The Deskilling of Labor/An Archeology of Art Process

Notes on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"
By Walter Benjamin

Tim Blunk, MFA
Bergen Community College

"The most perfect reproduction is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space" (Benjamin): Imagine the digitizing of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. All of that art now reduced to snippets of code sitting on a chip in a server somewhere.

0001001110101110000001110000111101010011010110100111110101001101011110101001101011110101001101011110100110

1011110101001101011110101001101011110101001101011110

Much has been theorized about the social/political consequences of the "deskilling of labor." (Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*) For one, the decrease in the human skill component of industrial processes has meant that human labor is imminently fungible and redundant. When my grandfather began working at the Allegheny Ludlum steel mill in Leechburg, Pennsylvania, the most important person in the mill was the roller. It was a skill that took many years to perfect. There were very few in the mill who possessed this knowledge. Without the roller, no steel could be made. Hence, if the roller went on strike, the entire workforce went out on strike. Now, the entire steelmaking production sequence is computerized and automated. The particular skill set of the roller has been digitized, robotized, "frozen" within a computerized/technologized production process that can be guided by a technician with a

few days of training. The roller is now a ghost inside the machine. Hence, the Steelworkers Union has been diminished in power in the remaining mills operating within the US – they are now ghosts within the political sphere.

In the US and Europe, we are witnesses/participants in an inexorable deskilling and banishment of labor from our midst. Contemporary industrial processes are more and more foreign to our comprehension. The flip side is reification: the freezing of human labor within all of the things/commodities of our lives. The technologizing of everything in our everyday existence crystallizes the sum of human labor and thinking into the smallest and most commonplace items. We don't know how things are made; we don't know where things are made. Moreover, we don't have any concern that we need to. Machines have made machines that have made machines ad infinitum to the point where it is nearly impossible to conceive of where the production process began.

The construction of the most mundane thing in our world is the result of inestimable manufacturing and materials invention processes. Living in the First World, we live among and use things that we don't understand, the origins of which (even the country of manufacture, after a first guess of "China" – one of the world's most geographically vast and populous countries) we are ignorant. It is nearly inconceivable that we could reproduce them ourselves if we had to (a la post-apocalyptic movie worlds such as that depicted in the "Mad Max" series.) The ordinary American or European cannot construct a cellphone, let alone build a fire with tinder and flint and steel. With the systematic drive to reduce the organic composition of capital, the things that surround us are made by generations of machines that correspond with an archeology of labor. That is, our world is made by robots that have been made by robots which were made by entire

generations of machines going back to the dawn of the Industrial Age. The work that has not been replaced by machines and robotic processes within the First World has largely been deported/exiled to the Third World, or Third World immigrants who live on the fringes of our society and do so much of our work for us.

I sometimes embark upon thought experiments with the simple items in my study – a pen, for example. I set about creating a graph, beginning with the question: Where was it made? What are the parts? Where were *they* made? Who made them? What were the machines that were used to extrude the plastic? Where were these machines constructed? Where were *their* constituent parts made? How long ago? And the ink: *where* was it made? Of *what* is this made? Who were the workers who managed the batches of dyes and chemical additives? Where did the dyes come from? Was it based upon a petroleum derivative? Where was the oil extracted? Who managed the drilling? Who manufactured the drills? Etc. I wonder how many generations of machines and tools and workers one must travel to locate the first workers with hand tools who crafted the machines that set the whole process in motion that resulted in this commonplace Bic pen. In this way, I attempt to construct an archeology of labor that resulted in this simple commodity. Each step backwards in this archeology is in part historical (and geographical as labor and capital have become internationalized), but also a process of examining layers of skill that have been removed with each generation, and as such, a demystification of technology. The endpoint must always be a lone craftsman with a handmade tool – a tool that most anyone could comprehend and probably construct or fashion if needed.

There is human agency at each level, there are human laborers involved at each step of the process, although the degree of skill involved arguably is diminished as my pen evolves. It is part of the process of alienation of which Marx wrote in the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse* – the distancing of human labor from the production of commodities and the confrontation of people with commodities that are the result of the exploitation of workers and the expropriation of their labor.

Art has largely, until recently, remained outside of this process. The mystification, so far as it appears to the now skill-less public, is one of mystifying the artist herself: artist as *genius*.

