drift shifting allegorical symbolisms. Even as a ruin, it is a beautiful ruin that never ceases to extoll the barbarism that it seeks to forget (*plate 9*). The oppositional terms of reference are stark: *Neue Wache*, indestructible and permanent, the assertion of classical form; *Bibliothek*, devoid of prospect, invisible, a day-to-day work of memory to keep open the public space of the square.

The light glowing from the archive counters the burning of books in 1933, and the ceremonies conducted by beacons or torchlight throughout the Third Reich. *Bibliothek* has taken up the work of history and memory, not by staging an imitation of the ancients but by work that is historical, a practice of memory through repetition.[28] This work has given itself, openly and chorographically, as an act of memory. *Bibliothek* establishes Opernplatz as a *lieu de memoire*,[29] almost eerily fulfilling the most basic criterion that Walter Benjamin considers to mark the work of art as having its source in ritual mimesis, embedded in a place. *Bibliothek* is there, in this and no other place. Being there, it seeks anonymity, to free itself from the operations of the signature that elevate art as if were outside the world, owing nothing to the world, itself a world. It is as an act of imitation that *Bibliothek* has returned to the world, to the commons. *Bibliothek* is minimal in its power to represent, maximal in its power to inscribe itself as a memorial.

In its downward trajectory into the square, *Bibliothek* fulfils an important methodological injunction of Ludwig Wittgenstein:

> When philosophers use a word – 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language game that is its original home? What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[30]

10 Anselm Kiefer, *Die Ordnung der Engel*, 1985–87. Mixed media on canvas, 133.5 × 220.9 inches. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center. Photo: Walker Art Center.

Wittgenstein's injunction to bring metaphysical language back into its 'original home' in ordinary language has its analogue in the contemporary art of *Bibliothek* and the icicle, because it would require art to abandon its pursuit of a self-possessed and autarchic residence in order to address the world. This contemporary art reaches out to acknowledge its dependency on the world, its need to return its work to the world, unlike Anselm Kiefer who turns his art into a vast factory complex to replace the world as if, *ex nihilo*, the artwork were a universe unto itself, merely having to borrow materials from the world, whether earth, straw, lead, mercury, propellers, barbed wire and so on (*plate 10*). Where Kiefer is grandiose in his apologies, Goldsworthy and Ullman are modest, practicioners of an *arte povera*. (Such also is the aesthetic practice of Ai Weiwei. The memorial of names on the exhibition wall, the backpacks of the children, victims of the Sichuan earthquake that form a snake marking 2008, the Year of the Snake and the state cover-up of the catastrophe, are all testaments to an unhealed wound, unresolved history.) In transit and transitory, contemporary art brings imitation back into the world, to re-inscribe itself in the world, to contribute to the commons.

Does an aesthetics that returns to the public space strengthen or weaken the autonomy that Goethe saw in the severed head of Medusa? Does this motion of return that brings art into the commons lessen or transform the principle of autonomy? The contemporary work of art does not arise like a tree or settle like a Heideggerean dwelling in the earth (*plate 11*). Rather its motion is otherwise. It seeks to return art to a work that justifies its need to reside there and nowhere else. In the meantime by surrendering the command of the signature over itself as marking its claim to place, it still has much work to do, leaving for the time being the mark of itself as a scar of a history that requires persistent acts of memory. Some works of art take up the obligation to serve as a testimony to injustice, to remember, to record declarations of solidarity. Benjamin is right. They are cultural documents, imitations that record misdeeds as barriers to their repetition, works as imitations of history. These imitations offer history lessons. Other works, like those of Andy Goldsworthy, seek

11 Micha Ullman, *Bibliothek: Memorial to the Book Burning by the National Socialists, 10 May, 1933*, 1995 [night]. Berlin: August-Bebel-Platz. Photo: Anne Lewison.

to create and bring back into nature the forms that are in and of nature. They are imitations that are defined by the transitory, by the work in transit, operating at the intersection between aesthetics and ethics. For Plato the copy, as fallen form, would be bound to time and decay; the forms themselves were, from their very nature, outside of time. The imitations of contemporary art accept, indeed embrace, their passing state as mere images; they accept, indeed embrace, their mortality.

