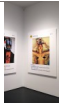
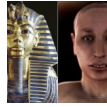


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The Work of Art in the Age of... Something

Ben Davis, Friday, October 17, 2014

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Still from Jeremy Bailey and Kristen D. Schaeffer's contribution to *Ways of Something*

What does it mean to be an artist today? How are the new normal of online sharing and digital connection affecting how we relate to art? Are the old theories we've used to approach these questions even relevant anymore?

These are a few of the minor questions that the recent web art project *Ways of Something* makes me think of. For me, it opens up the question of whether contemporary "network culture" is as distinct from "mass media" as "mass media" was from its old antagonist, "high art."

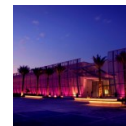
Which is not bad for an initiative that appears, at first blush at least, to be kind of a joke.

If You See Something...

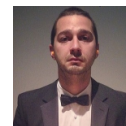
Ways of Something debuted at Williamsburg's always-interesting [Transfer Gallery](#) last month, the brainchild of net art guru [Lorna Mills](#). Its idea is so natural that it feels as if the internet coughed up the film all by itself, like a glimmery digital hairball: Mills set out to remake the 1972 John Berger BBC documentary *Ways of Seeing*—a high-water mark in outspoken popular criticism, with its Marxist-feminist critique of art, and a formative influence on modern media and cultural studies. The final product preserves the doc's original soundtrack, with a different artist responding to each minute of the 30-minute film in his or her own

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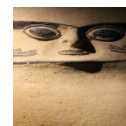
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style, a Vimeo-powered version of Exquisite Corpse.

The video opens with a witty sequence by [Daniel Temkin](#). On the soundtrack, Berger introduces the big themes of *Ways of Seeing*, saying he will reconsider the tradition of European art, but that his focus "isn't so much the paintings themselves as the way we now see them. We see them as nobody saw them before. If we discover why this is so, we shall also discover something about ourselves and the situation in which we are living." As he speaks, Temkin's clip shows a pair of hands leafing through the book version of *Ways of Seeing*—except every illustration in the book has been replaced with an image of Berger's face from the documentary.

Some of the contributions to *Ways of Something* illustrate Berger's material, some subvert it. My favorite does both: At minute 15, as Berger talks about Bruegel's *The Procession to Calvary* (1564) and how reproduction of it on TV allows us to change its meaning by isolating different fragments, [Joe McKay](#) shows an image of the painting onscreen in Photoshop. We watch as he edits it, lightning fast, collaging in a freeway to Calgary, Canada and adding a cartoon Santa Claus to replace Jesus carrying his cross. As with Temkin's riff, this seems both an homage to Berger and a joke about how primitive his musings sound in a digital context.

In either case, the implicit question is clear: How should we see *Ways of Seeing* today?

Something Old

I find the juxtaposition of the material in the first episode of *Ways of Seeing* with its digital remix particularly thought-provoking. To understand exactly why, though, it may help to revisit why Berger's intervention into art history mattered in the first place.

The first episode of *Ways of Seeing* was, as Berger himself made clear, a popularization of Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay "[The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction](#)" (recently awkwardly rechristened as "[The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility](#)" by a new translation), which these days has a status as one of the holiest texts of art theory. When Benjamin was writing, he was much closer in time to the invention of film itself than he is to our present age of omnipresent one-click "reproducibility" (the Lumiere Brothers' [Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon](#) came out in 1895; sound only came in in 1927). He was attempting to come to grips with a truly new way of seeing the world whose political effects were, as yet, still unclear.

The "decay of the aura" is the one-line summary people tend to take away from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in class. But its overall polemical meaning needs to be placed in its time: Against the background of Hitler, Benjamin saw the reflection of class struggle in the tension between high art and mass culture. New technologies, in particular film, created new ways of looking at the world, which he saw as potentially empowering to a politics of collective liberation, as opposed to the cultic and contemplative values of old-fashioned art (though he was well aware that new media's potentials were limited by what he called "film capital").

The Nazis were canny users of new mass media; the 1936 Olympics would be called the "Radio Olympics." But to legitimate themselves they also appealed to atavistic concepts of the Great Man, German tradition, and the cult of the soil (not to mention classical aesthetics; modern art was deemed "cultural Bolshevism"). By advancing his thesis about the inherently radical nature of modern technology, Benjamin hoped to "neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—which, used in an uncontrolled way (and controlling them is difficult today), allow factual material to be

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manipulated in the interests of fascism." He was out, in other words, to show that the Nazis were on the wrong side of history, that the future belonged to the collective.

Without this political analysis, Benjamin's prognostications about media wouldn't have had the charge that they did. They would simply be more or less equivalent to the constant stream of articles today about how this or that gizmo or app is "changing everything."

Something New

Before looking at how this lesson applies—or doesn't apply—to the digitally empowered world inhabited by the makers of *Ways of Something*, we still need to clarify why Benjamin seemed like a vital resource for John Berger at the end of the 1960s, a very different period of crisis and turmoil.

For its original viewers, the subtext of *Ways of Seeing* would have been clear: It was a leftist response to another documentary, Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*, which went to air three years earlier. Clark, an art historian of formidable erudition and communicative gifts, had been director of the National Gallery during World War II, creating a program that tried to use its treasures to rally the nation to defend its heritage. He understood, in other words, the ideological role that the "auratic" object could play, and *Civilisation's* sweeping, 13-episode tour of the masterpieces of European art also had an ideological point.