Just being called "handy," has become a compliment for a person who has maintained some semblance of familiarity with hand tools and can administer minor repairs to household objects. It has a nostalgic connotation and implies a reverence for bygone days when we used to know how to make things and fix the things we or others like us had made. As technological innovation increases on a scale and at pace that even our best media technologies can scarcely keep track, there is a concomitant increase in the value we place on manual skill. When I worked in the building trades, the most revered and sought after carpenters were the Amish – not because they were necessarily the most skillful, but because they don't work with power tools (although their assistants usually do) they enjoy an Old World mystique that translates into top dollar for the wealthy. Having an Amish carpenter had significant cache around Lake Erie in the lakeside community.

But the reverence for craftsmanship or manual skill is not generalized, it is increasingly located within the spheres of "craft" and "art." And much to the dislike of

most contemporary, university or academy trained First World artists, those who are able to make things using historical craft techniques are increasingly referred to as "artists." An "artist" for the general public, is more and more a person who can do things and make things that most of us cannot.

Art and the sphere of art-making in contemporary society might be described as the obverse of Clark's Third Law. The science fiction writer Arthur C. Clark (author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*) wrote that the actions and abilities of highly technologically advanced civilizations seem "magical" to those less advanced. [i] I would hold that for technologically advanced civilizations such as ours, the ability to paint a portrait or create a sculpture out of stone with one's own hand and simple tools seems, if not magical, then the province of a particular artistic *genius* – beyond the reach of the average person. They are not looked down upon, but rather are revered. There is a sense that that to be able to draw, for example, is something that "I wish I had learned, but I just never had the talent for it…" We forget the time (prior to the Age of Mechanical Reproduction) when drawing and draftsmanship were considered and taught as an essential part of any educated person's course of study. There was no other means to communicate visual information. The rarer such skills become, the more valuable they are as historical artifacts. There is an increasing social *scarcity* of skill that drives the prices and value of skill-derived objects higher. This is particularly true of the skill sets that an academy trained artist might possess. Their skills are art historical; they are rarified. They are useful, for the most part, only within the sphere of art itself. There is little that contemporary artists do that can be said to be impacting society on any scale approaching that of scientists in almost any field you might name. While subject to admiration, artistic

skill sets have little utilitarian value in our technologically advanced society. To be able to draw is like being able to speak Latin. It is a bit quaint; useful in some limited contexts, but not necessary.

The skills of the artist are revered/used/sought after/collected as part of the bourgeoisie's narcissistic narrative as deserving its place as the culmination of human history. Artists themselves and art educators, for their own part, jealously guard their investment in this narrative, while all the while trying to convince a generally unresponsive, disinterested public that they deserve a place at the table. For the contemporary bourgeoisie, art is a way of connecting itself in a self-justifying manner to the Medici, and the time of DaVinci when artists and scientists were one in the same.

L'art pour l'art, art for art's sake approaches the role of a secular religion that is the dialectical antagonist to the dominant secular religion of Science. Art freed up from ritual, becomes a thing unto itself, embedded in the sphere of commodity relations. Art for art's sake; money for money's sake. The festishizing of the commodity where the aura of the work is part of its valuation – the chop mark, the signed painting, the signed, numbered edition, and now the Brand.

Karl Marx and philosopher/critics such as Walter Benjamin in the Marxist tradition have examined the arts as a form of human labor as it exists outside of commodity production.

> For Marx, too, art is the highest form of creative activity, free creative activity, the highest form of work. Animals are not capable of such activity, they are not free. In so far as they produce, they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need . . . hence man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.

> These passages are from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, but the same thought recurs later in Marx's work. In the *Grundrisse*, he describes composing music as 'really free labour', which can constitute 'attractive work, the individual's self-realisation'. In the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' he envisages a time when work will become an end in itself, 'life's prime want'. (Sean Sayers)

Since the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, a divide has grown between art and technology. Art pertained to the sacred, even when God was not involved, whereas technology pertained to the production of commodities. Artistic work eschewed association with technological processes as if they were something dirty, as if the use of machines implied an alienated process that undermined the sanctity of Art itself. The obvious touch of the human hand was required for work to qualify as art. Witness the century long debate about the merits of photography as art. Those photographers most likely to be admitted to the canon of artists are those for whom the old processes – large format view cameras, wet plates, handmade papers, darkroom techniques, hand-tinting – have figured in their work.

