

Chapter 2

The Nomadic Aura

Reflections on the Encounter with Art in Conversation with Walter Benjamin

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1. Introduction

Continuing our attempts in the previous chapter to better understand the significance of the aesthetic experience emerging from the reception of an artwork in its autonomy and its possible relationship with the spiritual life, we will focus here on a central aesthetic concept of the 20th century, which is today again at the center of discussions about art and its significance: the aura, as conceptualized by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. Departing from the radical transformations in the modes of existence of an artwork in modernity, Benjamin offers sometimes inconsistent but still valuable contributions that help to understand what is at stake in the reception of an artwork. The concept of the aura serves Benjamin's desire to focus his attention on the aspect of experience in the sphere of art. And so even if he declares the decay or disappearance of the aura, his emphasis on experience allows us to notice, instead of the aura's decay, its shifting, or a series of shifts, which can be traced in contemporary art – especially performance art – with its focus on the question of reception.

In this chapter, we will discuss our thesis of the ›nomadic aura‹, a notion that resonates with contemporary aesthetic theory yet requires clearer development. We will begin by showing that the shift from the aura as an

immutable quality of an artwork to a dynamic element of reception is in fact already present in Benjamin's text, even if it remains hidden behind his rhetoric of decay. We then use a short film about an artwork to illustrate our interpretation of Benjamin's theory and to consider the consequences of adopting the perspective of the secularization of aesthetic experience. In a third step, we will turn to contemporary art in order to trace the possible metamorphoses of the aura, especially in the digital age. Focusing on the artistic genre of the performance and its interactions with digital media, we argue that the aura returns as an effective indicator of the claim of the artwork or artistic event to introduce its audience into a space of reciprocity where a meaningful experience becomes possible. We will discuss the performances of Marina Abramović and the aesthetic experience they offer as a momentary resting point in the nomadic wanderings of the aura in contemporary art.

2. Walter Benjamin's Search for the Lost Aura

In his essay »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction« (written in 1935), Benjamin discusses the changes in our relationship with art due to the use of new technologies of reproduction (photography, radio, and cinema) in contrast with traditional forms of reproduction such as etchings or lithography. Any change in the forms of production leads necessarily to a change in reception, and Benjamin focuses his analysis particularly on this dimension of reception with its inseparably aesthetic and political consequences. His goal is to evaluate the relationship between aesthetic questions and artistic production in the light of the transformations of modern technology, which he sees as an opportunity for the politicization of the arts and the concomitant deritualization of aesthetic objects.

Up to this point, his intention is perfectly in line with the ideas voiced by the cultural Marxists of his time, in particular Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, with whom Benjamin edited the famous *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in Paris. Yet their reactions to his essay are quite cool and unconvinced, because Benjamin's clearly political intentions are not enough to reshape the totality of his concepts and judgements which are kept intentionally vague. Benjamin's goal is to establish the foundations

of a materialistic theory of art,¹ but his theoretical move, and in particular his thesis of the decay (*Verfall*) of the aura, does not immediately and unambiguously support this goal. On the contrary, it becomes the point of departure for a larger aesthetic debate that goes way beyond the ideological-political framework of historical-dialectical materialism and has continued all through the last century until today.

The term ›aura‹ was well known among the European cultural elite of the early 20th century. It was mostly used to describe the halo of Christ or the saints in traditional religious iconography and thus had a clearly spiritual connotation. In esoteric, particularly theosophical circles, the term was democratized, indicating the sphere of energy surrounding each being.² Benjamin is, as he himself admits, rather polemical in his treatment of these theosophical ideas.³ He announces the decay of the aura as the end of the bourgeois fetishism at the basis of the cult around the singular artwork. And yet, while his revolutionary *intention* is quite explicit, Benjamin's use of the term is surprising. In particular, his analysis of the changes occurring due to modern technologies of reproduction and the resulting multiplication and massification of images is characterized by a rhetoric of loss rather than gain. From Benjamin's ideological perspective, the decay of the aura should represent an element of emancipation from the limitations of the bourgeois cult of the original work. But the tone he uses to describe this decay never conveys the satisfaction of a goal finally achieved or at least within reach, nor is it simply neutral. Instead, we note a nostalgic tone in his text that oscillates between mourning and an uncertainty as to the possibilities of survival of the aura. True, at least once Benjamin writes that »mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.«⁴ But there is a clear sense of the sacrifice that this emancipation requires due to the influ-

1 That is how Benjamin describes his project in a letter to Max Horkheimer from 16 October 1935; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 5, edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999, 179.

2 For the origins of the theosophical meaning of the aura, see Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Aura: An Enquiry into the Natural Forms of Luminous Mist Seen about Human and Other Bodies*, London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1897.

3 See his comment in Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, edited and translated by Howard Eiland, with an introductory essay by Marcus Boon, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, 58.

4 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction*, in: Walter

ence of the Hegelian paradigm of the end of art («the fateful hour of art has struck for us»,⁵ writes Benjamin to Horkheimer), which for Benjamin is a prophecy come true and yet retains a nostalgic, even desperate, note. His tone of nostalgia may also be due to his barely hidden fear that the democratization of art in the world of technology leads to the loss of the cult value of the work and, with it, of the density and intensity of the experience of reception.

This tension between his ideological assumptions of emancipation and the sense of nostalgia, between strong opinions and unexpressed regrets has ensured the long-term success of Benjamin's reflections and their fruitfulness, not at all affected by the failure of his goal to establish the revolutionary political fundament of aesthetic theory. In addition, in Benjamin's analysis, we discover an even more profound productive ambiguity. According to the sociologist Nathalie Heinich,⁶ Benjamin holds the modern technologies of reproduction responsible for the loss of a property that they instead help to create. What is apparent today – for example, the fact that the mass distribution of photographic reproductions has contributed to the renewed sacralization of the original painting – was, according to Heinich, already expressed between the lines in Benjamin's essay, for example when he recognizes that »at the moment of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be »authentic.« It became »authentic« only during the succeeding centuries and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one.«⁷ Authenticity, that is, the aura of a work, then, is not based in the substance of the work but seems to be a socially constructed phenomenon that becomes relevant only in modernity due to the reproductive technologies that are »instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity«.⁸ At least in this case, »grading« implies intensification and not dilution or decay. So what does *Verfall der Aura* really mean? According to Heinich, what Benjamin is getting at when he talks about desacralization because of mechani-

Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, Boston: Mariner Books, 2019, 166–195, here 174.

5 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 179; in the original: »uns [...] hat die Schicksalsstunde der Kunst geschlagen«.

6 Nathalie Heinich, *L'aura de Walter Benjamin*, *Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales* 49 (1983), 107–109.

7 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 222, note 2.

8 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 222, note 2.

cal reproduction is a »reverse sacralization«,⁹ which ensures through reproduction the conditions for the existence of the aura.