Notes

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1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, London, 1970, 365.
2 'Although the best modern artists have sought to reproduce, even down to the exact size, the celebrated Medusa (which, nevertheless, is not an image of the highest beauty), the original will always be recognized.' Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, Los Angeles, CA, 2006, 198.
3 Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, Cambridge, 1990, 15.
4 Goethe, *Italian Journey*, 365.
5 See my account of the differential disposition of pictures in 'The keeping place (arising from an incident on the land)', in Robert S. Nelson and Peg Olin, eds, *Monuments and Memory*, Chicago, IL, 2003, 157–82, esp. 162–71.
6 André Leroi-Gouhran, *Gesture and Speech*, Cambridge, MA, 1993, 195.
7 The Inuit have no special word for art or landscaper; see Bordo, 'The keeping place', in which the implications of this absence are considered.
8 Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, Chicago, IL, 2003.
9 See the entry on culture in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford, 1985.
10 For discussion of the Aboriginal Memorial in Canberra, Australia, see my 'The witness in the errings of contemporary art', in Paul Duro, ed., *Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, Cambridge, 1996, 178–202; and the discussion of the Indigenous Australian artist Rover Thomas in Jonathan Bordo, 'Picture and witness at the site of the wilderness', in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, Chicago, IL, 2002.
11 Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, 1993.
12 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge, MA, 2008, 24.
13 For work as ergon see: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, New York, 1951; Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago, IL, 1987; and Duro's introduction to *Rhetoric of the Frame*. One aspect of the parergon is with respect to the frame but another is with respect to the onto-semiology of the signature for which Agamben's problematization is indispensable; see Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of the World*, New York, 2009.
14 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York, 1981, notes 32–36.
15 For the German Romantist background, see: Hazard Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*, Talahasse, 1983; and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, Buffalo, NY, 1988. For recent noteworthy scholarship on the symbolic transit of pictures, see: Jennifer L. Roberts, *The Movement of Images in Early America*, Berkeley, CA, 2014; and Jason LaFountain 'The Puritan Art World', PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2013. See also Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, Berkeley, CA, 2009.
16 For discussion of this topic, see: Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, Cambridge, MA, 2004; and Wolfgang Welch, 'The virtual to begin with', in Mike Sandbothe and Winfried Marotzki, eds, *Subjektivität und Öffentlichkeit. Kulturwissenschaftliche Grundlagenprobleme virtueller Welten*, Köln, 2000, 25–60.
17 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 [1938–40], Cambridge, MA, 2003, 391–2.
18 Walter Benjamin, 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian', *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 [1935–38], Cambridge, MA, 2002, 260–302.
19 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, New York, 2006.
20 Bordo, 'Witness in the errings', esp. 178–84.
21 'Et j'aurais ici à rappeler le nom genevois, dont nous sommes fiers à d'autres égards encore pour notre patrie, d'Adolphe Pictet, le premier qui conçut méthodiquement le parti qu'on pouvait tirer de la langue comme témoin des âges préhistoriques . . .' Ferdinand de Saussure, *Écrits de linguistique générale*, Paris, 2000, 143.
22 De Saussure, *Ecrits*, 150.
23 'Language is a storehouse of sound-images, and writing is the tangible form of those images.' Ferdinand de Saussure, *A Course in General Linguistics*, New York, 1957, 15.
24 Bordo, 'Witness in the errings', 187.
25 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, IN, 1978.
26 Agamben, *Signature of the World*.
27 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, New York, 2010, 295–6.
28 I am indebted to the work of James Young in his persistent and influential advancement of the 'counter-monument' in contemporary Germany; see especially, James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, New Haven and London, 2000.
29 Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 3 vols, New York, 1996–98.
30 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953, 48, n. 116.