The degree to which art is seen to be technology-driven can have a negative effect on the work's perceived value. Digital photography does not command the same respect as traditional darkroom-based photography, and neither can compare to painting. The ubiquity of images (our world is awash in images) has particularly undermined the artistic currency of photography. Technology has a shelf life. The more that technology is involved in the artistic process, it would seem the more that it is thereby defined by that technology's temporal limitations. Competition and the incessant drive to reduce the organic composition of capital (the element of human labor) define the technological sphere. To enter into is to make a deal with that particular devil. Your art may also have a shelf-life. Moreover, as Benjamin points out, technology is influencing the very way in

which we now perceive the world. This process used to evolve over generations; it is accelerating now in a logarithmic fashion. Cinematic special effects have less than a 10-year shelf-life before they seem downright cheesy. The demands for our entertainment experiences now are multimedia, HD surround sound 3-D. The reproducible must not only mimic live performance but surpass it: multiple camera angles, stop-action, instant replay, directors' comments, deleted scenes, alternate endings.

Reproduction gives the "sense of the universal equality of things." Television gives us the opportunity to live vicariously through 'reality shows:' We are all stars. In age of mechanical reproduction, we are all Artists. There is a democratizing element to this current – photography is freed up from the darkroom – even from the one-hour photo hut. Almost anyone with a point and shoot and a passing knowledge of Photoshop can take and produce what 20 years ago would have been considered "brilliant" photographs. The sheer number of possible shots on a flash card (terrabytes!) extends the odds of taking that one terrific photo. Painting and image creation are increasingly freed from the academy, as well. Art-making is now considered more about intentionality and concept and less and less about technique (whether Old School artists and art history folks like it or not). Paralleling industrial society as a whole, there has been a general deskilling of art as a productive process and a concomitant increase in the use of technology. It is as if art (and artists) have been escaping from reproduction and reproducibility itself into the realm of the conceptual where the essence of the work *eludes* reproduction. The quandary comes in when the art does not lend itself to commodification. Conceptual art is tough to sell, and the process of archiving (film, video, photographs) either fail to capture the concept or they cheapen it. In this case, the artist, and often the gallery itself become the

commodities. The artist/brand supersedes the work itself. The Artist *qua* artist seeks to stay ahead of reproducibility by copyrighting the Brand of her work, and/or by making work that is not reproducible. The artist becomes more involved in her endeavor as a theorist/priest, interpreting the work for the public that would otherwise have little or no context for understanding what is on the wall.

Ironically, Pittsburgh, once the steel capital of the US and the world, has now become better known for its art scene. There may very well be more artists working in Pittsburgh than steel workers. These artists create new commodities that have value based in their unique character as objects or events that are created "by hand" or based upon training and tradition that has codified object-making processes. Interestingly, one significant goal for most of these artists, who are *artists* by virtue of creating hand-made "first generation" objects, is to have their works *reproduced*. Whether it be through an opening reception postcard, on film in a PBS documentary, or the ultimate – a MOMA retrospective coffee table book – our contemporary artists understand that the value of what they make, as a commodity on the art market or the *aura*, for Benjamin) is contingent upon the reproduction of the same. The extent and nature of reproduction is directly related to the art commodity value of the original (in part through licensing, but certainly not limited to such direct commercial interests). In fact, the reproduction of a single, particular work can have the effect of raising the commodity value of all of the original works (and reproductions thereof) of the entire oeuvre of the artist. It becomes part and parcel of the branding of the artist – the commodification of all that the artist and her/his representatives touch. The aura is transferred to the brand along with its codified exchange value. Collectors don't talk about buying a particular painting by Picasso – they

speak of buying *a Picasso*, as if they were speaking of buying a Rolex or a Mercedes. Even the conceptual artist is involved in reproduction through "archiving" her/his work – giving the ephemeral some life as a commodity that a gallery or museum can somehow sell, or at the very least proving its existence for those who were not on the gallery's guest list.

> "The gallery show in the 19th century is an early symptom of the crisis of painting." (Benjamin).

The crisis has only deepened with the rise of conceptual art. I would argue that much of conceptual art is nostalgia for and an unconscious (in most instances) return to art's ritual origins and the "art-event" with its time-based, time-delimited aura. The gallery is art's secular sanctuary. We go there to worship and experience the non-reproducible. The experience of going to any of the Whitney Biennials of the past ten years would argue for this view. Indeed, not only is the flotsam, jetsam and detritus glued to and assembled on the walls and floors not reproducible, one goes away grateful for the fact. There is nothing possessible about the work; there is little that makes any sense or has any use-value (as we have understood that term in regards to art) outside of the context of the gallery. In order for us to have any relationship to the work outside of the Whitney – to possess or access the aura on our own – would require moving the work to our own private galleries – our private chapels – to view and experience it. As the art itself is harder to commodify and sell, the artist becomes the commodity giving ever more power to the gallery.