Kenneth Clark in *Civilisation* (1969): "At this point, I reveal myself in my true colors as a stick in the mud..."

The year it hit the airwaves, 1969, Jimmy Hendrix took the stage at Woodstock. It was against the cresting tide of the "counterculture"—sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, sit-ins and love-ins and all that—that Clark was raising the great, timeless tradition of Europe's High Culture as a bulwark. *Civilisation's* first episode, "The Skin of Our Teeth," begins just after the fall of Rome, which is not a coincidence: "In the last few years, we've developed an uneasy feeling that this could happen again, and advanced thinkers, who even in Roman times thought it fine to gang up with the barbarians, have begun to question whether civilization is worth saving." The series ends with Clark's plea that "order is better than chaos," "human sympathy is more valuable than ideology," and, putting a bright line under the message, "above all, I believe in the God-given genius of certain individuals, and I value a society that makes this possible."

In other words: *Respect your elders, young man. Don't you know what*

we've done for you?

Ways of Seeing is meant as a rebuttal to such patrician bromides. That is why it begins as it does, with Berger standing in front of a replica of Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* and slashing it open. That is why Benjamin's heady prophecies about mass communication technology made sense as a political position in 1972. The message was that *Civilisation*-style reverence is phony. Kenneth Clark disdained intellectuals who sided with the "barbarians;" Berger referred to art critics who "are the clerks of the nostalgia of a ruling class in decline."



John Berger cuts open Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* in *Ways of Seeing*

Something's Changed

Which brings us back around to our own day, and to Mills's update/remix of Berger. Where do we stand in relationship to his themes?

The most obvious difference is that Kenneth Clark-style cultural politics have been reduced to an extreme minority position. When Clark says, in the closing minutes of *Civilisation*, that he is going to reveal himself as a "stick in the mud," most viewers are liable to agree with him.

And yet as it turns out, capitalism doesn't need patrician figures nattering on about the value of "tradition." Power can get on just fine with technocrats talking about "brand management" and "cultural penetration," or, lately, the "social graph" and the "sharing economy." (In terms of "cult value," AirBNB apparently literally uses a media strategy informed by the language of cults.)

Baby Boomer tastes are now the cultural mainstream. The process by which the radical critical energies of the 60s got coopted and turned into the mainstream language of Silicon Valley—how we went "From Counterculture to Cyberculture," as one book puts it—is by now well documented. "As it turned out," Stewart Brand, the patron saint of the hippie lifestyle manual *Whole Earth Catalogue* (founded 1968), once explained, "psychedelic drugs, communes, and Buckminster Fuller domes were a dead end, but computers were an avenue to realms beyond our dreams." Now he does TED talks.

In many ways, the empowered amateurism of online culture seems a perverse realization of Benjamin's dream of collective authorship; our future-obsessed tech society is evidence of the "liquidation of the value

of tradition in the cultural heritage" predicted in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In the final moments of the first episode of *Ways of Seeing*, Berger gives a monologue that serves as his manifesto to the viewer:

Remember that I am controlling and using for my own purposes the means of reproduction needed for these programs. The images are like words but there is no dialogue yet. You cannot reply to me, for that to become possible within the modern media of communication, access to television must be extended beyond its narrow limits. Meanwhile with this program, as with all programs, you receive images and meanings which are arranged. I hope that you will consider what I have arranged, but be skeptical of it.

In *Ways of Something*, as these words are spoken, the artist responding to this particular minute, [Faith Holland](#), flashes up the logos for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Tumblr onscreen. This gesture seems at once glib and absolutely lucid (my own essay, "[Ways of Seeing Instagram](#)," is all about the parallels between Berger and social media). The "decay of the aura" of old-fashioned art seems less of a burning issue than the "decay of authority" of old-fashioned mass media.

Benjamin and Berger both, in different ways, erred in thinking that collective *authorship* would be a correlate of collective *ownership* of the media. This has proven to be spectacularly untrue: all this sharing, searching, and remixing may undercut the authority of some big corporations but it is also brought to you by other massive corporations, whose algorithms and profit motives set the fundamental parameters of digital life.

I mentioned at the outset the overall comical characteristic of *Ways of Something*. I think you can tease out a kind of philosophical mission in its jokiness: *Ways of Something*'s remix serves to deflate the "aura" of reverence that has built up around *Ways of Seeing* (and through it, to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") so that you can see the distance between its time and our own, and thereby appreciate it as something other than a font of timeless truth.

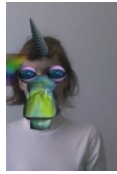
As Berger himself might say: *We see these theories as never before. To ask how they have been changed is to discover something about ourselves and the situation in which we are living.*

At the same time, the fundamental ambiguity of *Ways of Something*—is it a tribute, or a parody, or both?—makes me think of something Astra Taylor [said](#) in promoting her new book, [The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age](#). The reason that critical discussion of the internet waffles between utopianism and doom-and-gloom, Taylor argues, is that there has been a missing piece: "a political economy of new media." Which is to say that the underlying project of Berger/Benjamin—of understanding how technological forms are shaped by political forces and have a fate and meaning bound up with struggle—is absolutely worth reinjecting into the present, and could easily be lost amid all the riffing.

Something is happening to culture; we really have to name that thing. *Ways of Something*, in its way, contributes to that collective project, as a remake that points to a sequel that still needs to be made.

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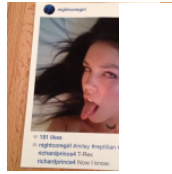
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