What Heinrich describes as a clear discrepancy in the goals of Benjamin's theory, others have interpreted as the ambivalence of the phenomenon of the aura and its decay itself. More important than the internal contradictions in Benjamin's reflections is the fact that he relies on a concept that includes a dialectical element. Jürgen Habermas, for example, underlines that the dissolution of the dialectical element in the aura would lead to the loss of the historicity of the experience of reception that instead needs to be renewed.¹⁰ And even more explicitly, Catherine Perret affirms that »the aura is not an ambiguous concept; it is a dialectical concept appropriate to the dialectical experience whose structure it attempts to understand«. ¹¹ The liberation of the artwork from its solitary contemplation and from the auratic wrappings that protect and isolate it – that is, its liberation from the suppression of the autonomy of the artwork and the cultural reverence towards it – have always been contained in the aura as a possibility. If this wasn't the case, after the deritualization of the artwork the recipient's experience would no longer be significant. In other words, if the aura was only a property of the work defining its sacralizing value as an original object, there would be no space for the dialectical dynamic between artwork and recipient. But this is not the case, as Habermas and Perret note. Their analysis points towards the aesthetic experience that situates the individual in front of and in relationship with the artwork. It is the reception experience, and not the artwork per se, that is most usefully discussed through the concept of the aura, whereas thinking of the dissolution or retention of the aura as a quality of the artwork would seem inconsistent. In the following section, we will re-think Benjamin's theory from this perspective, in dialogue with a specific example of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, namely the short film *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* by Michelangelo Antonioni (*Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, IT 2004).

9 Heinrich, *L'aura de Walter Benjamin*, 108; in the original: »sacralisation a contrario«.

10 Jürgen Habermas, *Consciousness-raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin*, Special Walter Benjamin Issue, *New German Critique* 17 (1979), 30–59.

11 Catherine Perret, *Walter Benjamin sans destin*, Paris: La Différence, 1992, 99; in the original: »l'aura n'est pas un concept ambigu, c'est un concept dialectique approprié à l'expérience dialectique dont il tente de penser la structure«.

3. Antonioni/Buonarroti: ›Michelangeloesque‹ Metamorphoses of the Aura

In his essay *A Short History of Photography* (first published in 1931), Benjamin proposes a first, suggestive definition of ›aura‹ which he also references in »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction«: »What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer's noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence – this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch.«¹² The aura relates to an object whose aesthetic experience leaves an indelible imprint in the recipient. This aesthetic experience is defined through the spatio-temporal context in which the relationship between the recipient and the work can develop. The work is here not a passive object but ›appears‹ in time (›the moment or the hour‹) and space, oscillating between proximity and distance. Benjamin is quick to note the ›political‹ necessity to disrupt this balance between proximity and distance (›Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range«¹³), but his addition does not reduce the dialectical character of the aesthetic experience and instead ensures its realization. To approach an aesthetic object means to allow it to appear for what it is without references to any symbolic superstructure (its cult value), in its singular and unrepeatable presence, as we noted in the previous chapter.

It might be helpful to illustrate these aspects of Benjamin's theory in reference to a concrete example. In Antonioni's short film *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, the experience of reception itself is studied through the means of mechanical reproduction and gives life to a new artistic expression precisely because it is mechanically reproduced. Here, the elderly director films himself during a visit to the Basilica San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome to see Michelangelo's sculptures – Moses and the tomb of Pope Julius II – after their restoration that returned the statues to their original brightness of the whitest marble (fig. 1).

12 Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, translated by Stanley Mitchell, Screen 13.1 (1972), 5–26, here 20.

13 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 173.



Fig. 1: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tomb of Julius II* (1505–1545), white marble, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.¹⁴

14 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pope_Julius_II_tomb_by_Michelangelo_04_2024_7626.jpg, photo by Mariordo [accessed 25 January 2026].

The restoration (1999–2003) was planned in a way that viewers could follow its progress on a webpage through the livestream of adjustable webcams. Thus, while the sculptures were hidden from the view of tourists in Rome, they were easily accessible in the virtual world through a technological apparatus able to reproduce not just the artwork but also its gradual return to its original state in the process of cleaning and restoration. Here, a new configuration of the dialectic between proximity and distance central to Benjamin's aura is noticeable, which creates new spaces and modes of reception. The tourists who arrive at the doors of San Pietro in Vincoli and find them closed because of the restoration are in a sense much more distant from the work than the internet user in Tokyo or São Paulo who looks at the newly cleaned Moses on their computer screen. In addition, the relationship between the original and its reproductions is complicated because only the virtual reproduction on the internet tracks the series of changes the work undergoes in the course of the restoration, of which the original, once the restoration is concluded, does not retain a trace. In all this, the transformation of what Benjamin calls the exhibition value of the artwork becomes obvious, and it is equally obvious that such transformations do not manifest the disappearance of the aura but rather its continuous renewal and repositioning under the changing conditions of the production and reception of the work.

When Antonioni agreed to make this film about Michelangelo's statues, he was already 91 years old. He had been paralyzed on his right side for 20 years due to a stroke and could no longer speak. Nevertheless, he worked on the project as far as was possible for him, as a director and also painter. *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* is a moving testimony of the dedication to art of a man who is severely limited in his means of communication. It is the expression of a feeling of consonance between person and artwork.

The film lasts a little longer than a quarter of an hour and does not include any dialogue or titles apart from the opening and closing credits. It begins with a fade-in and a shot from inside the entrance of the basilica. Slowly the light from outside the church floods the screen. A shadow moves slowly and with difficulty forward until we see the feet, then the legs, the torso and finally the whole body of the director. He stops just behind the threshold and lifts his gaze to the ceiling of the basilica. He moves forward, in a total and then medium close-up from above, while his steps echo in the deserted building. His gait is composed and elegant, rendered only slightly uneven by the

consequences of his stroke. The light from behind creates a sharp, black silhouette of the slender man, while around him the impressive architecture comes alive, bathed in the faint light that underlines movement, shapes, and rediscovered clarity. The opening sequence thus anticipates a central topic of the film: the encounter between the director's fragility and the beauty of the sculptures in their solidity. This encounter is realized in this »peculiar web of space and time« – essential to the experience of the aura, according to Benjamin – because of Antonioni's movements, pauses, and gestures as the viewer of the sculptures, and because of the construction of the filmic images, edited by Antonioni as the director of the film.

