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Issues in Contemporary Art

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Reaction: Benjamin

Throughout this essay, I thought that Benjamin thoroughly analyzed art and technology from a Marxist perspective in the concept of property. The recurring theme of what constitutes the essence of contemporary art rests in a dual function. In the form of artistic expression, the exposure of the masses to the true nature of social institutions is diffused, and the dismantling of cultural ritualism occurs. Benjamin cites politics as the impetus of the property system, where codification of social mores grants the authority to actively suppress dissent against the dominant culture, in latent methodologies that do not constitute the social construct of “oppression.” This included the visual arts, in which the dominant paradigm was “l’ art pour l’ art,” meaning the art for the art; the very tenant of Modernism that Greenberg espoused. It is indicative of the sociological anomie perspective, where the means of attaining success in accordance with ascribed cultural tradition are few and cumbersome. With the inventions of photography and film, artistic expression had latent methodologies to actively counterattack the dominant culture that did not constitute “dissent,” but yet it was.

Photography enabled the artist to record an image with a speed parallel to that of eye movement, making hand rendition obsolete. While the original artwork resides in a fixed location with a limited audience, photography enhances the artwork by granting it mobility; the original meaning is still preserved but can appear in any location at any time with an unlimited

audience. Film enabled the artist to enhance an image with consecutive duplicates that vary in position only, while interaction with surroundings occurred just as it does in life, giving rise to the motion picture. Captions helped preserve the original meaning of the scene, later enhanced dramatically by the incorporation of sound. In photography and film, the audience is completely unaware that they complete the composition by their viewership, a form of indirect interaction. Benjamin summarizes this in an analogy of original art being represented by a magician, and mechanical art as represented by a surgeon - the magician is remote and ineffective, whereas the surgeon is close and precise. It is the desire to connect to our fellow man that fuels mechanical reproduction, and in turn mechanical reproduction defines the true nature of art. With this in mind, Benjamin sees mechanical reproduction as the key to effective social change, while leaving the "purity" of art untouched. As Danto said, art can be anything.