In the postmodern era, reproduction oftentimes *is* the art. What I mean is that a constant theme for today's artists is to use make use of the technical ease of reproduction

to attempt to turn quantity into quality through the act of reproducing dozens, hundreds or thousands of images or objects as part of the installation or event.

> The work of art in the age of digital reproduction is physically and formally chameleon. There is no clear conceptual distinction now between original and reproduction in virtually any medium based in film, electronics, or telecommunications. As for the fine arts, the distinction is eroding, if not finally collapsed. The fictions of "master" and "copy" are now so entwined with each other that it is impossible to say where one begins and the other ends. In one sense, Walter Benjamin's proclamation of doom for the aura of originality, authored early in this century, is finally confirmed by these events [3]. In another sense, the aura, supple and elastic, has stretched far beyond the boundaries of Benjamin's prophecy into the rich realm of reproduction itself. (Douglas Davis, 1995)

In the developing world, the existence of an art scene that is marketable in the West is promoted as a sign that that country “has arrived.” It is not a coincidence that the vast majority of musicians studying at the Juilliard School of Music are Korean, Chinese, and Russian. It is not a coincidence that in the 1990s it was Korea, and now China that is at the center of the “really hot” art scene.

Art, as practiced by the hand of the individual plastic artist appears increasingly “magical” in her/his creation and art returns to its basis in ritual as human directed and executed (Benjamin). It is increasingly within the sphere of the contemplative, and closer to its roots in religion: artist as shaman. The gallery is the bourgeoisie’s new temple. Temples are where we tell ourselves we are going for our rituals and the contemplate matters beyond our understanding. Temples, as often, are where we go to be told by those in power of our place in the Universe – beneath them. In worshipping their culture, their art, we worship them and their inevitable power over us.

In another parallel to the placement of art in the realm of religion is in the conceptual realm (distinct from conceptual art). Western art since Dadaism, with the exception of realist-based movements inside and outside the socialist world, has required interpretation for the masses. Critics and to a lesser extent gallery owners have served the role of priests to define and preserve orthodoxy. They have told us what is "good:" stamping art as valuable/collectible/sellable. The nuances of what is "good" and what is not are beyond the layperson. These require explication and interpretation. Formal analysis, search for symbols and locating the work within an historical continuum or celebrating its break with that continuum. This is what it means that most contemporary art is about art. Art *is* the ritual.

What is the current ritual use of art? Preservation of an archeology of civilization – placing us (the bourgeoisie and those who identify with it) in history? Social/class introspection? Search for meaning side by side with Science? Is art a mirror for us as a culture? Do we need it to affirm our place in history? The masses don't need it. It is hardly taught. It is not missed. It is replaced by entertainment and time-passing escapes – many of them, particularly film, which are art-based, but not consciously considered as Art. It seems to be more needed by the intelligentsia as reminder of the class's importance – or is this merely a vanity of the class, of the ruling class? Part of the ruling class's narrative about itself and location in history – the inevitability and rightness of its dominance. Art is part of this narrative, and masks itself as secular ritual, having outlived sacred ritual.

Interesting: Benjamin's mention of how painting and science were inseparable during DaVinci's time but are so distant now – anatomy, geometry, physics of light,

pigments and chemistry of solvents, glazes, etc. Painters after the intrusion of photography are all the more apt to assert the "born genius" model and deny the use of science in art. Photography's "intrusion" into art only heightened painters' tendency to emphasize the magical, genius-based nature of painting. Interesting also: that Benjamin was particularly interested in film. When we speak of Art, with a capital "A", cinema does not occur to us anywhere near the top of the list, unless one happens to be a film actor or director. There is growing divide between Art on the one hand, and the realm of culture production geared towards mass entertainment. "Art Film" is a subcategory of Entertainment, not the other way around. The movie theaters most likely to close up in these economic hard times are the ones dedicated to showing "art films."

As Benjamin pointed out, the film and (and I would argue, its progeny in computer-driven animation, computer and PlayStation gaming, 3D and the like) have changed and continue to change the very ways in which we perceive the world. The pace of this technology is guided by corporations that have the means and resources to employ teams of the very finest artists/computer technologists in the world to create works that are frankly so mind-boggling and compelling that the individual artist is left in the proverbial [silicon] dust.