And this is not all. The encounter between sculptures and viewer is reciprocal. When Antonioni stops in front of the tomb of Julius II, which remains outside of the frame, he is still a silhouette without a face, his whole body in the frame. He stands immobile in front of the balustrade. After a cut we see a close-up of the statue of the Warrior Pope. Again a cut, and we see an extreme close-up of Julius's eyes. Only then is Antonioni framed in close-up, still from above, as if it was a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the statue, as he lifts his face slowly towards the statue (fig. 2). This underlines an aspect of the aesthetic experience that Benjamin introduces through his concept of aura, namely the power of the artwork to answer the viewer's gaze. In his essay »On Some Motifs in Baudelaire« (1938–1939), Benjamin writes: »The person we look at, or who feels he [sic] is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.«¹⁵ Benjamin identifies the illusory dimension of the aura with the feeling of »being looked at«, to which he ascribes the capacity of evoking an empty contemplative enjoyment in the bourgeois audience. But again, Benjamin goes further. In fact, he adds in a note: »This endowment is a wellspring of poetry«,¹⁶ and quotes Karl Kraus: »The closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back.«¹⁷ The illusion of feeling oneself »being looked at« thus is not limited to the pure negativity of an alienated infatuation. Instead, it refers

15 Walter Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, Boston: Mariner Books, 2019, 103–148, here 141.

16 Benjamin, *On Some Motifs*, 222, note 17.

17 Karl Kraus, quoted in Benjamin, *On Some Motifs*, 222, note 17.



Fig. 2: Michelangelo Antonioni, *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* (*Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, IT 2004), film still.

to the broader phenomenon of giving the object, image, or word the time to appear in a distance that is at the same time proximity, that is, to appear in the space opened up by the subjectivity of the viewer, their willingness to imagine, to associate other images, to approach them poetically. When I lift my gaze in front of a statue because I feel myself looked at, as Antonioni does in the sequence described above, I am not hallucinating but allow myself to live the encounter with an artwork as a true encounter between subjects and thus to be involved in an imaginative and personal way.

Georges Didi-Huberman comments on Benjamin's dialectic between proximity and distance: »When the work of the symbolic succeeds in weaving this suddenly ›singular‹ frame from a visible object, on the one hand, it literally makes it ›appear‹ like a unique visual event, and on the other hand, it literally transforms it: for it disturbs the very stability of its aspect, insofar as it becomes capable of calling forth something distant in the close or supposedly graspable form.«¹⁸ What Didi-Huberman captures here with great

18 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regard*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1992, 106; in the original: »Lorsque le travail du symbolique parvient à tisser cette trame tout à coup ›singulaire‹ à partir d'un objet visible, d'une part il le fait littéralement

precision, Antonioni seems to have experienced in front of Michelangelo's sculptures in order to then pass on the evidence of this experience to the viewers of his film. Hence the film's title, *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo*, which exploits the homonymy of director and sculptor: whose gaze is it to which the title refers? Michelangelo Antonioni or Michelangelo Buonarroti, through the eyes of his sculptures? It is impossible to resolve this question, mainly because the two gazes seem inextricably intertwined through the film's editing, and also because in the moment in which I pose this question, a third gaze, mine as the viewer of the film, has already inserted itself into this exchange of gazes in the process of reception prolonged indefinitely in the technological reproduction which, as becomes clear here, does not cause the aura to disappear but instead liberates it to wander about in ever new ways.

The combination of the two Michelangelos' gazes is constructed with great attention to detail. The film does not limit itself to simply reproduce Antonioni's aesthetic experience of the sculptures. Although he uses the subjective point-of-view shot of the statue of Julius II, Antonioni the director avoids the subjective of Antonioni the viewer,¹⁹ not only because it would be superfluous but because it would identify the camera's perspective with a particular subjective point of view and thus emphasize the primacy of the viewing subject. Instead, the film expresses the »peculiar web of space and time« in which the relationship of the I with the work is realized as a kind of mutual questioning. It is the work that is reproducible, not its reception which, however, is dramatized in the film and integrated into the space and time of the cinema. And neither is its aura reproducible which, because it is not the exclusive property of the work (»the presence of the original«²⁰), can re-present itself in new forms even where the work is no longer original, provided that the quasi-intersubjective setting be preserved in which work and recipient encounter and communicate with each other. It is obvious that Antonioni's film does not aim to share with its audience the emotions of

»apparaître« comme un événement visuel unique, d'autre part il le transforme littéralement: car il inquiète la stabilité même de son aspect, dans la mesure où il se rend capable d'appeler un lointain dans la forme proche ou supposée saisissable.»

19 In particular, the use of vertical tracks, close-ups and long dissolves to black in the filming of the statues creates a strong sense of distance from Antonioni's subjective vision. The director uses several semi-subjectives in which, however, the sculptures remain out of focus.

20 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 170.

somebody entering the basilica and looking at Michelangelo's statues. But it testifies to Antonioni's experience of these emotions in a singular space and time which is thus not reproducible. The *mise-en-scène* of this singularity does not re-create the auratic density of Antonioni's singular experience but creates a new aesthetic object, this time to be experienced by many and itself an opportunity for emotion and encounter in which the aura may appear.

Antonioni's filmography is characterized by the persistent treatment of the question of vision, and in particular how in vision »*the gaze that makes the film* comes to directly question itself through the exercise of itself and its dynamic«. ²¹ The distance between the gaze of Antonioni the director and Antonioni the viewer leaves space in the film for the gaze of another Michelangelo, and thus guarantees that our gaze, too, can move freely within this network of gazes and access an experience that is not an imitation or repetition but a space of originality in which we are at the same time questioned and promised a new insight, a new fulfillment, or in Benjamin's terms, a finite horizon of joy.

4. The Secularized Aura and Its ›Theologies‹

Mechanical reproduction – and even more the electronic and digital one – thus does not multiply the aura of the original, but it also does not contribute to its decay. Instead, these forms of reproduction multiply and diversify the conditions of production and reception and thus the occasions for the aura to liberate itself from its bourgeois limitations. Obviously, such a multiplication of evocations of the aura and potential access points to it does not automatically increase the number and quality of aesthetic experiences. On the contrary, without a formation in aesthetic appreciation, it may contribute to that emotional and sensory decline often deplored today. The solution for this decline of taste and sensibility – if it really exists at all – is not the return to an attitude of contemplative purity that sacralizes the work in order to preserve it. The shift from the cult value of an artwork to its exhibi-

21 Lorenzo Cuccu, Antonioni: Il discorso dello sguardo: Da *Blow Up* a *Identificazione di una donna*, Pisa: ETS, 1990, 7 (original emphasis); in the original: »*lo sguardo che fa il film giunga a mettere in causa direttamente se stesso attraverso l'esercizio di se stesso e la sua dinamica*«.

tion value, as noted by Benjamin, has definitely taken place. But as we said above, Benjamin has dialectically indicated in his theory of the aura what in this passage has not been lost, at least potentially, and what remains as a promise of joy, situated in the performative character ascribed to the work that opens up the space for the encounter with its audience by virtue of its aesthetic qualities. In the measure in which the viewers respond to this invitation, they feel like they are »being looked at«, as Benjamin writes, and look back, adding intimacy and enchantment to the aesthetic experience.

Rainer Rochlitz²² argues that what Benjamin defines as the loss of the aura should more precisely be understood as a change in its destination. If in traditional art, the aura of an object is what is communicated to God within it, in avantgarde art, photography, or cinema, the addressee is the profane audience of those who are open to transforming the world. Rochlitz underlines that Benjamin's theory of art develops from his conception of language as the power to name, as an absolute expression with God as the only addressee. The cult value of art is the consequence of this original destination and thus every further attempt by Benjamin to revoke it reflects a kind of theological hesitation. Benjamin's sincere will to put art in the service of political action never goes as far as to negate the theological roots of his thinking about art. With this theological foundation of his thought, Benjamin continues to see an occasion for joy and fullness with messianic undertones in art, even while he insists on the need to bring the artwork to the level where the destiny of the individual and the masses is at stake.

Even if Benjamin's goal in his essay »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction« was to delegitimize any »theology of art«²³ understood as a defense of the cult value and the inaccessibility of the authentic object in the face of the revolutionary advent of photography, it is understandable that his discourse could not dispel the numerous »theologies of the aura« that were inspired in various ways by his theory. These theologies are legitimate and consistent as long as they do not force the terms of the discourse and identify an original religious destination or an implicit sacred content in every aesthetic object and, instead, capture the nature of the existentially revelatory event and of the space that is opened for the intersubjective

22 Rainer Rochlitz, *Le désenchantement de L'Art: La philosophie de Walter Benjamin*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992.

23 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 174.

encounter in the aesthetic experience. In this sense, Didi-Huberman's interpretation seems typical:

It may now seem impossible – philologically, historically speaking – to evoke a »cult value« attached to the aura of a visual object without explicitly referencing the world of faith and established religions. And yet, it seems quite necessary to secularize, to re-secularize this notion of the aura – like Benjamin himself could say [in his essay »Central Park«] that »remembering is the secularized relic« in the poetic field – in order to understand something of the »strange« (*sonderbar*) and »unique« (*einmalig*) effectiveness of so many modern works which, by inventing new forms, have precisely had the effect of »deconstituting« or deconstructing beliefs, cult values, already informed »cultures«. ²⁴

The religious sphere offers the historical paradigm and the exemplary form of the aura. Yet the secularization of this paradigm and form does not entail the renunciation of the involvement of the subject who makes this experience in a spiritual dimension in which they become open to the promise of meaning and accomplishment. And if the analysis of this process is not the exclusive prerogative of theology, it can at least profit from the competencies of theology.

The film *Lo sguardo di Michelangelo* is a good example in this regard, as well. We see Antonioni entering and moving around the sacred space of the basilica just as if he was in a museum. As we would expect given what is known about the director's biography and convictions, he does not show any religious attitude, but ›only‹, from the beginning to the end, respect

24 Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons*, 112 (original emphasis); in the original: »Il peut sembler désormais impossible – philologiquement, historiquement parlant – d'évoquer une ›valeur de culte‹, attachée à l'aura d'un objet visuel, sans faire une référence explicite au monde de la croyance et des religions constituées. Et pourtant, il semble bien nécessaire de séculariser, de re-séculariser cette notion d'aura – comme Benjamin lui-même pouvait dire que ›la remémoration est la relique sécularisée‹ dans le champ poétique – afin de comprendre quelque chose à l'efficacité ›étrange‹ (*sonderbar*) et ›unique‹ (*einmalig*) de tant d'œuvres modernes qui, en inventant de nouvelles formes, ont précisément eu l'effet de ›déconstituer‹ ou de déconstruire les croyances, les valeurs culturelles, les ›cultures‹ déjà informées.« The German terms *sonderbar* and *einmalig* reference Benjamin's definitions of the aura.

and attention, a receptivity towards that which appears in front of him, a demeanor expressive of his perception that something important is happening. The cult values have shifted here, as Didi-Huberman hoped, from the level of content and symbolic forms to that of the aesthetic experience itself. And even though we know that in the film this experience, which in itself cannot be reproduced, is only represented, there is no reason to doubt that the process of filmic construction is not the same as the original aesthetic experience. Or rather: we have no other doubts than those the film itself raises. Apart from the soundtrack in the last sequences of the film, the *Magnificat quarti toni* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1591), the mise-en-scène avoids any religious references that would underline the viewer's distance from the artwork, fixing it in a transcendent horizon. On the contrary, Antonioni's gestures and attitude during his visit and his filmmaking aim at reducing this distance and eliminating it in the »peculiar web of space and time« of reception. On a first level, the elimination of distance, and thus of the typical attitude of veneration, in Antonioni's visit to the basilica results from the fact that Antonioni uses his status as a privileged visitor who is able to do what would not be permitted to an ordinary tourist: he crosses the balustrade and approaches the statue of Moses until he is able to touch it, caressing the perfect lines of the marble. On a second level, that of filmmaking, the distance is overcome through a series of close-ups of the statues in which the image is too close to permit the reconstruction of the figures as a whole. We can see the veins of the marble and its luminosity, even the traces of the chisel and of Michelangelo's precise workmanship; yet most of all, we realize that there is nothing ›else‹ to see because the contours of the figure of Moses, subject of this work of ›sacred‹ art, are not recognizable.

This twofold elimination of distance secularizes the reception and allows for new aspects of the experience to emerge, such as the tactile dimension of the aura made palpable in the sequence in which Antonioni touches the sculpture, which questions the idea (implicit for whoever engages with audio-visual media) that only the distant senses of vision and hearing are a reliable source of knowledge. The film underlines the contrast between Antonioni's fragile, uncertain hand and the full, vigorous forms of Moses's body as if it wants to capture in the director's touch of and gaze at the sculpture not just artistic competence, enchantment, and admiration, but also a kind of envy of this polished body that does not have to be afraid of growing old.

Yet the gesture of touching the statue also expresses the intimacy between the work and its recipient. Many religious traditions prohibit touching the sacred. Yet in the film, tactile contact overcomes the separation between sacred and profane and opens new dimensions in the interaction with the aesthetic object. Touching Moses, Antonioni is in solidarity with him, feels close to him and recognizes himself in the statue, perhaps in their shared incapacity to speak. Buonarroti's question of his masterpiece, ›Why do you not speak?‹, becomes a silent ›Why don't we speak?‹ that Antonioni asks the sculpture, or that perhaps they ask each other through their eyes. Of course, we can only imagine this exchange of gazes and what it might mean based on the film images. And yet this exercise of the imagination allows to reactivate the aura in this potentially infinite play of references and shifts of meaning that is the foundation of aesthetic experience.