One could argue that the greatest advances in artistic image-making are happening in the studios of Pixar and the other computerized/robotized effects studios of Hollywood, yet except during the predictable pre-award speeches at the Academy Awards we don't include these revolutionary image-making and perception-changing techniques in the sphere of Art (with a capital "A"). Why? It is about content: these film and animation houses, the computer gaming industry with their billion dollar budgets are

engaged in the creation of "techno-kitsch." The story lines, the characters, the ideological messages have changed little (witness the adaptation of the 1950s comic book story "Captain America" as a feature 3D film.) They deliver the same old pabulum over and over in utterly predictable formulae. But the advances in the animation process are evolving so quickly and with such impact as to make the special effects the whole reason for watching. Hardly a DVD of this nature comes to market that does not include special feature sections that demonstrate how the animation effects were achieved and filmed. The process is the point. It is usually the source of the buzz over upcoming feature films – particularly the summer fare. We want to be, expect to be, demand to be dazzled, rocked and amazed; the bar is set ever higher. Our expectations ratchet up with each innovation. Watching *Star Trek* episodes from a mere 30 years ago is laughable, almost painful experience when we see Captain Kirk wrestling aliens in rubber suits amidst Styrofoam rocks, calling Lt. Uhuru on a communicator that a 10-year old wouldn't want as a cellphone. What individual artist with paint and brush (or Macintosh work station) can compete?

In the history of the world there has never been a ruling class as disinterested in the arts as currently inhabits the US. Is it because the US bourgeoisie is so secure in its imperial place in the world? I believe that is a factor. What is left to prove? Our cultural hegemony is unprecedented. The cultures of the world are ours to harvest at will. We cherry-pick the greatest minds, the finest doctors and computer scientists, the greatest artistic talents (whenever the nostalgic need arises for some secular uplifting).

The United States remains captivated by a nationalist form of pseudo-Christian fundamentalism that is the antithesis to critical thought. The pervasive USA myth-

building enterprise is not served well by individual artists laboring away in their studios, but the large animation houses such as Pixar serve these purposes quite well. The capital required to produce the average animated or action feature is so staggering as to push almost all to the side save those beholden to or utterly committed to the continuation of the capitalist system itself. Even the largest film houses are driven to product placement strategies in their scenes and subsidiary spin-off products to make these features profitable. The revolution, to quote the late, great Gil-Scot Heron, may not be televised, but more surely, it will not be animated in 3D anytime soon. (*Insurgent Panda, Part 3*?)

One crucial way in which our perceptual relation to the world has been shaped by technology involves our apprehension of time and space. The rapid evolution of the internet and 4G technology has created an instantaneous/contemporaneous character to our existence that abhors/negates reflection, inquiry and criticism. It all happens too damn fast. And Art takes time. Art demands time: It takes time to make. It takes time to view or experience. It takes time to criticize. Art (the plastic arts) exist in one place – until they are captured on an Android and tweeted. We are human beings living in (or being hijacked by) an increasingly a machine-based world. There is too much information to be accessed and too little time to access it. As a result, we are losing our collective historical memory. It sits on a server somewhere in the mountains of Montana. Thank god we have Fox News to interpret current events in real time ("spin-free") so that reflection and/or criticism are unnecessary. It makes perfect sense that Fox and their ideological compeers abhor art and artists.

Critics may write blog all we want about the sublimity of great contemporary paintings or the ambiguously subversive character of postmodern sculpture. Our

experience of technology and how it is reforming our visual experience of the world, coupled with the dominance of capital in this realm is rendering the plastic arts into a marginal, nostalgic refuge for intellectuals – a sort of bohemian Colonial Williamsburg with actors dressed like painters. Art as it was once understood is becoming a subcategory of archeology.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Reprinted in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. By Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books, New York. 1969. pp. 217-252.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)" By Douglas Davis. *Leonardo*, Vol. 28, No. 5, Third Annual New York Digital Salon (1995). The MIT Press. pp. 381-386. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1576221 .

Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria." By Gyorgy Markus. *New German Critique*, No. 83, Special Issue on Walter Benjamin (Spring - Summer,2001), pp. 3-42. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/827788 .

"Creative Activity and Alienation in Hegel and Marx." By Sean Sayers. *Historical Materialism* 11 (1):107-128. 2003.
Stable URL:
https://www.kent.ac.uk/secl/philosophy/articles/sayers/creativeactivity.pdf