5. The Aura in the Age of Digital Media

The question about the loss of the aura arises again, but differently, in the age of digital technologies of reproduction that have reached a level of perfection that makes the distinction between original and copy impossible and even useless. Authenticity – which for Benjamin attributes aura to an artwork – is no longer tied to the original. As Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe explain, an excellent copy of an artwork can be even more authentic than the original. The question is no longer (and it never has been for the performative arts) the distinction between original and copy but instead the quality of the copy and whether it is convincing. If that is the case, it might happen for example, as Latour and Lowe write, that »the aura of the original [of Veronese's *Nozze di Cana*] had *migrated* from Paris to Venice«,²⁵ where a digital reproduction of the image was exhibited. Along the same lines, Jay D. Bolter and his co-authors argue that the aura is not lost in digital media but

25 Bruno Latour/Adam Lowe, The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original through Its Facsimiles, in: Thomas Bartscherer/Roderick Coover (eds.), *Switching Codes: Thinking through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 275–297, here 277.

rather passes through »an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternately called into question and reaffirmed«. ²⁶

Digital media do not just allow for an ever more perfect, ›original‹ reproduction, but they also enable unlimited access to the work up to the point that the audience can follow the work of restoration in San Pietro in Vincoli, enter the most famous buildings of the world with the help of virtual reality technologies, ²⁷ or cooperate in an online artwork such as *The World's First Collaborative Sentence* created by Douglas Davis. ²⁸ The reproducibility of technological and especially digital production processes expands possibilities of reception and production, and blurs their distinction. Given that not only the consumption but also the creative process become practices of the masses, the identification of a singular, authentic work is less important for aesthetic appreciation, whereas the singular experience of the person in front of the work – or involved in other ways in the multiple forms of its representation – is essential. The spatio-temporal co-presence with the work (Benjamin's ›presence‹) is now differentiated. The temporal dimension, the now, is maintained, while the spatial dimension is reconfigured: through digital mediation, *hic* and *illic* coincide in virtual reality.

In this context, the aura is no longer something that belongs to the object, be it original or copy, with all the possible migrations of the aura from one to the other that Latour and Lowe note. Instead, it emerges in the experience of encounter and communication with the work. This communicative dynamic can repeat itself without limits given the work's accessibility through the internet or digital reproductions. But the moment of each encounter itself is, every time and for every individual, unrepeatable and unique because it does not depend on an unchanging work but on a living, historical subject, and, thus, the experience can change depending on the situation, one's mood, the history of the work and of the individual who encounters it. And even the most stable object of aesthetic experience will change ever so slightly in multiple encounters, through erosion, the fading of colors, or other material processes of change, so that the same work is never encountered twice.

26 Jay D. Bolter/Blair MacIntyre/Maribeth Gandy/Petra Schweitzer, *New Media and the Permanent Crisis of Aura*, *Convergence* 12.1 (2006), 21–39, here 22.

27 Bolter/MacIntyre/Gandy/Schweitzer, *New Media*, 30.

28 Douglas Davis, *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991–1995)*, *Leonardo* 28.5 (1995), 381–386, here 382.

To recognize the permanence of the auratic dimension in these experiences is not obvious from the outset. There is always the risk, noted also by Benjamin, of the banalization of experience encouraged by the opacity of the digital medium. Given this risk, one might consider the performative arts, with their attention to the body and bodily movements as constitutive elements in the artwork, as the space where the aura has survived in the digital age. Bryan Turner argues that these forms of art – in particular, dance – resist technical reproduction and thus maintain the aura also in secular modernity²⁹ as they express, through their particular corporeal language, the sexual, political, and religious dimension of society.³⁰ Thus the bodies of the performer and of the recipient become the space where the aura still expresses itself despite its presumed decay – an idea that resonates with Benjamin's theory of the aura in some respects because Benjamin, drawing on the mystical tradition of Judaism, affirms that the aura can be attributed not only to an artwork, but also to nature or a person.³¹

The attempts outlined here of rediscovering the aura again in our time – in its migration from the original to the copy, its emergence in the virtual encounter, its residual presence in the body – are closely connected among each other, as the case of performance art shows particularly well to which we now turn.

6. Rediscovering the Aura in Performance

Performance was defined as an art form in the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which original and radical performances were produced by artists such as Hermann Nitsch, Piero Manzoni, or Carolee Schneemann, who focused on the re-elaboration of ritual and limit experience with the body as their primary creative material. But even before and after this period, performance

29 Bryan S. Turner, Introduction – Bodily Performance: On Aura and Reproducibility, *Body & Society* 11.4 (2005), 1–17, here 2.

30 Turner, Introduction, 5.

31 See Benjamin's discussion of the aura in the experience of nature (Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 173) and in the human photo portrait (176), as well as his idea that in cinema, differently from theater, »for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man [sic] has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence« (180).

has been important as an art form that contests the static nature and commodification of the traditional artistic ›object‹ and introduces new forms after the preceding ones have proven unable to communicate.³² Thus, the performance has a strong political dimension in its critique of the institutions of society and the art world which is expressed in its radical forms, actions, and materials (such as blood, intestines, acts of masochism, etc.) which often go beyond what is considered acceptable and tolerable, both for the artist and the audience.

Most characteristic of the performance is its singularity. Normally, it does not follow a script (at most there are some notes, minimal indications regarding positions in space etc.), and there are no rehearsals or roles to play. The artist is usually, though not always, also the protagonist of the performance. The performance exists only in the moment as it is produced, in the singularity of the time and space in which it is situated and for the audience that is currently present. The documentation of a performance (photos, videos, materials, accounts) can only testify to what happened, without trying to replicate the event. Nevertheless, Amelia Jones³³ notes that no reception experience is completely im-mediate: it is always part of a context by which it is influenced and that mediates the experience. Thus, the documentation of a performance is not worth less simply because of its mediated character; instead, it is different from the performance itself but can help to understand the event: for example, a photo can show particular aspects one did not notice during the performance or solicit reactions different from the ones that were evoked by it. And beyond simply helping to understand a past performance, its documentation can even become an artwork in its own right, as Abigail Levine notes about the documentations of Marina Abramović's performances: »The most successful documentations of the show seemed to stand on their own as works of art. In their revisiting, they created something new.«³⁴

32 For the history of performance as an art form see RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

33 Amelia Jones, ›Presence‹ in *Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*, *Art Journal* 56.4 (1997), 11–18, here 12.

34 Abigail Levine, *The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art, *After Truth* 7.2 (2010), <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-72/7-2-review-essays/marina-abramovic-time-the-artist-is-present-at-the-museum-of-modern-art.html> [accessed 7 February 2025].

Even though one cannot assume that in the reception of a performance (whether live or through its documentation) one necessarily experiences its aura, there are some elements typical of the performance that can encourage such an experience. The first is the element of presence: the artist or other protagonists in the performance as well as the audience are co-present and create the work through their presence. According to Benjamin, the auratic potential of a work consists in rendering present, in some fashion, its origin. The aura eliminates the spatio-temporal distance between the creative act of the artist and the receptive act of the viewer, and thus in a certain way, what I see in the work (in as far as I know it is ›original‹) is the hand of the artist who paints or sculpts it. However, in the performance, there is no need for the aura to be understood in this way because there is no distance to overcome nor a moment of the past (the creative act) to revive: there is no need to *evoke* co-presence because it is *already there* in the performance.

In addition, the performance is based on reciprocity. The performance artist Marina Abramović, for example, explains that she needs the presence of the audience in order to enter into the frame of mind (and body) necessary to perform the often extreme actions planned for the performance.³⁵ The artist underlines that this presence does not always imply a true encounter: it can also be a form of voyeurism, a mere consumption of what the performance offers, without any real involvement on the side of the viewers.³⁶ Also, the artist's intense experience during the performance does not always correspond to an equally strong experience for the audience. The dissolution of the boundary between the ›work‹³⁷ and its audience – condition for a true encounter and thus the experience of the aura – may not always be achieved. The performance certainly offers favorable conditions for that to happen but whether the audience takes advantage of them or not depends on their willingness to let themselves be involved and expose themselves to the event every time again.

35 Janet A. Kaplan, Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović, *Art Journal* 58.2 (1999), 6–19, here 10.

36 Kaplan, Deeper and Deeper, 8.

37 Obviously, the term ›work‹ cannot cover the complex dynamics between the artistic action, the involvement of the audience and its spatio-temporal extension that take place in a performance. It is a work and at the same time an event.

The sense of presence that Benjamin associates with the experience of the aura is very clear in the performance which exists only in the moment and then dissolves, only leaving traces of itself, in contrast to the traditional work of art, an object that can be touched, bought, exhibited, with a history of past and future reception. This unrepeatable presence of the performance is rendered even more obvious by the frequent use of the artist's body as the center and ›raw material‹ of the performance, a living body that changes in time and thus will never be present in the same way again.

Abramović affirms that for her, the body is the central idea that she focuses on in her artistic activity: »you may have one good idea, or, if you are a genius, two. But be very careful with this. All the rest is interpretation of the same idea, and for me, the only idea I have always had is the human body. That's the only thing I have always been interested in. It's a large idea to be explored, and I always feel that I'm just at the beginning.«³⁸ It is therefore unsurprising that the artist has chosen the performance as her primary genre of artistic expression, precisely because of the possibilities that it offers to work with the/her body. In a successful performance, the artist creates a moment of intensified presence through her body and the experiences to which it is exposed, producing a tension that would be unsustainable outside of the sphere of the performance, and, as performance artist Jill Sigman notes, offering the possibility of a resonance between her body and the bodies of her viewers through which they are able to participate in this moment and identify with its affects.³⁹

Given the importance of the artist's embodied presence for the creation of a communicative relationship between the work and its audience, one often talks about the artist's charism through which they are able to create a particular atmosphere or power in an activity that in other circumstances would appear ordinary. Without wanting to identify charism and aura, the two concepts are nevertheless related in the sense that the charism appears as a quality of the artist that contributes to creating the aura in the aesthetic encounter. Even if performances seek to dissolve the boundary between life and art – they often take place in anonymous spaces, outside of galleries and museums, and focus on ordinary experiences or activities, using materials

38 Kaplan, Deeper and Deeper, 19.

39 Jill Sigman, *Live, Body-based Performance: An Account from the Field*, in: Sherri Irvin (ed.), *Body Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 153–179, here 155.

from everyday life – the two spheres remain distinct because of the intense concentration of the artist which distinguishes the performance as a purposeful and intentional action from ordinary life, highlighting processes that otherwise remain unconscious or are performed automatically.

For Benjamin, the aura of an artwork is closely tied to its cultic or ritual origin and the contemplative attitude of the audience. This cultic origin is also evoked in the performances of the secular age: in his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* of the 1960s, Hermann Nitsch referred to precisely this dimension which he considered lost in the alienation of consumer society and which he wanted to bring back to true reality and primordial consciousness through his orgiastic, sacrificial rites. Abramović's performances, too, have a ritual dimension: the artist's preparation for her performances (normally she fasts and does not speak before a performance in order to purify her body and to enter into the proper frame of mind), the often repetitive gestures, her attempts to communicate something to the audience – an energy, transformation – and thus to change reality, at least for a short moment and to a small degree. Her 1997 performance *Balkan Baroque* (Golden Lion at the Biennale in Venice), for example, might be considered as a ritual of mourning and recognition of pain as the artist sits on a heap of bones which she cleans while behind her, images of her parents and herself are projected on a screen, as they dance and recount a Balkan legend.

As we have shown here, the artistic genre of the performance mirrors in several aspects what Benjamin considers characteristic of an auratic artwork: originality and authenticity, the emphasis on embodied presence, the connection with a ritual context. Is the performance then the chosen space where we re-encounter the lost aura in the age of digital reproduction? We will focus more closely on Abramović's work in order to trace an answer to this question.

7. Marina Abramović: ›The Artist is Present‹

Trained as sculptor and painter, the Serbian artist Marina Abramović (born 1946) began to realize performances in the early 1970s and soon became one of the most important representatives of this genre. In her early solo performances, she works primarily with her own body as a means of expres-

sion, exploring it as a space of pain and pleasure, the limits of what she can endure, the relationship between body and mind, body and self, the body as space of political power, body and time. An example is her performance *Rhythm 10* (1973), the reproduction of a Russian game in which the artist stabs a knife with increasing speed between her spread fingers. She changes knives every time she hurts herself (she has several of them), recording the sounds of the action. Then she listens to the recording and tries to repeat every movement, every injury, so that past and present become one in her own body.⁴⁰ The radicality of her performances demands involvement also on the part of her audience which reacts in different ways, with fascination, shock, or disgust, and in some cases even has to intervene to protect the artist's wellbeing. An attitude of detached aesthetic appreciation is not possible here; instead, the viewer is required to accept the ethical dimension of the experience: the encounter with the artwork becomes a moment of engagement and responsibility.⁴¹ This ethical dimension is grounded in the awareness of the performer's embodied presence and vulnerability that Sigman notes: »We see the vulnerability of the performer and it tells us something about our own humanity and its many faces.«⁴²

Abramović challenges her audience's capacity for ethical involvement especially in the performance *Rhythm 0*, realized in Naples in 1974. Reversing the roles of audience and artist, the artist offers herself for six hours to the audience as raw material for their creativity, providing them with 72 objects on a table that they can use on her body, such as a rose, a scarf, a lipstick, a knife, a sprig of rosemary, and even a loaded pistol. Afterwards, the artist recounted that the actions of the participants became increasingly extreme and violent, as if they lost their initial inhibitions over time.⁴³ But not without retaining some sense of responsibility: when somebody pointed the pistol at the artist's head, another participant in the performance stepped in and took it away. This shows how in the reception and interaction with an artwork, human freedom and responsibility are always solicited and activate each other, even if this might be less obvious when the work is a material object.

40 Cristina Demaria, *The Performative Body of Marina Abramović: Rerelating (in) Time and Space*, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 11.3 (2004), 295–307, here 297.

41 Demaria, *The Performative Body*, 297.

42 Sigman, *Live, Body-based Performance*, 160.

43 Demaria, *The Performative Body*, 297.

In Abramović's collaboration (and relationship) with the German artist Ulay, the central topic of their performances is the exploration of interpersonal relationships, being-one-in-two in space and time, trust and responsibility, the tensions and balances shaping a relationship. In the performance *Rest Energy* (1980), for example, Abramović holds a bow with a poisoned arrow pointing at her chest, while Ulay, standing in front of her, pulls the bowstring so that she remains unharmed only by maintaining the tension between them. This theme of tension and resistance becomes more important for the two artists over time as they explore it in long performances in which they both are immobile and silent in order to allow their energies and those of the space to coalesce and interchange.

After her separation from Ulay, Abramović continues her career by experimenting with new forms of the relationship with the audience through transitory objects.⁴⁴ In *Black Dragon* (1990 onwards), for example, the artist installs pieces of minerals on a wall in various museums. The recipients are invited to press their bodies against the stones in order to absorb their energy. Here, the exhibited objects do not have any artistic function until the audience interacts with them. The encounter is imagined as an occasion of mutual exchange: the bodies pressed against the minerals leave a trace over time and might chip or crush the object, while one assumes that the stone, too, with its energy, will change something in the person who touches it.

With this emphasis on the relationship with the audience, and their active contribution to the artwork, Abramović overcomes her personal dissatisfaction with the art form of the performance in so far as it potentially allows for passive consumption. This also means, however, that the person of the artist herself becomes less important, as in her installations of transitory objects: even if she is often present during the exhibitions, Abramović is not a part of the work which is materially composed of objects that remain neutral and impersonal⁴⁵ until somebody in the audience makes them significant. If it is possible to find the aura here, it does not emerge from the object as original creation (in fact, Abramović prefers serial production for her transitory objects), nor from the space of the exhibition (in Japan, some transitory objects were installed in front of a supermarket), nor from the artist's

44 Germano Celant/Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Public Body: Installations and Objects 1965–2001*, Milano: Charta, 2001, 11.

45 Celant/Abramović, *Public Body*, 10.

charismatic presence (as she is often absent), but from the encounter with an individual which occurs every time in different ways.

Over time, Abramović has started to explore the possibilities to conserve or reproduce a performance. An interesting attempt was realized in 2010 in a show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York: *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, a performance retrospective of Abramović's career both in traditional forms through the exhibition of videos or photos of her performances and through a series of live re-performances of her works, realized by young artists who prepared for their participation in a workshop with Abramović.⁴⁶ In addition, the artist herself offers a new performance lasting for the duration of the show. Although original, this work, too, relates back to a series of earlier performances she realized with Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–1987), in which the two sat facing each other at a table, without talking or moving, offering themselves as a kind of *tableau vivant*. Now, in the MoMA, Abramović sits immobile at a table in the foyer and invites the visitors to the museum to sit with her for as long as they want, one at a time, and thus to participate themselves in the performance.

Even if nothing really ›happens‹ during this performance (in particular in comparison to the striking, even violent performances in the early years of the artist's career), the impact of the experience of sitting in front of the artist, who looks at them with an intense gaze, seems to be significant for the individual. In the silent, motionless encounter, without being able to use words or have direct physical contact,⁴⁷ the relationship develops through being present together, breathing together, passing time together without measuring it, creating a sense of timeless presence, apparently beyond temporal limits because the artist begins the performance before the museum opens and continues until after it closes. Both participants' overall immo-

46 Similarly, the exhibition *Marina Abramović – The Cleaner* in the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn in 2018 combines the documentation of performances with their re-performance, creating two distinct forms of experiencing Abramović's works. See also Sigman, *Live, Body-based Performances*, 158, on her experience as a re-performer of one of Abramović's performances in the MoMA exhibition.

47 Abramović disrupted these conditions she placed on herself during the inaugural evening of the show when her ex-partner and collaborator Ulay sat down in front of her. The example underlines the spectacular element that surrounds the artist in spite of the seriousness of her works: she is well aware of her charism and decides how and to which degree she uses it in her self-performances.

bility and silence sharpen the attention for even the slightest movement, a change in breathing, a suppressed sigh. Here, a form of encounter with the other is realized that is contrary to ordinary encounters, in which what is invisible or nearly invisible, the tiniest signal, acquires great weight in the moment of intimacy between these two strangers. From the perspective of a re-performer, Sigman describes the quality of the encounter between performer and audience as »the pathos of live performing [...] a moment of recognition of [the performer's] humanity and connection to it«. ⁴⁸ While Sigman speaks about a different performance, this same quality also seems to characterize the experience of those sitting with Abramović, focusing on the pure moment of encounter, without any ›message‹ other than the experience of the embodied presence of the two co-protagonists.

However, a critical reading of the performance and its set-up, with the artist as its ›star‹ at the center, is also possible, and thus viewers might ask themselves, as Abigail Levine does: »Was it a work of humble generosity and sacrifice that opened a space for unique experience for an audience, or was it a literalization of a recent art world tendency to put star power center stage?« ⁴⁹ The charismatic presence of the artist is, in the ideal case, one of generous openness, but it can also be exploited for the purposes of the art market.

Starting with its title, *The Artist Is Present*, the MoMA exhibition programmatically engages the issue of presence, offering the opportunity for a number of different presences: the artist's presence in her works, varying according to the forms of their representation (documentation, live performance or live re-performance) that require in return different forms of presence from the artists and the audience who thus experience different forms of reception. The first reviews of the show were relatively negative regarding the re-performances of Abramović's performances, which were perceived as flat and empty ⁵⁰ – perhaps because of the difficulty to sustain the comparison with Abramović's active presence in her own performance and with the video documentation of the ›original‹ performances placed next to the

48 Sigman, *Live, Body-based Performance*, 158.

49 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

50 James Westcott, *Artist Marina Abramović: ›I Have to Be like a Mountain‹*, *The Guardian*, 19 March 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/mar/19/art-marina-abramovic-moma> [accessed 7 February 2025].

re-performances.⁵¹ Previously, Abramović herself had experimented with the possibility of recreating the performances of others in *Seven Easy Pieces*, a series of performances realized at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005. Those re-performances were, however, presented as originals, or at least as new, autonomous interpretations, whereas the re-performances at the MoMA were framed as ›reproductions‹ and integrated into other forms of documenting previous performances. Levine argues that »[i]f the re-performances become effective only in relation to the ›original‹ performance of the work, then they become a fragmentary form, another document.«⁵² Instead, in order to have an affective impact, re-performances have to become performances in their own right, much like Abramović's own *Seven Easy Pieces*. This also appears to have been the artist's intention, as Levine writes: »Abramović's selection and training of performers, however, pointed the works much more in the direction of reinterpretation, of creating performances, than faithful display.«⁵³ The curatorial decision to place the re-performances in a historical, documentary context, however, seems to have undermined this intention and the re-performances' impact on viewers.⁵⁴ According to Levine, in the end what helped to turn the re-performances into works in their own right was their duration over three months, as long as the exhibition lasted.⁵⁵ It is important to note that it is paradoxically their continuation over an extended time that distinguishes the re-performances from their one-time originals for both performers and audiences and thus adds an element of originality that helps to make the shift from documentation to artwork.

The MoMA show also offers new ways of participating in the exhibition and potentially experiencing the aura of its works. During the opening hours of the museum, it was possible to follow Abramović's performance live through the internet thanks to a webcam pointed at the artist and the person sitting in front of her, while in the background, the legs of persons in

51 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

52 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

53 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

54 Sigman notes the varied impact of the re-performances on viewers; this is another example of the highly individual and subjective dimension of aesthetic experiences, which is precisely what makes them singular and thus open to the presence of the aura; Sigman, *Live, Body-based Performances*, 158.

55 Levine, *The Artist is Present*.

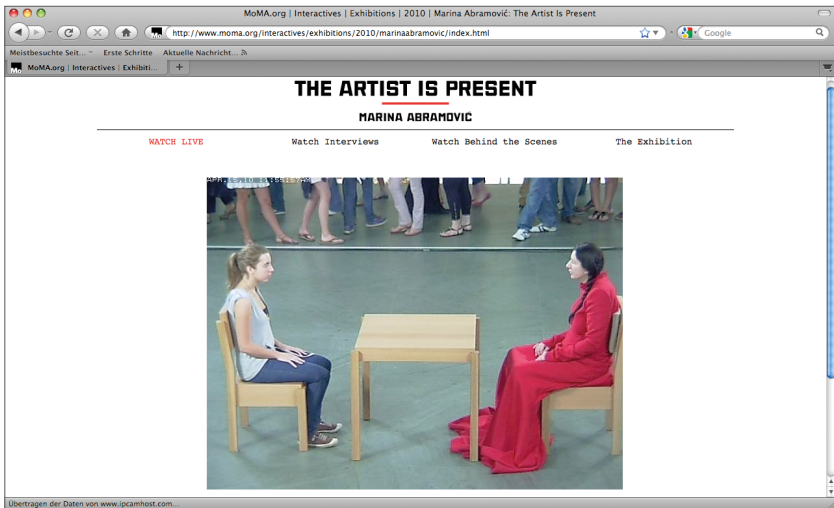


Fig. 3: Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*, screenshot of the livestream of the performance, 15 April 2010.

the audience could be seen passing by, stopping, or sitting on the floor for a while, providing a sense of the audience's reactions to the performance (fig. 3). A gallery of portraits of the persons who took part in the performance was also accessible online and offered a sense of the multiple ways in which the performance was experienced given the range of expressions on their faces, from smiles to disturbance to tears. It is also important to note that the live-stream of the video was interrupted after a few minutes and the user had to establish a new connection so that it was always clear that this form of participation was mediated. The streaming of the performance did not serve as documentation but made it accessible to a wider audience in new forms of reception, opening up again the question of presence and the ways to perceive it. The viewers of the livestream are not in the museum, and yet neither are they watching a film. The mediation of the performance through the internet does not cause an alienation from reality but offers a different form of experiencing the exhibition and thus a different presence of reality.

8. Conclusion

The art form of the performance – characterized by action, immediate and bodily presence, the singularity of the here and now, attention to experience, and the invitation of the audience to become personally involved – offers the conditions for the continued experience of the aura even in the age of digital media. Instead of closing the work in a protective cover as in past theorizations that tied the aura to the substance of the original work, in our conceptualization, the aura reflects the work's openness for ever-new encounters with the audience. In the reception process of the performance-event and its multiple traces (including those reproduced mechanically or digitally), the aura emerges as the gift of aesthetic experience that cannot be traced back to a past event or be limited to the permanence of an object.

Thus not only has the aura not disappeared nor decayed with the technological changes in the creation, existence, and reproduction of artworks but it seems clear now that even before these innovations, it has never been sedentary and has always migrated and reconfigured itself in new ways, always about to shift to new possibilities. If the aura indicates a quality, it inseparably belongs both to the aesthetic object and the viewer's aesthetic experience in its encounter. Only in the conjunction of object and experience appears what we can legitimately define as aura. If the aura was the intrinsic property of an artwork, it would be difficult to argue against its conceptualization as a purely historically and socially constructed phenomenon.⁵⁶ And yet, if the aura was exclusively the content of the individual subjective experience, it would not be possible to recognize and communicate it, and to evaluate its experience. Instead, the aura is precisely the space of encounter – sometimes barely touching, sometimes face-to-face, perhaps obstinate or even combative – in which the work makes itself performatively accessible and the recipient enters into the relational dynamics of the aesthetic encounter.

If the space of the aura is that of the encounter between work and audience, it becomes easier to perceive its transitory nature and to understand

56 See for example Alessandro dal Lago/Serena Giordano, *Mercanti d'aura: Logiche dell'Arte contemporanea*, Bologna: Il mulino, 2006, 141, for whom »l'aura di un'opera d'arte è semplicemente l'effetto che produce« [the aura of a work is simply the effect it produces]. This effect, however, depends on »insieme di cornici sociali e cognitive che fanno dell'Arte quello che è« [both the social and cognitive frames that make of art what it is] (10).

how it seems to disappear at times, because we look for the aura where it isn't, where perhaps it never has been or is no longer, as it happened to Benjamin. Or perhaps because we look for it in those moments when the aura briefly disappears in order to find a new space. Or simply because one can never be absolutely certain of its reappearance given that the experience we have of it is, as Andrew Benjamin says, »the experience of an expectation or a possibility.«⁵⁷ Thus we can make an appointment with an artwork but not with the aura: only intermittently present, and without a permanent abode, the aura might simply not show up for our meeting.

The proper place of the aura, thus, is the threshold; it lives of transitions, continuous, productive exchanges occurring in the act of reception, in the liminal space between work and viewer. Benjamin's image of the *passages* in Paris offers itself as a useful paradigm for its movements. The aura does not reveal itself where there is not the opportunity to pause, to linger so that something can happen, without being fixed into a single location. Its momentary appearance requires a space of possibility. One could also say that the aura is the product of a tension, and this refers back to the dialectical nature of Benjamin's aura that we discussed above. There is a dialectical tension between the aesthetic appearance of presence (»the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be«⁵⁸) and its reflective, imaginative fragmentation in the experience of reception. And it is precisely this tension that causes the wanderings of the aura.

The aura emerges only in the encounter of gazes, when one feels oneself looked at by the work, which can even take the – explicit and even disturbing – form of Abramović's intense gaze directed at the visitors of the MoMA show. This understanding of the aura does not contradict Benjamin's basic idea: presence, originality, and authenticity remain fundamental but, instead of being attributed to the work itself and thus establishing the distance between work and viewer, they are conditions for the unrepeatable intersubjective encounter in the aesthetic experience. In spite of the difficulties of Benjamin's text and his vague definition of the aura, the term has become a part of the vocabulary of aesthetic theory precisely because it indicates the experience that is offered in every encounter with art, and

57 Andrew Benjamin, *The Decline of Art: Benjamin's Aura*, *The Oxford Art Journal* 9.2 (1986), 30–35, here 33.

58 Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, 20.

because of the fact that this experience requires commitment and responsibility in order to offer, in exchange, the promise of a possible fulfillment in the form of aesthetic pleasure.

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